



contents

- 172** Acer Veriton FP
AJP Neo-PC
- 173** Carrera Octan DM 650
Elonex Book PC
- 176** evesham.com Evolution
Gateway Profile 2
- 177** Hi-Grade UltiNet 733
Packard Bell Spirit RF 730
- 181** Panrix V-Box Home Theatre PC
Simply Systemax P750 RV
Performance
- 182** Time Time Machine 750-7r
VQ Pro
Viglen Incepta
- 184** Alternative architecture
- 186** How we did the tests
- 187** Performance results
- 190** Features table
- 193** Editor's Choice

• PCs reviewed by Scott Montgomery and tested
by Lars Goran-Nilsson



Stylish systems

If you've coveted the iMac for its looks, read on, because this month we challenged 12 manufacturers to come up with a slimline system you'd be proud to have in your living room

The age of grey dull boxes may soon be over – well at least the box part. This month we decided to see what the PC manufacturers have come up with to compete with the more stylish looks that machines like the iMac manage to achieve; and rather surprisingly, there are a number of very small, unobtrusive solutions that are – dare we say it – stylish enough to have in your living room.

The reason for this is that today there are high-quality small form factor motherboards with both sound and video onboard, allowing manufacturers to cram quite a lot of computer into a small space, while still leaving enough in the budget for appealing items such as TFT flat panels. It is certainly a long overdue move, and there are a few really snappy systems out there that, despite being more expensive than their bigger brothers, are far more likely to not be hidden in your spare room.

We set the manufacturers simple guidelines for this group test, and with no price point, all the machines had to do was allow easy access to the Internet and be able to handle home/office duties. The system had to be a small, unobtrusive easy-to-use PC, with at least 64MB of RAM, 10GB of hard drive space, a DVD or CD-ROM, a minimum of a 15in display, a modem, and an office suite. The entrants varied from the very inexpensive smallish PC to the ultra-stylish, ultra-expensive unit where money needs to be no object. If you're looking for something a little bit different, then the following pages show that the old PC needn't be only a grey box, but can be as stylish as the best of them.

PHOTOGRAPH DAVID WHYTE

Acer Veriton FP



LIKE AJP'S PC, THE Acer Veriton FP is an integrated unit, with speakers built into lower corners of the fascia, below the 15in TFT screen. The Panasonic CD-ROM and 3.5in floppy drive sit between the speakers, along with an infra-red port. The Veriton doesn't have the simple elegance of AJP's system, but the screen image is sharp – although the colours are not as vibrant as some other TFT screens. The screen can be tilted to the required viewing angle.

Processing power comes in the form of a 500MHz Pentium III, mounted on the BX-based motherboard. Installed in one of the DIMM slots is 128MB of PC100 SDRAM, leaving one slot free for upgrading the memory. A modem is supplied as standard. Both sound and video are integrated onto the motherboard in the form of an ESS Solo audio chip and an ATi Rage LT Pro graphics chip, supported by 8MB of SDRAM. As with all the integrated

units, upgradability is not the priority. For storage, a 13GB Quantum hard disk is installed, which is not large by today's standards, but will be adequate. Unfortunately, only a CD-ROM is supplied for optical reading, where DVD would be preferable and would make more sense with a unit of this price. Inclusion of the floppy drive, however, is beneficial for small file transfer. In general, the spec on this system is not as strong as similarly priced units, although

the inclusion of network software and the lack of an office suite point to this machine's roots and price being firmly in the business world. For home use, though, Acer will supply the unit with whatever software is required and add the cost to the basic price.

Overall, the Veriton FP is not as stylish as some of the other all-in-one units in this group test, but then again, it has been primarily designed for the business environment. It is expensive for the specification supplied, although it will take up very little space, and won't spoil your décor too much.

DETAILS

PRICE £2,113.82 (£1,799 ex VAT)

CONTACT Acer 0870 900 2237

www.acer.co.uk

PROS All-inclusive unit with a TFT screen; infra-red port.

CONS Very pricey for the specification; software not included in the price

OVERALL An all-in-one unit that is pretty small and unobtrusive, but too expensive for the spec. There are better value systems in this group test

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★

★★★

★★

★★★

AJP Neo-PC



AJP'S NEO-PC, IS ONE of the most expensive systems in this month's test. A concept PC for the ultra-stylish, it both looks good and has the specs to match.

Apart from the ergonomic keyboard and the mouse, the PC is integrated into a single unit that has a small footprint for a relatively unobtrusive presence in your living room or office, although the power cable pushes it forward from the wall. There is even a handle on the top for easy transportation, although the

unit is heavier than it looks. The 15.1in TFT screen is attached to the front of the main body and pivots up and down for comfortable viewing. The on-screen image is even with well-represented colour.

The AJP is powered by a 750MHz Flip Chip Pentium III, mounted on a Slot 1 converter, for use with the Mitac BX-based motherboard. Occupying one of the DIMM slots is a 128MB module of PC100 SDRAM, leaving one slot free for

upgrading, although this involves placing the unit on its screen and removing the back. An onboard Crystal Sound Fusion chip provides sound, which is piped to the integrated speakers, while an ATi Rage LT Pro with 8MB of SDRAM deals with video.

The hard drive is a very respectably sized 20.5GB Quantum Fireball, and a vertically mounted 3.5in floppy drive is installed to one side. Unfortunately loading floppies correctly into the

laptop-style drive is quite difficult, requiring nimble fingers to push the disks home. A Hitachi DVD is mounted beside the floppy drive.

The Apollo Fax/Modem fits neatly into a PC Card slot on the left of the unit, leaving a second slot free for other peripherals. The system also has an onboard network adaptor, as well as an infra-red port.

The Neo-PC doesn't only look pretty, the bundled Microsoft Works Suite 2000 is a strong software package. If you're looking for a PC with simple, elegant looks and don't mind paying the premium, this may just fit the bill.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,976.35 (£1,682 ex VAT)

(delivery £15 unless ordered on the Internet)

CONTACT AJP 020 8208 9755

www.ajp.co.uk

PROS Simple elegant machine, with a built-in TFT screen

CONS Very pricey

OVERALL A good specification on a simple unobtrusive machine. It's expensive, but perhaps worth a look

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★★

★★★★

★★★

★★★★

Carrera Octan DM 650



THE SMALLEST OF Carrera's Octan range, the DM, looks like a conventional PC, just slightly smaller. The micro ATX case is a similar height to a conventional PC, but not as deep. A quick look inside shows that the depth has been cut to enable the micro ATX motherboard to fit snugly with no room to spare.

The Biostar M7VKA motherboard employs the VIA KT133 chipset, with the new 650MHz Duron processor and 128MB of PC133 SDRAM strapped into

it. There are two spare DIMM slots and the motherboard can support a massive maximum 1.5GB of RAM.

Installed in one of the two 5.25in bays is a Ricoh Combo drive. This allows four-speed DVD reading, 24-speed CD reading and writes and rewrites discs at six-speed and four-speed respectively. Carrera has also included both a CD-R and CD-RW disc with the bundle to get you started.

A 15GB Western Digital hard disk in one of the 3.5in bays leaves one bay free. Although not the largest hard disk in the test, 15GB will still take a while to fill. A modem is seated in the AMR slot.

