

The flick's in the post



Online DVD rental sites are on the rise. We examine which ones are film fans' favourites

THE BIG EASY



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administrator

Don't want to pay a monthly fee? Perhaps EasyCinema's (www.easycinema.com) pay-per-rental service is for you. Tina and her husband have been using EasyCinema for about four months and love the flexibility. Tina says: 'We like having a DVD to watch when we have time and because it's pay-per-rental, we can keep DVDs as long as we want.' We haven't included EasyCinema in our trial as it works differently from most services. Rather than paying monthly fees, you buy credit upfront, and £1.99 is deducted for each DVD. You have to buy at least four credits at a time but can use them up at your own pace – perfect if you're not sure how many DVDs you'll watch.

Picture the scene. It's 8pm on a Friday. You're stretched out on the sofa but there's nothing on TV. It's the perfect night to relax with a DVD – but that means going out, finding a parking space, queuing and getting home tired and late. And worse, you have to repeat the whole process later in the week or risk late fees.

Now picture the same scenario – but this time you belong to an online DVD rental service and a film dropped through your door this morning. No fuss, no late fees.

The process of subscribing and inputting details (including credit or debit card information), making a DVD list, receiving and returning is simple (see 'How it works', above). Postage is pre-paid and you prioritise the DVDs you want to see first. Prices vary considerably, depending on how many DVDs you want a month and at any one time. For occasional viewers, prices start at £4 or £5 a month for a service capped at

two DVDs a month. For film fanatics, £20–£25 will get you an unlimited service that lets you have up to six DVDs at a time. We've got full listings for the services we trialled at www.which.co.uk/dvdrentals.

Cheaper by the dozen

Rental by post may not be right for everyone, as you can't guarantee what film you'll receive and when. But if you're willing to be flexible and you pick the right service for your viewing habits, there are benefits.

The best of these is cheaper prices – if you make good use of your service, you're unlikely to pay more than around £2 a DVD. In contrast, Blockbuster stores charge £3.95 for overnight rental of recent releases. Other DVDs are £3 each or three for £7 for a week. Also, with online rental, there's a wider selection and no risk of late fees. And many sites offer free trials.

However, as companies offer similar deals, it can be hard to choose on price

Many sites offer free trials so you can try before you buy

Not such a great escape

The small print that can make cancelling your service troublesome

Although most of our triallists found it easy to cancel, they were helped by the fact that Which? had read each site's terms and conditions and advised them when to cancel. However, two members suggest that unless you follow the small print closely, cancellation can be difficult.

First, when you request cancellation, you may not receive any more DVDs from that date, regardless of how long you have left before your

next payment. If you cancel the day after a payment goes out, you might miss out on nearly a month of DVDs, so make sure you're aware of your payment date and cancel as late in the payment period as possible.

But then a second problem arises. Many sites state that they must receive all discs back before the next payment date or you will be charged. No problem as long as you know your dates – but if cancellation overlaps with the sites'

dispatch of a further DVD, you may not get this disc back before the due date. One solution is to have your full quota of films at home before you cancel, and then get them in the post as soon as possible.

One company has a solution. Amazon allows you a grace period of 15 days following your next payment date for you to return your DVDs. We'd like all companies to offer this.



How it works

- 1 Subscribe to a service, input your details including credit/debit card info
- 2 Create your 'wish list' and prioritise DVDs
- 3 Wait for DVDs to arrive
- 4 Keep each DVD as long as you want – no late fees
- 5 Return films in pre-paid envelopes and update list

Contacts

Amazon www.amazon.co.uk	Movieconnect www.movieconnect.co.uk
Blockbuster www.blockbuster.co.uk	MyMovieStream www.mymoviestream.com
Cinema Paradiso www.cinemaparadiso.co.uk	Tesco www.tescodvdrental.com
Lovefilm www.lovefilm.com	WHSmith www.dvdrental.whsmith.co.uk

alone. So we've tested the service on offer from eight of the biggest DVD rental sites.

Our 63 testers signed up to eight sites between them and kept a diary for five weeks. We asked triallists to keep each DVD for three nights, excluding Sundays. Each was asked to add five films to their wish lists as top priorities: *Miami Vice*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Monster House* and *Hidden*.

