

Buying a Desktop PC

Several people have asked me about buying a new desktop computer recently, what to look for and what to avoid, so here's a quick guide on what's available and what it will cost you.

As far as the operating system is concerned there are few options out there and you will more than likely end up with Windows Vista, unless you buy a computer from a business range where you can get a Windows XP pro downgradable licence and pay typically an additional €45 for the privilege. For some of you this is a cheap way of avoiding the compatibility issues of Vista so that you can continue to use your older software and printers that are not supported by the new operating system. I do not recommend you buy a Vista PC to then install XP on it, as having done this myself I know that it is far from easy and takes the best part of the day to get everything going perfectly. If you insist on following this road you must ensure that XP drivers are available for the different components within the box you are buying, and that you have a way of installing them once you remove Vista.

What to get in the box?

Processor: Whereas before processors were named by their speed, i.e. Pentium 3.2 GHz, the guys at Intel have chosen a naming system that has nothing to do with speed anymore. An example of the current range can be seen below with the processor name and corresponding speed:

Core 2 Duo

45 nm process technology

Number of Transistors 410 Million

Variants

Core 2 Duo E8600 - 3.33 GHz

Core 2 Duo E8500 - 3.16 GHz

Core 2 Duo E8400 - 3.00 GHz

Core 2 Duo E8300 - 2.83 GHz

Core 2 Duo E8200 - 2.66 GHz

Core 2 Duo E8190 - 2.66 GHz

The faster PCs now have Quad cores called the "Core 2 Quad" range and can be found in middle of the range PCs upwards. Obviously the more cores the better and the higher the numbers the better, pretty much determined by your budget in the end, with Quad Cores available on PCs from around €550 for the box only, and as far as dual core is concerned, I would head for at least a 2.6 GHz model upwards (3 GHz is better) from around €450. Any PCs (sold excluding the screen) for less than €450 will have older and slower processors, and will probably feel relatively slow in just a few years time. Carrefour is currently selling an Acer PC for €299 Euros with Vista basic. If you just want to get on the Internet it will do the job fine, but I expect that 2 years down the road with multiple Microsoft windows updates, it will have become frustratingly slow.

Memory: This is another key factor in a PC today, and the good news is that it is now very cheap compared to a few years ago. Most PCs today are being shipped with 3 Gigs of Ram, which is fine for Vista, though again getting 4 Gigs is better. I would avoid those with only 2 Gigs as they will struggle, though if you are planning on putting XP on then 2 Gigs is fine.

Graphics Card: Typically you are better off with a dedicated graphics card as opposed to one built in to the mother board. There are only 2 main manufacturers of

Graphics cards and these are Ati and Nvidia, so if in the computer spec you see either of these brands, then there is a dedicated graphics card. You then need to look for 256 Mb of memory or better the models with 512 Mb, though powerful graphics are better for those who wish to play games, edit video or for those investing in a high quality screen. To the average user they are not fundamental but if you plan on watching a DVD through the PC then head for a dedicated graphics card, and looking to the future if there are any breakthroughs in the domain of graphics, then the dedicated cards are upgradeable.

Other bits: Most PCs have card readers, plenty of USB ports for your peripherals, Dual layer DVD burners, huge amounts of storage on HD of unbelievable sizes - 500 Gig, 640 Gig and even a terabyte (1000 Gigs) which is the equivalent to several million digital photos, a few hundred thousand MP3s, or thousands of hours of digital video all for around €100. In fact storage is rarely a factor worth considering when buying a PC nowadays as even basic PCs have tonnes of storage. If you watch DVDs on your PC then you may want a Blue Ray drive, but most PCs cover all bases nowadays so buying is a lot easier – just decide how much you want to spend on it and choose according to your favourite brand, whether you like the look of the box....

An approximate price rang is:

Budget €300-€450

Home user €450-€650

Bit special €650-€900

Stunning €900+

As far as screens are concerned 19 inch is the budget end of the scale for around €130, 21-22 inch is better for around €180 allowing you to view 2 full windows side by side on the screen at once, i.e. one for you email and one for you word document...24 inch upwards are still more pricey at €350 odd. Adding these prices to those of the PC itself, €650 will get you a good home user PC with a decent screen, and for the average person running a small business from home and using their computer daily, I would recommend in the region of €825 for the screen and PC, excluding any additional software. For example from Dell today you can buy a PC with English keyboard and operating system with Vista, 3 Gig dual core Processor, 4 Gigs of Ram, 256Mb Ati graphics card, 23 inch screen, 320 Gig Hard drive, Card reader, dual layer DVD burner, umpteen USB ports, DVi etc, etc for €830.

Lastly, many older printers will not work with Vista due to driver availability or obsolete connectors, and I would advise you buy in the box everything you want and do not try and add your own WiFi card for instance, as it often does not work, with manufacturer and Microsoft blaming each other for the problem.

It's that easy, happy shopping!

For computer problems and advice, please contact: Edward on 06 26 98 03 12 or by email on ed@emarshall.fr All previous VVV Computer articles can be found at www.emarshall.fr