The motherboard has both sound and graphics onboard. The sound is integrated into the VIA chipset, and outputs to the supplied Altec Lansing speakers. The graphics, although onboard, are provided by an nVidia TNT2 chip, with 32MB of SDRAM.

As with the Time entrant, this

onboard graphics solution allows the Octan DM to produce a respectable gaming performance. With a Quake III score of 24.8fps (frames per second), it's not quite as fast as the Time PC, but then neither of them are trying to be games machines.

The monitor is an LG 775N 17in unit. As the PC's case is not as small as the systems from Simply or Elonex, the monitor does not look too large, but for space-saving considerations, a 15in unit would have sufficed.

Lotus SmartSuite Millennium is included, making this a pretty good machine overall. It is certainly not the most stylish in the test though.

DETAILS

PRICE £938.93 (£749 ex VAT)

CONTACT Carrera 020 8307 2800

www.carrera.co.uk

PROS Good performance

CONS It just looks like a small PC and might not look too good in the living room

OVERALL This is a good performer and, if you don't mind the conventional design, it is a good machine

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★

Elonex Book PC



THE BOOK PC IS satisfyingly small and includes a stand that allows the case to sit vertically. As with Simply's entrant, the unit includes a 17in monitor, where a 15in would be more in keeping with the smaller chassis.

The front of the case has a full-sized floppy drive, as well as a laptop-sized Mitsumi CD-ROM drive. There is also an infra-red port on the front. A small flap allows access to the two USB ports, plus headphone and microphone sockets.

Inside the case is an MSI motherboard. The NLX form factor uses a riser board, which means the PCI slots are perpendicular to the main board, so installed cards lie parallel. This allows more boards to be fitted into a smaller space.

Tucked neatly under the CD-ROM is a 27.3GB Fujitsu hard drive, giving plenty of storage. With its 810E Intel chipset, this machine is for gamers, but the 733MHz Pentium III Flip Chip will pound through anything else you

can throw at it. The motherboard has a single 128MB PC133 memory module installed, leaving one DIMM socket free, although, unfortunately, on the PC we saw, the memory was incorrectly clocked at 100MHz in the BIOS.

As for upgrading, apart from USB peripherals, there is a problem if PCI cards need to be installed. The modem sits in one of the two available PCI slots, and, although the other is free, a serial port obscures the backing plate position

in the case. This means the serial port will have to go if another PCI card is installed. However, a serial port is built into the motherboard, so the sacrifice isn't too great. At the back there is a socket for the onboard network adaptor, along with a DVI output. The onboard Yamaha sound output is also at the back and is piped to the Creative SBS20 speakers.

The inclusion of Microsoft Office 2000 Small Business Edition means the software on this PC is excellent. Its small case is a good size, although the monitor is slightly too large. If this doesn't bother you, this system is good value; but for a bit more cash, you could afford the more stylish Hi-Grade UltiNet 733.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,065 (£899 ex VAT)

CONTACT Elonex 020 8452 4444

www.elonex.com

PROS Small case with infra-red at the front

CONS 17in monitor dwarfs the case

OVERALL A good little system with reasonable performance. Unfortunately the monitor doesn't complement the small chassis

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★



evesham.com Evolution



WITH A MICROTOWER two-thirds the size of a normal PC case, and a 15in evesham.com-branded monitor, the Evolution looks like a PC in miniature.

Opening the unit was a nerve-jangling experience, although as there is no room for internal upgrading, there is no need to get inside the box. The Intel 810E Desktop motherboard has both sound and video onboard. A Creative SoundBlaster PCI 128 feeds Creative SBS52 speakers, while the 810E chipset,

along with 4MB of SDRAM, deals with graphics. A single DIMM slot is filled with a 128MB PC133 memory module, although as the system bus is 100MHz, running the Pentium III processor at 700MHz, this faster memory is redundant, although it affords some future proofing. There is also an onboard network adaptor, with the output at the rear. The single PCI slot holds a Diamond SupraExpress modem.

To compensate for the lack of internal upgrade options, there are four USB ports, two at the rear and two at the front under the small blue rounded flap. This looks fine when it is closed, but is not aesthetically pleasing when open, although the location of USB ports on the front perhaps makes this compromise acceptable. Both the mouse and keyboard are USB, although the keyboard has a PS/2 mouse socket into which you could plug a PS/2 mouse, freeing a USB port.

A 20GB Maxtor hard drive is included, as well as a Samsung Combo drive to cater for removable storage. This allows CD-ROMs and DVDs to be read, while also allowing CD-R and CD-RW media to be written. On the whole, a very versatile solution to the issues of optical reading and removable storage.

Coming complete with Microsoft Works Suite 2000, this machine has it all – in miniature. Only one real criticism can be levelled: the image on the monitor submitted for review was very poor. Ultimately, the Evolution will do its job, but it's not much cheaper than the superior Hi-Grade machine.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,291.32 (£1,099 ex VAT)

CONTACT 0800 038 0800

www.evesham.com

PROS Small, compact system, with a good combo drive

CONS Monitor image quality was poor on our test unit; USB flap is unattractive

OVERALL A small, relatively unobtrusive unit. If CD writing is required, this unit is worth a look

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★

★★★★

★★★

★★★

Gateway Profile 2



GATEWAY'S PROFILE 2 is a stylish system that would certainly be a conversation point if it were nestled in your living room. With its curvy body supporting a high-quality 15in TFT screen, Gateway has moved away from the boxy conventional lines of PCs.

As a 'legacy-free' machine, there are no output sockets except four USB ones. The keyboard plugs into one port, leaving the others free for peripherals (the USB mouse conveniently plugs into

the keyboard to keep the other ports free). The only other sockets are the Motorola modem output and the Ethernet network output, both situated at the back.

There was no popping the bonnet on this machine to ogle its interior, since the Profile 2 is a 'sealed box'. It has not been built for the upgrade addict, and its performance is geared towards Internet surfing and office applications. Its Celeron 500MHz processor is adequate for

these tasks, as is the Intel 810-based motherboard and the 64MB of PC100 memory. Graphics and sound are both dealt with onboard by the 810 chipset (the video having 4MB of SDRAM to help it along), with the sound piped to speakers that are integrated into the base.

The IBM Deskstar 20.5GB hard disk will provide plenty of space; and a floppy drive is installed at the front. Above this is a Toshiba DVD-ROM for optical

reading, while below it there is a built-in microphone as well as a headphone socket for convenient access.

Bundled with Microsoft Works Suite 2000, this is a fine unit. The stand holds the screen at a good level for viewing and gives the machine a more organic profile – Gateway has even put a curve on the top of the fascia to get away from any artificial man-made straight lines. It won't be breaking any performance records, but when it comes to style, this may well be the machine to put in your living room, and it's certainly a worthy winner of this month's Highly Commended award.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,643.82

(£1,399 ex VAT)

CONTACT Gateway 0800 552 000

www.gateway.com/uk

PROS Wonderfully vibrant TFT screen; interesting shape

CONS A little pricey

OVERALL Different enough to normal PCs and with an excellent TFT screen, the Gateway would be a stylish addition to any living room

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★★

★★★

★★★★

★★★★



Hi-Grade UltiNet 733



THE ULTINET 733 is a very snappy looking machine, with its small case and TFT screen. The case is only 29 x 9 x 28cm (w x h x d), yet it still has room for both a full-sized floppy drive in the front and an Asus E608 DVD. If nothing else, this PC will look good in your living room, but thankfully there is much more.

