



● INTEL 945P MOTHERBOARD

Abit AL8

PRICE £92 (£108 inc VAT)

DELIVERY £5 (£6 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

INTERNET www.abit.com.tw

VERDICT The AL8 may not have all the extras of nForce4, but it's still fast and reasonably priced.

The nForce4 SLI Intel Edition chipset (see opposite) gives the new Intel platforms (see p54) some stiff competition: a hardware firewall and SLI support are only the tip of the iceberg with its new chipsets. Intel had to decide whether to go head-to-head in an extra features slugging match or undercut nVidia by offering better value. Typically, it's done both.

The 955XE chipset will offer every extra feature that Intel can muster, while this more value-focused 945P board from Abit is about £40 cheaper than either board opposite. As a 945 board, the AL8 won't take the new dual-core Pentium Extreme Edition, but will take any other pinless Pentium 4 or Pentium D.

Using our standard test kit, we saw comparable scores to those from the nForce4 boards. An overall score of 2.27 is speedy for our 3.8GHz Pentium 4 570, though the detailed breakdown of scores show differences between how Intel and nVidia do things. For example, the Abit proved faster when searching through our databases, but lagged behind a touch in our Word and Excel tasks. You won't notice the difference in everyday use though. What you will notice is the brilliance of a Pentium D once you install one – a 2.8GHz 820 beat our Hyper-Threaded 3.8GHz 570 in the multithreaded 3ds max test by more than 11 per cent.

Thankfully, the AL8 isn't devoid of features, even though it's £40 cheaper than either nForce4 board. There's High Definition Audio from the ICH7R south bridge and Realtek ALC880 codec. The specification comfortably beats the AC97 audio of the nForce4 boards, although you'll need a serious audio setup to notice. Like the nForce boards, it will give you eight audio channels, but with the added advantage of being able to assign them independently to different audio streams.

The ICH7R south bridge does more than feed the audio codec. The 'R' suffix indicates the inclusion of Intel Matrix Storage (with support for RAID0, 1, 5 and 10), AHCI (Advanced Host Controller Interface) and NCQ (Native Command Queuing). This makes the most of any SATA hard disk attached to its four ports



A fast dual-core motherboard for under £100.

(as long as they're advanced enough to take advantage). Abit also uses the ubiquitous Silicon Image 3132 chip to create two extra SATA 2 connections. Unfortunately, they're placed oddly, making attaching a drive awkward.

For legacy connections there's only one parallel ATA connector; if you still have a parallel ATA hard disk, you'll have to share its connection with your optical drive. There's still a floppy connector should you not trust Windows-based BIOS flashing though. There are also two PCI slots, which should be ample, even if you want to usurp the High Definition Audio. Complementing these slots are three PCI Express slots and the single 16x graphics slot. There's a USB, FireWire and mini-FireWire backplane provided to neatly connect external devices.

At £40 cheaper than an nForce4 Intel board, the Abit has a lot of appeal. Performance is on a par with the nForce4, there are plenty of storage options, and the onboard High Definition Audio is a bonus. However, the lack of a hardware firewall, SLI and a second Gigabit Ethernet port might persuade you that £40 is better spent on the MSI. But if a decent dual-core motherboard with good performance at a fair price is what you're looking for, the Abit AL8 is a fine choice.

CLIVE WEBSTER

PC PRO RATINGS	
PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS Socket 775 motherboard; Intel 945P chipset; 4 x DDR2 RAM sockets; maximum 4GB memory; Ultra ATA/133 connector; 6 x SATA 2 connectors; 2 x PCI, 3 x PCI-E (1x), 1 x PCI-E (16x); 2 x PS/2; Gigabit Ethernet; parallel; serial; 4 x USB 2; FireWire; Realtek ALC880 7.1 audio; 2 x digital S/PDIF out.

● RESULTS



WP/SPREADSHEET: 2.18 DATABASE: 2.21
2D GRAPHICS: 2.41 MULTIMEDIA: 2.47

TEST RIG: 3.8GHz Pentium 4 570; 1GB Crucial PC4200 RAM; 36GB Western Digital Raptor hard disk; XFX GeForce 6600 GT graphics.