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2002 LapTop Guide

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Money's top picks

With faster chips, there will soon be lots of several laptops to choose from.

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New York (MONEY MAGAZINE) - This Spring, every major PC maker, from Compaq to Toshiba, is coming out this spring with a laptop loaded with the new Pentium 4 laptop chip. Barring parts shortages, you should soon be able to buy one of these machines, featuring performance you used to see only on big desktop models.

In general, these machines are quite similar: All have large screens, lots of power and memory, stereo sound systems and DVD/CD-RW drives. The differences come down to details like the navigation device and the amount of software that's included with the price. Here's our pick, plus an overview of the machines from the eight major players and, for those who just won't part with their Macs, how they compare with Apples closest model.

While these machines come in numerous configurations, we recommend a 1.7GHz processor with at least 256MB of RAM, which you'll need to run the memory and power-hogging Windows XP. A 40GB hard drive is more than enough unless you plan to do a lot of video or photo editing. In that case, bump it up to 60GB. If that's not an option, you may be able to buy an additional 20GB drive for about $300.

View a

These laptops run on 1.7Ghz Pentium 4 processors and come with features youd demand of a desktop: wide, high-resolution screens; DVD/CD-RW drives; stereo speakers and soundcards for movies, music and games; and at least two USB ports to hook up peripherals. But you will find differences in weight, battery life, high-speed capability and extras. Heres how the eight major P4 laptops stack up, plus how Apple's closest competitor fits into this category. Unless otherwise noted, prices are list for a model with 256MB of RAM and a 40GB hard drive.

The best of the field

Our overall favorite P4 is the Dell Inspiron 8200. From word processing to spreadsheets to video editing, the Dell handles every task with aplomb. We found the 1,600-by-1,200-pixel LCD screen especially crisp and bright. The software that comes with the machine includes Microsoft Office Small Business Suite, Quicken 2002 and Dell Jukebox powered by MusicMatch, the best available PC program for listening to music. Since the Dell comes with both a pointing stick and a touchpad, you have a choice as to how you move the cursor around. And don't forget Dells excellent reputation for customer service. With our suggested configuration, this laptop sells for $2,825, which puts it squarely in the middle of the price range for a P4 laptop. That price tag is a mere $225 more than that of its comparably equipped cousin, the Dimension desktop.

The best of the rest

Many of the other P4s are close runners-up to the Dell and, in some cases, better options for certain users. The $3,349 IBM A31p, for instance, is a great choice for anyone who works at home or spends a lot of time crunching numbers. Its keyboard is the most comfortable of those we tested, and the retractable keypad on the side (a $128 option) makes entering numbers easier.

If playing high-performance computer games is your top priority, consider the $2,499 Toshiba Satellite Pro -- its NVIDIA GeForce4 420 graphics controller, 3-D graphics accelerator and Yamaha sound chip make up the best configuration for games.

Say you want a laptop that complements your handheld. The Toshiba has a slot for the Secure Digital cards found on new Palms, so you can exchange data between devices without synching. Similarly, both the Sony Clie handheld and the new Sony GRX590 laptop have slots for memory sticks. Finally, Hewlett-Packard has managed to pack an abundance of power into a P4 notebook that weighs less than six pounds, making the vt6200 a good option if you travel a lot and still want a laptop that can replace your desktop.

What about Mac?

If you prefer a Mac to a PC, there's already a laptop that can stand in for a desktop: the $3,299 Apple Titanium PowerBook G4, Apples most powerful portable. Apples less expensive iBook, with its sturdy plastic case and 12-inch screen, is a great machine to lug around in a backpack. You could use the $1,799 iBook, with its 14-inch screen and 600MHz G3 processor as a desktop replacement. But a better choice is the PowerBook; its 667MHz G4 processor is much quicker than the G3.

And how does the PowerBook match up against the new P4 laptops? The proportions of its 15.2-inch screen make the display better for watching or editing digital video. The PowerBook is sleeker and lighter than the P4s--its DVD/CD-RW slot drive (vs. the pop-out trays found on other laptops) helps keep the machines weight down to a mere 5.4 pounds. And the 4-hour battery life is double what you get on some of the P4s.

Head to head with the 1.7GHz P4 processor, the PowerBooks 667MHz Motorola processor does fine--it takes about 45 seconds longer to boot up, but once the laptop is running, the difference is negligible. As Apple always argues, there's more to computing speed than megahertz. Other technical features such as the length of a processors pipeline, cache speed and clock cycle all factor into performance.

One look at the Apples elegant titanium case, and you'll see that you have a machine thats equal parts workhorse and work of art -- the kind that looks great sitting on top of a desk. ■

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