Powered by a 733MHz Pentium III processor on the L-shaped Chaintech motherboard, this little machine has versatility we would usually expect only

from a much larger unit. Opening a front flap reveals two USB ports, microphone and headphone sockets, as well as a FireWire socket. Round the back, there are a further two USB ports, a serial port, a parallel port, two PS/2 sockets, a further FireWire socket, a DVI, as well as S-Video and composite video outputs. We think you'll agree this is an incredible array of connectivity. There is even an IrDA port at the front for infra-red communication.

Especially noteworthy are the FireWire sockets, which allow digital video devices to be attached – ideal for those who dabble in video-editing capabilities. The 20.4GB hard disk will fill up reasonably quickly with this sort of task, but it will be adequate with a bit of organisation.

With 128MB of PC133 SDRAM installed, one DIMM is free for upgrade, but apart from this there is no room for expansion. There is an AMR socket,

although this holds the AMR modem. Both sound and video are onboard and are controlled by the SiS chipset.

The 15in TFT flat panel has integrated speakers in the base, and the screen can be tilted up and down to adjust for comfortable viewing. The combination of both the TFT screen and the small case makes this a PC that will look good wherever you decide to put it. The system case can even be stood on its side to save space.

Bundled with Lotus SmartSuite Millennium, and costing only £1,373.58 inc VAT, you'll be hard pressed to find a machine as unobtrusive, yet still offering the versatility. Overall, a worthy winner of this month's Editor's Choice.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,373.58
(£1,169 ex VAT)

CONTACT Hi-Grade 020 8532 6111
www.higrade.com

PROS Compact, stylish and versatile PC
CONS None

OVERALL If it's a small PC you desire, then this is the one to go for

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
OVERALL RATING ★★★★★



Packard Bell Spirit RF 730



THIS LATEST INCARNATION of the Spirit series certainly has some ethereal qualities in that both its keyboard and mouse are cordless, so you literally 'beam' your information to the PC via radio waves. Decked out in stylish dark grey and silver, the Spirit RF 730 is one of the most attractive in the test. Its Slimview TFT screen has a fairly sharp and vibrant image, although it is not of the same quality as the digital flat panels bundled with previous Spirits.

The case is constructed to mount vertically, which makes loading CD media into the drive a little awkward, but that's a price you have to pay for stylish looks. This niggle aside, the Pioneer DVD114 is a quality, full-sized drive. Below the DVD sits a laptop floppy drive. Also adorning the front of the Spirit RF 730 is one of the two USB ports, along with a microphone socket (for use with the supplied microphone) and a headphone socket,

complete with a useful volume control.

The processor is a powerful 733MHz Pentium III, which sits on the MSI 810E-based motherboard. The memory installed is a single module of 128MB memory clocked to 133MHz, complementing the 133MHz FSB. Another DIMM slot is free for upgrading.

Inside, the modem sits in the AMR slot, leaving the two available PCI slots free for adding any required cards. A

fairly large 20.4GB Maxtor hard disk takes care of fixed storage. Video is onboard and is dealt with by the 810E chipset, as is the sound, which is piped to rather stylish flat NXT speakers.

A good software bundle – Packard Bell's Spirit CD collection (including Caesar III and Photo Express) and Microsoft Works 2000 – complements its stylish looks. With its radio-controlled keyboard and mouse, TFT screen and stylish colours, this is an eye-catching PC, with a bit of power as well. That said, it's more expensive than some of the similarly specced PCs in this test.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,899 (£1,616 ex VAT)

CONTACT Packard Bell 01628 508 200
www.packardbell.co.uk

PROS Very stylish looking unit
CONS A little bit pricey; flat panel not as good as previous models

OVERALL With its cool grey colour and its flat speakers, this unit looks great; and it has a solid spec and good software. It's just a little on the expensive side

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
OVERALL RATING ★★★★★



Panrix V-Box Home Theatre PC



LOOKING SOMEWHAT LIKE a video recorder without a time display, Panrix's entry wins the prize for the system that looks least like a PC. Built primarily as a low-cost alternative to conventional PCs, Panrix expects to supply the V-Box without a monitor, leaving the user to connect it to a television. However, our review unit came with a ViewSonic 17in monitor, or you could have a dark grey monitor (to match the case) if you want a matching ensemble.

A TV-style remote control is included, which has a joystick-driven mouse, so you can operate the V-Box from the comfort of your armchair. The V-Box is certainly a big move away from conventional thinking.

An infra-red keyboard allows input to the system from anywhere within a fairly large room, as long as the keyboard is pointed at the receiver. To aid reception, the receiver extends on a short cable for optimal positioning.

The motherboard is Intel 810-based, with video dealt with by the chipset, and supported by 2MB of onboard video memory. Sound is onboard in the form of a C-Media chip (which is also employed for use with the modem), and a quality set of Creative Soundworks Digital speakers is included to blast the sound out. The motherboard has a 128MB memory module slotted into one of the two available DIMM slots.

This Panrix has neither vacant bays,

nor any slots for upgrade, although for the target user, this is unlikely to be a concern. A Panasonic SR-8584A DVD and a floppy drive fill the only available drive bays, while a 15.3GB Maxtor 91531U3 hard drive deals with storage. In terms of software Microsoft Works 2000 is bundled in.

This low-cost move away from PC convention is interesting. Only one thing concerns us, and that is the quality of the image on a television. With lower resolution, web pages and especially text tend to look fuzzy; and doing any kind of high-intensity work on a TV will perhaps be a bit of a headache.

DETAILS

PRICE £821.33 (£699 ex VAT)
CONTACT Panrix 0113 244 4958
www.panrix.com

PROS Inexpensive and unique solution to PC construction
CONS If you opt for the V-Box without a monitor, viewing on a television will perhaps be a bit of a strain
OVERALL Interesting, low-cost alternative to a standard PC

FEATURES	★★
PERFORMANCE	★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★
OVERALL RATING	★★★★

Simply Systemax P750 RV Perf



SIMPLY'S ENTRY IS a small, tidy looking box, let down by only one thing: the CTX PR705 monitor is too large. It is not a bad monitor – far from it, the image is crisp and the colours vibrant. It's just that a 15in monitor, or a TFT display, would have been more in keeping with a small unobtrusive PC.

Pumping along with its Pentium III 750MHz, this machine will be more than adequate for surfing the net, and with Microsoft Office Small Business Edition

included, all the software you'll need is available for working at home.

The case itself is satisfyingly small, yet the front still has room for a floppy drive, as well as two USB ports and headphone and microphone sockets. A Compaq DVD is also mounted on the front, although unlike Hi-Grade's entry, it is a laptop model. There is also the option of mounting the case vertically with the included stand.

Opening the chassis reveals a Tardis-like quality, with the components and the Intel 810-based Q-lity FlexATX motherboard neatly fitted in. The motherboard has room for only a couple of upgrades: one DIMM slot is free, the other being filled by a 128MB PC100 SDRAM module; and there is one PCI slot, which is free because the Motorola modem occupies the AMR slot.