Of the eight companies, My Movie Stream scored highest. All companies did well for accuracy – everyone received only films on their wish list – but there were bigger differences in the other areas.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Most triallists had to wait only a day or two for their first DVD. But Lovefilm, the UK's largest online DVD service, kept them waiting, on average, five days. Several triallists of Tesco and WH Smith, which are powered by Lovefilm, had similar problems. A Lovefilm spokesman said: 'We had a technical problem over a short period in January, so new triallists may have had a delay in receiving their first DVD.'

Lovefilm was on a par with most other companies for sending priority films – on

average, three of the first four DVDs were among the top five on triallists' wish lists. But those with Movieconnect received on average only one top-priority film among the first four DVDs. Triallist Zoë Slater was unhappy with this aspect. 'I didn't like the fact that with Movieconnect I had to wait so long for films I wanted to see,' she said.

A Movieconnect spokesman said: 'We welcome the feedback and will look into ways to improve this aspect of our service.'

Movieconnect, along with Lovefilm, Tesco and WH Smith, also did worse than the other companies for problem DVDs – on average between 10 and 20 per cent of discs received had problems playing, such as the DVD freezing or skipping frames.

As for cancellation, most triallists found it easy, although some were surprised that Lovefilm required a phone call to cancel. However, without advice from Which?, it may not have been so simple (see 'Not such a great escape', opposite).

Overall, online DVD rental gets the thumbs up from triallists – more than eight out of ten would use either the same or a similar service again. So if you watch a lot of films, want to save money and keep discs as long as you like, online rental is for you.

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Package and price details

Two-DVD package Price of unlimited 'two DVDs at home at a time' package. Amazon and Movieconnect do not offer unlimited package. Except for Blockbuster, this was the package used in the trial (see footnote d).

Monthly limit The maximum number of rentals a month.

Test performance

Website rating A web expert reviewed each site for ease of use and features and gave an overall score. For more, visit www.which.co.uk/dvdrentals

Ease of sign up How easy it was to subscribe

and add films. **Days to receive first DVD** One or two days on average gets ★★★★★. **Problem DVDs**

The percentage that had problems playing. Less than 10 per cent gets ★★★★★.

Priority DVDs received How many of the first four were from the top-priority films. An average of three or more gets ★★★★★.

Score Ignores price and is based on

Priority DVDs	30%
Problem DVDs	30%
Days to receive first DVD	10%
Website assessment	15%
Ease of cancellation	7.5%
Ease of sign up	7.5%

DVD RENTAL SITES	PACKAGE AND PRICE DETAILS				WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE						SCORE
	NUMBER OF TITLES	FREE TRIAL	TWO-DVD PACKAGE (£)	MONTHLY LIMIT	WEBSITE RATING (0-100)	EASE OF SIGN UP	DAYS TO RECEIVE FIRST DVD	PROBLEM DVDs	PRIORITY DVDs RECEIVED	EASE OF CANCELLATION	
1 MYMOVIESTREAM (8)	40,000+	1st month ½ price	12.99	No limit ^a	79	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	97
2 AMAZON (9)	40,000+	2 weeks	7.99	4	59	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	94
3 BLOCKBUSTER (8)	see ^b	2 weeks ^c	12.99 ^d	No limit	40	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	91
4 CINEMA PARADISO (9)	30,000+	First 4 disks free	12.49	No limit ^a	54	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	87
5 LOVEFILM (7)	65,000+	2 weeks	12.99	No limit ^a	98	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	82
6 WH SMITH ^e (7)	60,500	30 days	12.99 ^f	No limit	67	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	see ^g	77
7 TESCO ^e (7)	56,000+	2 weeks	11.97 ^f	No limit ^a	74	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	73
8 MOVIECONNECT ^h (8)	35,000	None	7.99	4	52	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	60

^a Offers a capped package at a lower price ^b Treats two-disc sets as one so it doesn't publish the number ^c Only with certain packages ^d At the start of our trial, Blockbuster did not offer a two-DVD package, so triallists used three-DVD package but kept one DVD at home to allow a fair comparison ^e Powered by Lovefilm ^f Film packages only ^g Sample not big enough for rating ^h Movieconnect did not have *Hidden*