Sound is onboard, in the form of a Creative SoundBlaster PCI 128, and this

pipes out to Creative SBS52 speakers. With the inclusion of a microphone and a Creative WebCam3, with its maximum resolution of 640 x 480, the opportunity is there for a bit of home video dabbling – and it works remarkably well. The 20GB Maxtor hard disk is of a reasonable size for this task, but saving too many videos will soon fill it up.

This PC looks good, and the webcam helps to make it fun and versatile. Office 2000 Small Business Edition makes this a good system for work as well. Only the large monitor lets it down. In our opinion, it is a bit too big. Apart from this, though, this is an excellent machine.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,173.83 (£999 ex VAT)
CONTACT Simply 08707 297 366
www.simply.co.uk



PROS Small, compact case; webcam
CONS Monitor, although a high-quality unit, is a little too large to be unobtrusive
OVERALL An excellent system and a worthy winner of an award despite the size of the monitor. If you don't mind that, this is a very good value system

FEATURES	★★★★
PERFORMANCE	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★
OVERALL RATING	★★★★



Time Time Machine 750-7f VQ Pro



WITH THE FRONT of its case shaped like the heads of the battle droids in *Star Wars Episode I*, the Time Machine's design is certainly intriguing. There's even a silver handle on the top, in case you need to move it around. You'll either love the way it looks, or loathe it.

The processor is a 750MHz Athlon, and with the AMD 750 chipset-based micro ATX MSI motherboard and 128MB of PC100 SDRAM occupying one of two available DIMM slots, this

machine is no slouch, despite its size. Its SYSmark rating of 134 and Quake III score of 29.2fps make this one of the preferred units for those looking for a small PC with a bit of scope for game-playing. With its onboard nVidia TNT2 64 chip with 32MB of SDRAM powering the graphics, this performance isn't that surprising though.

Storage comes in the form of a Fujitsu 20GB hard drive, and there is also a floppy drive. A

Pioneer DVD means you can read CDs at a respectable 40-speed and DVDs at 10-speed.

Inside the case a Winmodem is slotted into one of three PCI slots, leaving some room for upgrades. The internals are neatly set out; with cables carefully tied back, and there is even an extra fan to make sure it all stays cool.

Audio is onboard, in the form of a Creative Audio PCI 128. The output from this is pumped to two Time-

branded speakers designed to match the case. The 15in Time-branded Samtron monitor, on the other hand, doesn't follow suit to complete the look. The monitor is a good size for a relatively unobtrusive PC, although the image isn't the sharpest in the world.

The standard Time extras and software are included: a joystick and gamepad and a standard software pack, including Lotus Word Pro Millennium for word processing and 1-2-3 for spreadsheets, among other packages. This is a well-specced PC but it doesn't really fall into the same slimline category as much of the competition

DETAILS

PRICE £821.32 (£699 ex VAT)

CONTACT Time 01282 777 555

www.timecomputers.com

PROS Inexpensive, good performance, decent graphics

CONS The case will appeal to some, but will put others off; larger than other systems

OVERALL As an inexpensive machine in a relatively small case, this system is good value, if aesthetically a little different

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★

Viglen Incepta



THE VIGLEN INCEPTA is a compact unit indeed, and in a daring move away from the drab beige colour of most cases, the Incepta comes in navy blue, with the Viglen logo emblazoned vertically down the front of the case. Totally legacy-free, there are USB ports (two front and two rear) and no other sockets at all – except to connect the modem to a telephone socket. The keyboard and mouse use two of the USBs, leaving two free for the addition of peripherals.

the Incepta has no floppy drive, so nothing can be saved external to the machine (although an external USB Zip drive, or something similar, would address this issue). For accessing the Internet, a mini PCI modem is fitted into the only available (mini) PCI slot, which means upgrades all have to be external, and USB driven. For optical reading, a vertically mounted, black Teac DVD drive is installed at the front of the case.

Driven by onboard graphics is a

Strapped onto the Intel 810 motherboard is a respectably powerful 700MHz Pentium III, plus a single 128MB PC100 memory module, leaving one DIMM slot free.

Sound requirements are onboard in Intel's Sound-max Digital Audio, with output piped to Altec Lansing LCS33 speakers.

The Fujitsu 10GB hard disk is fairly small by today's standards, but it will be adequate for most home users. Also worthy of note, in light of the smaller hard disk, is that

Viglen 15RX-TA 15in TFT flat panel. The quality of this was fairly mediocre, as the colour representation and lighting from top-to-bottom was not particularly regular. However, colours were vibrant and focus was good. The TFT panel in combination with the small case will certainly make this PC a talking point.

With Microsoft Works Suite 2000, this unit has a strong software package, since Word 2000 is the preferred word processing option; and for £1,350.08 inc VAT, it isn't too expensive either. Overall, the Incepta is small, different looking, yet has most of what you require for a small fully functional home PC.

DETAILS

PRICE £1,350.08 (£1,149 ex VAT)

CONTACT Viglen 020 8758 7000

www.viglen.co.uk

PROS Small machine with strong software

CONS TFT screen wasn't the best quality; no removable storage

OVERALL As a small, stylish looking unit, this one is up there with the best, although it's not very feature rich

FEATURES

PERFORMANCE

VALUE FOR MONEY

OVERALL RATING

★★★★

★★★★

★★★★

★★★

Any colour as long as it's beige?

A computer is ultimately nothing more than a versatile tool, or is it? Admittedly its roots are firmly in the realms of functionality, but can the modern computer's status really be reduced to a mere tool? With email and the Internet being used more and more for non-work purposes, computers are as much a part of personal life as of our professional lives. It is therefore strange that the PC's looks have remained so functional when a more stylish look would be more in keeping with its home use.

As this group test has shown some steps are being taken to make the PC look a bit trendier, but there is still a long way to go as the standard colour schemes of most of the test systems highlight. Of course it doesn't have to be this way, as Apple has shown with the iMac.

It is likely that if you asked someone to imagine the most stylish computer they could, their mind would drift to the curvaceous all-in-one form of Apple's iMac. What Apple has observed is that in the same way that people like objects such as their telephone to look a bit cool, they want their computer to look good too. As a result, the iMac is physically different in almost every way from a PC, and looks far more like part of your home décor than a business device. All its components are built into the monitor casing, which is

decked out in clear plastic allowing the world to see the slick innards, and the keyboard and mouse are also similarly translucent.

Specification-wise, the iMac is not dissimilar to a PC. It has a processor, a G3 clocked at between 350MHz and 500MHz, although due to the architecture of both the G3 and the new G4 processor, there is no real comparison of clock speeds with Pentium IIIs and Athlons. A comparable amount of memory to PCs is installed, either 64MB or 128MB; and there are all the other usual components too: up to a 30GB hard disk, a CD-ROM/DVD drive, and a built-in 56K modem. The graphics solution is provided by an ATI Rage 128 Pro with 8MB of SDRAM; and the audio system is integrated into the main unit. This could all be straight from a PC specification sheet, yet the packaging makes the iMac appeal to a totally different audience.

And the nightmare doesn't end there for the PC manufacturers, because Apple hasn't been sitting on its laurels since it released the iMac and has let loose the Power Mac G4 Cube. Even the name sounds like something you'd want in your living room, somewhere between your lava lamp and your stylish mini hi-fi. The cube, although not truly cube shaped, is a mere 24.8cm tall with its width and depth both 19.5cm, making it extremely small and unobtrusive, but as powerful a computer as any home user will need.

Another threat to the home PC market is the Sega Dreamcast, an alternative to both the PC and the iMac for email and Internet browsing.

Although primarily a console, with a keyboard (which only costs £20)



Apple's new Cube is small, stylish, powerful – and not beige

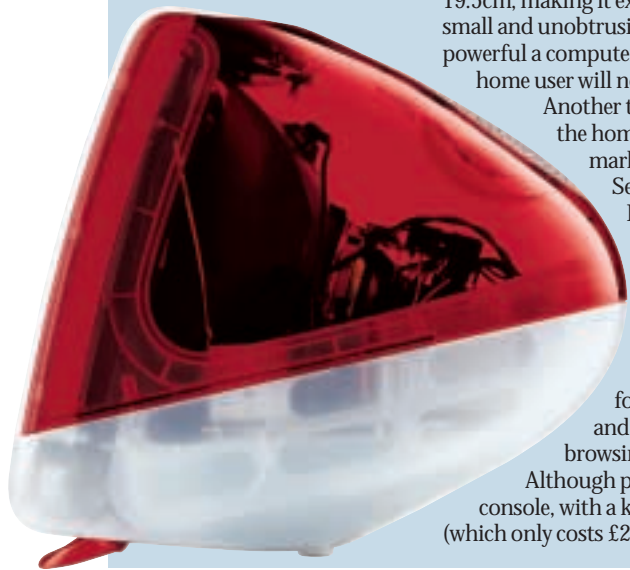
emailing and the Internet become a possibility. There is an obvious television screen resolution issue with this solution, and it does not have the versatility of either the iMac or a PC. But then when the primary use is online gaming, the option of email and web browsing is an attractive extra; and no doubt web pages will be optimised for television viewing in the near future, which will increase the appeal of the games console over a computer as an email and surfing solution, especially taking the cost differential into account.

Another option for a move away from PC convention is a laptop docking station from manufacturers such as Hewlett-Packard. This allows a laptop to be shared between work and home environments. The laptop gives the versatility of a mobile computer, but there is the option of docking it at a static location where, along with the station itself, it attains all the functions of a full PC.

The docking station can have a greater number of input and output sockets than a laptop, such as SCSI and PC Card slots, as well as allowing further hard drives and CD/DVD-ROM drives to be fitted. A screen, keyboard and mouse have to remain with the station (which doesn't work without the laptop) but at least the overall look is different to the conventional PC – and they don't all come in beige either.

Ultimately, most people would like their computers to look good, as well as perform well. Considering the way current motherboards and graphics cards look, PCs would doubtless look as good as the iMac if the interior was visible. Apple has shown that style can be achieved in a computer. We say it's time for the PC to undergo a similar metamorphosis so it can also display a level of stylishness more in keeping with the modern household item that the computer has become.

SCOTT MONTGOMERY





How we did the tests

SYSmark 2000

This comprises 12 application workloads and a management program. The workloads are divided into two categories: office productivity and Internet content creation. We run the benchmark at a resolution of 1,024 x 768 in 16bit colour. It loops three times, rebooting between each workload.

It then assigns the system a performance rating for each application, based on a comparison of workload runtimes between the system being tested and a fixed calibration platform. A rating of 100 indicates the test system has performance equal to that of the calibration platform, 200 indicates twice the performance and so on. The calibration platform is based on a Pentium III 450MHz processor, an Intel 440BX chipset motherboard, 128MB of SDRAM, a 32MB Diamond Viper V770 Ultra graphics card, an IBM DJNA 371800 and Windows 98 SE.

Each category rating is a geometric mean of the workload ratings in that category. The overall rating is a weighted geometric mean of the category ratings.

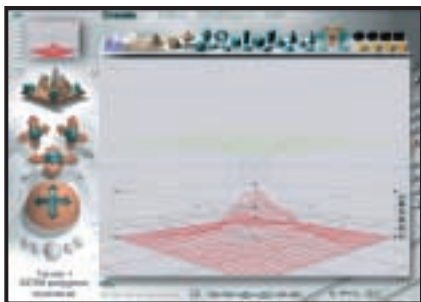
Office productivity

Corel CorelDraw 9.0

This script first takes an abstract design, applies an Art Stroke to it and runs various filter effects. It creates and manipulates a scene composed of vector graphics. Next, it takes a raster image and applies effects. It creates several 3D objects and performs 3D manipulations.

Corel Paradox 9.0

This performs SQL-style queries on a database table and runs a 'find duplicates' query. It imports other text files, formatting and exporting each to HTML. Then it opens up query forms, enters



Bryce 4 script manipulates a wire frame scene and renders it

charts, applying graphics and sound effects, and adding movie files.

additional data and produces reports based on queries.

Microsoft Word 2000

This workload invokes word processing functions, including editing, spell checking, search and replace, font change, copy and paste, print preview, mail merge fields, insert hyperlinks, background and table formatting plus opening and viewing HTML pages.

Microsoft Excel 2000

Operations include closing and opening spreadsheets, HTML pages and data in text files, spell checks, formula calculation, plotting data, formatting charts and cells, analysing data in pivot tables, naming a cell and inserting hyperlinks.

Microsoft PowerPoint 2000

Operations include spell checks, editing, formatting and moving pictures, applying templates, formatting tables in slides, inserting hyperlinks, applying header and footer data, formatting

3DMark 2000 tests each system's DirectX performance (above) and OpenGL performance is tested via Quake III: Arena (right)

Dragon NaturallySpeaking Preferred 4.0

The script plays a pre-recorded wav file into NaturallySpeaking, which then converts the wav file to text.

Netscape

Communicator 4.61

This opens a website of plays by Shakespeare and selects and loads the texts several times. Then it loads a page consisting of large tables, thumbnails and images and cycles through viewing the images.

Internet content creation

Adobe Premiere 5.1

This creates an animation of about 16 bmp files and other avi clips and puts transitions between them. It superimposes two audio tracks and runs the audio through filters.



Adobe Photoshop 5.5

The script loads, resizes, zooms out of images, applies filters to the images, changes mode and colour settings, adjusts image brightness and contrast and saves the image to a jpeg file.

Avid Elastic Reality 3.1

The workload sets up and renders a morph between two mpeg2-sized images (720 x 480 pixels, roughly 750KB).

MetaCreations Bryce 4

This script opens an assembled wire frame scene and renders it to the final image. Then a new image is opened and saved in Metastream format. Another image is opened and saved in an HTML-compatible format.

Microsoft Windows Media Encoder 4.0

The input file is an avi clip that is encoded using the mpeg4 Video Codec.

3DMark 2000

Remedy Entertainment's MAX-FX is used to test the DirectX performance of a system. It runs two specially coded games at low, medium and high resolutions. We ran the benchmark at 1,024 x 768 in 16bit colour, with each game set to loop three times. The 3DMark is calculated by adding the frames per second for each game together and multiplying the result by 12.

Quake III

We tested each system's OpenGL performance with Quake III: Arena (1.11).

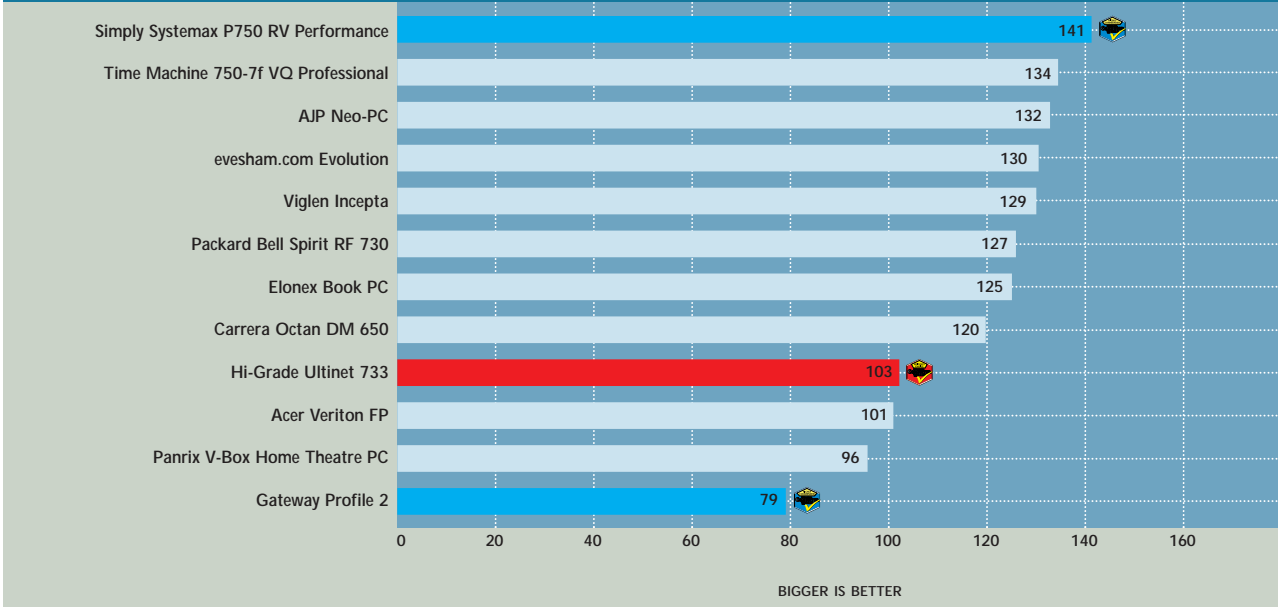
The settings were: video mode - 1,024 x 768, colour depth - 16bit, full screen, highest texture detail, texture quality - 16bit, texture filter - bilinear, lighting and lightmap.

At command prompt we typed:

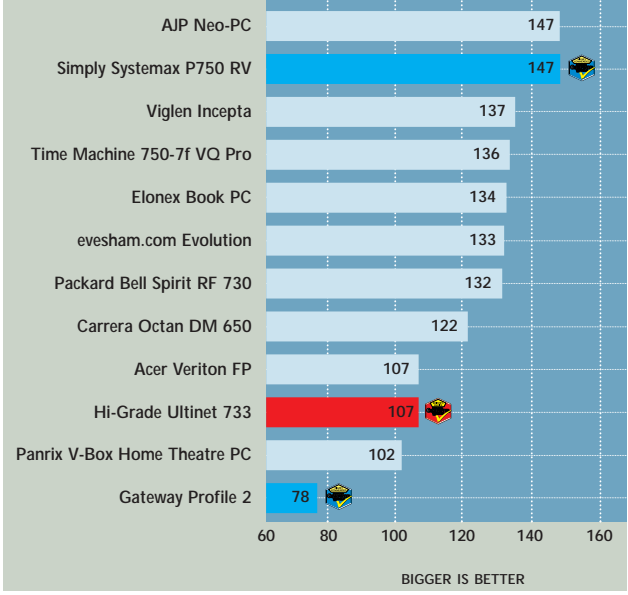
```
timedemo 1
demo demo001
```

This runs demo 1 and records the frames per second.

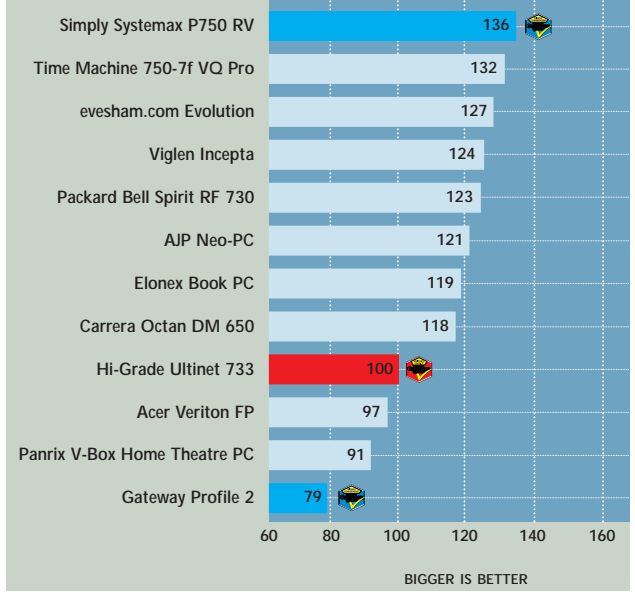
SYSmark 2000 overall



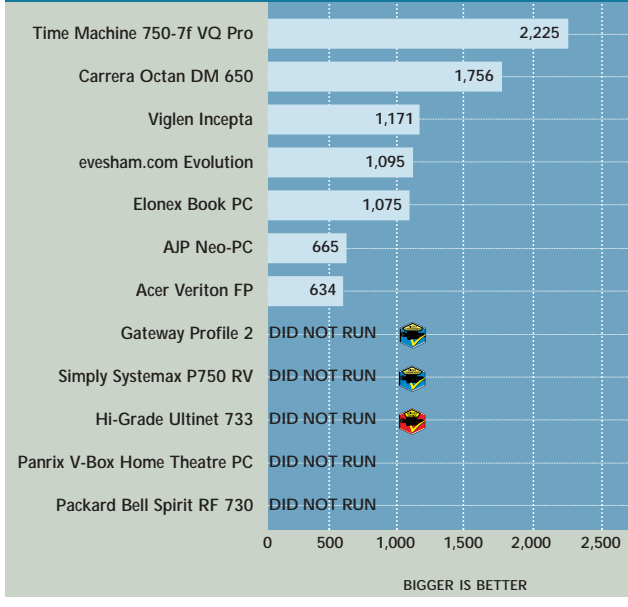
SYSmark 2000 Internet content creation



SYSmark 2000 office productivity



3DMark 2000



Quake III (fps)

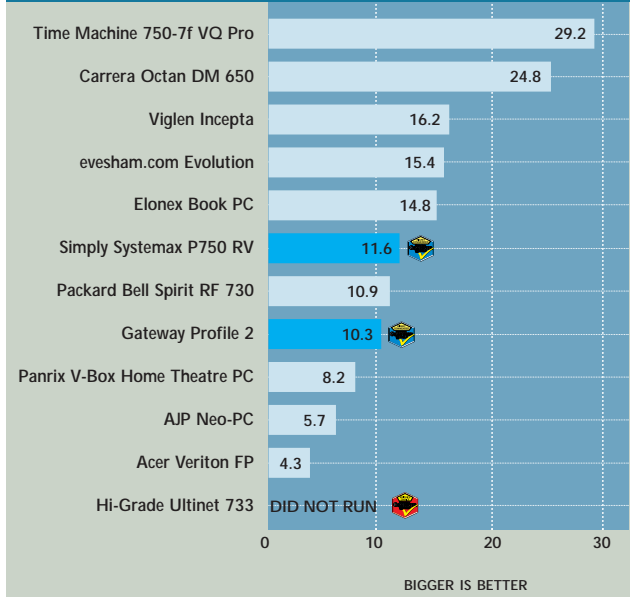










Table of features						
						
MANUFACTURER	ACER	AJP	CARRERA	ELONEX	EVESHAM.COM	
MODEL NAME	VERITON FP	NEO-PC	OCTAN DM 650	BOOK PC	EVOLUTION	
Price inc VAT (ex VAT)	£2,113.82 (£1,799)	£1,976.35 (£1,682)	£938.93 (£749)	£1,065 (£899)	£1,291.32 (£1,099)	
Telephone	0870 900 2237	020 8208 9755	020 8307 2800	020 8452 4444	0800 038 0800	
HARDWARE SPECS						
Processor	Pentium III 500MHz	Pentium III 750MHz	AMD Duron 650MHz	Pentium III 733MHz	Pentium III 700MHz	
RAM/type	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC133	128MB/PC133	
Occupied RAM slots/spare RAM slots	1/1	1/1	1/2	1/1	1/0	
Max memory in this configuration	384MB	256MB	1.1GB	384MB	128MB	
Maximum memory supported by motherboard	512MB	256MB	1.5GB	512MB	256MB	
Hard disk (manufacturer and model)	Quantum Fireball Plus KA	Quantum Fireball QML20400LB	Western Digital WD15 3BA	Fujitsu MPE3273AH	Maxtor 52049U4	
HD size/interface	13GB/EIDE	20.4GB/EIDE	15GB/EIDE	27.3GB/EIDE	20GB/EIDE	
Storage drive model and manufacturer	N/A	N/A	Ricoh Combo MP9060	N/A	Samsung Combo SM-304B	
Size of storage drive media/storage drive interface	N/A	N/A	650MB/EIDE	N/A	650MB/EIDE	
3.5in floppy drive	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	
MOTHERBOARD COMPONENTS						
Motherboard manufacturer	Acer	Mitac	Biostar	MSI	Intel	
Model/chipset	V66LT/Intel BX	67X/Intel 440BX	M7VKA/VIA KT133	MS6174/Intel 810E	MO810E Desktop/Intel 810E	
EXPANSION AND I/O						
No of 3.5/5.25in bays	1/0	1/0	3/2	2/1	1/1	
No of free 3.5/5.25in bays	0/0	0/0	1/1	0/0	0/0	
No of PCI/ISA/shared/AMR slots	1/0/0/0	1/0/0/0	2/0/0/1	2/0/0/0	1/0/0/0	
No of free PCI/ISA/shared/AMR slots	1/0/0/0	1/0/0/0	2/0/0/0	1/0/0/0	0/0/0/0	
No of USB/serial/parallel/PS/2	2/1/1/2	2/1/1/2	2/2/1/2	2/2/1/2	4/0/0/0	
MULTIMEDIA						
DVD manufacturer/model	CD-ROM: Panasonic CR175	Hitachi GD-S100	Ricoh Combo MP9060	CD-ROM: Mitsumi SR242S	Samsung Combo SM-304B	
DVD speed/interface	N/A	6x/EIDE	4x/EIDE	N/A	4x/EIDE	
Sound card manufacturer	ESS	Crystal (onboard)	Onboard	Onboard	Creative (onboard)	
Sound card model	Solo	Sound Fusion Audio	VIA KT133	Yamaha AL-XG Audio Device	SB Audio PCI 128	
Speakers (manufacturer and model)	Integrated	Integrated	Altec Lansing ACS22	Creative SBS20	Creative SBS52	
Graphics card manufacturer and model	ATI Rage LT Pro (onboard)	Onboard	OEM TNT2 M64	Onboard	Onboard	
Chipset	Rage LT Pro	ATI 3D Rage LT Pro	TNT2 M64	Intel 810E	Intel 810E	
RAM/max RAM and type	8MB/SDRAM	8MB/SDRAM	32MB/SDRAM	4MB/SDRAM	4MB/SDRAM	
Graphics card interface	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	
Monitor manufacturer/model	Integrated flat panel	Panasonic integrated MEDTCF02QEF	LG 775N	ELX MN017HS	Vibrant VM52RDA-E02	
Monitor size/max viewable diagonal	15in/15in	15.1in/15.1in	17in/16in	17in/16in	15in/13.8in	
Maximum resolution and refresh (Hz)	1,024 x 768/60	1,024 x 768/60	1,280 x 720/75	1,280 x 1,024/75	1,024 x 768/60	
OTHER INFORMATION						
Modem manufacturer and model	Standard 56K PCI modem	Apollo Fax/Modem FM560	HAMR 5600 Voice Modem	Conexant HCF V.90 56K PCI	Diamond Supra SST 56i Pro DF	
Misc hardware	Intel 82558-based integrated Ethernet, IrDA port, ASM Pro Suite V.1	AMD Family 10/100 Ethernet adaptor, IrDA port	None	Intel 82559 Fast Ethernet (onboard), DFPI connector, IrDA port	Intel Ethernet LAN onboard	
Bundled software	None	MS Works Suite 2000	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Office 2000 Small Business Edition	MS Works Suite 2000	

							
	GATEWAY	HI-GRADE	PACKARD BELL	PANRIX	SIMPLY	TIME	VIGLEN
	PROFILE 2	ULTINET 733	SPIRIT RF 730	V-Box HOME THEATRE PC	SYSTEMAX P750 RV PERFORMANCE	TIME MACHINE 750-7F VQ PRO	INCEPTA
	£1,643.82 (€1,399)	£1,373.58 (€1,169)	£1,899 (€1,616)	£821.33 (€699)	£1,173.83 (€999)	£821.32 (€699)	£1,350.08 (€1,149)
	0800 552 000	020 8532 6111	01628 508 200	0113 244 4958	08707 297 366	01282 777 555	020 8758 7000
	Intel Celeron 500MHz	Pentium III 733MHz	Pentium III 733MHz	Celeron 600MHz	Pentium III 750MHz	AMD 750MHz	Pentium III 700MHz
	64MB/PC100	128MB/PC133	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100	128MB/PC100
	N/A	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1
	N/A	384MB	384MB	384MB	384MB	384MB	384MB
	N/A	512MB	512MB	512MB	512MB	512MB	512MB
	IBM Deskstar DPTA-372050	Fujitsu MPE3204AH	Maxtor 32049U3	Maxtor 91521U3	Maxtor 52049U4	Fujitsu MPE3204AT	Fujitsu MPF3102AT
	20.5GB/EIDE	20.4GB/EIDE	20.4GB/EIDE	15.3GB/EIDE	20GB/EIDE	20GB/EIDE	10GB/EIDE
	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
	Gateway	Chaintech	MSI	PC-Chips	Q-lity	MSI	Intel
	Intel 810	6SLV/SIS 630	MS-6303/Intel 810E	Panrix OEM/Intel 810	CP810-F1/Intel 810	MS6316/AMD 750	GS810/Intel 810
	N/A	2/1	1/1	2/1	1/0	3/2	1/0
	0/0	0/0	0/0	0/0	0/0	1/1	0/0
	N/A	0/0/0/1	2/0/0/1	0/0/0/0	1/0/0/1	3/0/0/0	1 mini PCI/0/0/0
	N/A	0/0/0/0	2/0/0/0	0/0/0/0	1/0/0/0	2/0/0/0	0/0/0/0
	4/0/0/0	2/1/1/2	2/1/1/2	2/0/1/2	4/1/1/2	2/1/1/2	4/0/0/0
	Toshiba DVD SD-C2302	Asus E608	Pioneer DVD114	Panasonic SR-8584A	Compaq DRD-U624	Pioneer DVD-104S	Teac DV-25E
	12x/EIDE	8x/EIDE	10x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	6x/EIDE	10x/EIDE	5x/EIDE
	Soundmax	SIS (onboard)	Onboard	C-Media	Creative (onboard)	Creative (onboard)	Onboard
	AudioCodec 97	SIS 7018	Intel 810E	CM18738/C3DX PCI	SB Audio PCI 128	SB Audio PCI 128	Intel 810 Soundmax Digital Audio
	Integrated	Integrated	NXT FPS-1EP(B)	Creative Soundworks Digital	Creative SBS52	Time speakers	Altec Lansing LCS33
	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Intel 810	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard
	Intel 810	SIS 630	Intel 810E	Onboard	Intel 810	nVidia TNT2 M64	Intel 810
	4MB/SDRAM	8MB of system memory	4MB SDRAM	2MB system memory	4MB SDRAM	32MB/SDRAM	4MB/SDRAM
	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard	Onboard
	Gateway PFL2-15A (integrated)	X-TAL 6220 TFT	Packard Bell Slimview S525	Viewsonic E70	CTX PR705	Samtron 55E (M) (plus)	Viglen 15RX-TA flat panel
	15.1in/15.1in	15in	15in/15in	17in/16in	17in/16in	15in/14in	15in/15in
	1,024 x 768/60	1,024 x 768/60	1,024 x 768/60	1,024 x 768/75	1,280 x 1,024/75	1,024 x 768/75	1,024 x 768/75
	Motorola SM56 AC-L	Standard AMR modem	AMR modem MR 2800-W	C-Media 56K	Motorola SM56 AC-L	WinModem 56K	3Com Mini PCI Datafax Modem 56K
	Intel 21145-based phone/Ethernet controllers	2x FireWire sockets, DVI, S-Video, composite out IrDA port, SIS 900 PCI Fast Ethernet	Microphone	SIS 900 Network (onboard)	Creative WebCam3 Microphone	Joystick, gamepad headset & microphone	Network Card 10/100 Intel-based (onboard)
	MS Works Suite 2000	Lotus SmartSuite Millennium	MS Works & Word 2000, Packard Bell Spirit CDs	MS Works 2000	MS Office 2000 Small Business Edition	Time standard software pack, MS Works	MS Works Suite 2000



Editor's Choice

The judging this month was exceptionally hard, because so many of the systems were good in different ways. The manufacturers followed three directions. First, Time and Carrera opted for basically a standard PC, but in the smallest conventional case available. These units are not only the most upgradable, but are also fast enough to indulge in a little gaming. Both have an onboard TNT2 chip and 32MB of video SDRAM, so the graphics processing, although not state-of-the-art, is good enough to run games. So, if it is just a small PC you need, with some upgradability and a bit of pace, then either of these will be in the running.

Other entrants are built around a fully integrated unit, with speakers and a TFT screen attached to the main body of the PC and only the keyboard and mouse plugging in. This is a lot more expensive and most of the models have been designed more for business environments than as cheap and stylish home PCs. As a result, they have virtually no options for upgrade, as the design is for the user who wants something to look good as well as perform. But then let's face it, an amateur 'hotrod' PC builder will want a giant case, with lots of fans and good two-hand access, not a curvy all-in-one case with built-in TFT. The bottom line is that this type of unit fits a niche, and if money is no object it's worth a look.

AJP's entrant has a screen that almost looks like it's hovering in front of the rest of the case, while the Gateway Profile 2 has a TFT screen image was second to none.

The third approach was to use ultra-small cases not much bigger than a stack of five PCW issues. In combination with a TFT flat panel, these are as small and unobtrusive as a PC can be while still being functional. Unfortunately, some of these units came with 17in monitors. This is a pity as it doesn't matter how small the PC case is if you need to find space for a large monitor. The PCs from Viglen and Hi-Grade, by contrast, have small cases and TFT screens, which in our eyes, was the most stylish combination. Unfortunately, in Viglen's case this wasn't backed up by lots of features and the TFT screen was not the best.

The winners

This month's **Editor's Choice** is the Hi-Grade UltiNet 733. This unit has everything a small PC should have to be versatile, while being so stylish that you'd actively encourage people to look at it when they visit your home. The case is small and compact, yet Hi-Grade has managed to fit in a full-size Asus DVD and a floppy drive. Not only do these feel more robust to use than laptop equivalents (used in many of the other units), but also in the event of failure of either of these drives, there will be a great financial saving when replacing them.

The UltiNet 733 has such a vast array of versatile inputs, that the competition is left standing. Where some of the systems in this group test had USB and little else, Hi-Grade's PC not only offers USB, but also DVI, composite video, S-Video, as well as being one of the first systems we've seen with integrated FireWire

sockets. This will appeal to the video-editing enthusiast, and the 733MHz processor and 128MB of SDRAM is adequate to battle through the processing of this and any other task. There's a spare DIMM socket to boost the memory to 384MB. As for storage, a good-sized 20.4GB Fujitsu hard disk gives plenty of room, although video editing will soon use up the space. Completing the stylish ensemble is a TFT screen. The UltiNet is small, good looking, versatile and well priced. Need we say more?

As for this month's **Highly Commended** awards, the first goes to the Gateway Profile 2. Cheapest of the integrated units, this machine looks almost organic with barely a straight edge on it. The TFT screen was second to none in the tests, with a bright, sharp, focused and regular image, which is presented at a good viewing height. Driven by a Celeron 500MHz backed up by 64MB of SDRAM, it isn't the highest specification, but as a stylish PC, it wins the first award hands down.

The second award goes to the **Simply Systemax P750 RV Performance**. Despite its large screen, there is just too much about this PC to not recommend it. The monitor is of excellent quality, our only criticism being over its physical size. The small case houses the Pentium III 750MHz; Microsoft Office SBE ensures that all office applications will be handled easily; and Creative's WebCam makes it a fun and versatile system as well. As an overall bundle it may not be the most unobtrusive, but it certainly deserves a Highly Commended award.



Hi-Grade's UltiNet is a versatile and stylish system you'd be proud to show off



The curvy Gateway stood out with its high spec, great screen and low cost



Simply's large screen was not enough to put us off and the WebCam adds a bit of fun