

# Get more from your TV

Whatever you watch this Christmas, you'll get great pictures with our Best Buy DVD players and recorders, and digital set-top boxes

ith money tight and the credit crunch biting, now may not seem like a great time to splash out on new audiovisual equipment. But there are bargains galore on the high street and online, as retailers desperately try to tempt customers back. For those with a few spare pounds, now's the time to pick up a Best Buy.

If you simply want to settle back and watch some DVD boxsets, a new Best Buy DVD player or recorder will deliver topquality pictures – better than anything you can receive on standard digital TV.

Our top Best Buy DVD player, the Pioneer DV-300, costs just £50. And if you opt for a Best Buy DVD recorder/ PVR combi from Pioneer (the DVR-560HX-K) rather than Sony (the RDR-

HXD1095) you'll save £170. You could also save money by renting DVDs online rather than on the high street (see below).

We also have two Best Buy set-top boxes on p54. If you haven't yet turned to digital TV, the choice just got a little better, with the arrival of the new digital satellite service 'freesat' (see p55 for a full guide). The UK will switch over to digital TV by 2012, so if you want to receive digital TV without monthly subscriptions, then freesat and Freeview (via your aerial) are good options.

## HOW TO RENT DVDs ONLINE

#### Say goodbye to long queues at the video store and late fees by renting movies online

Most online DVD rental services offer a much wider choice of titles than a video store. The DVDs are delivered straight to your home and can be kept for as long as you wish before you post them back in a prepaid envelope.

Popular DVD rental services include Blockbuster, Cinema Paradiso, LoveFilm, Movie Connect, Out Now, Tesco, The Sun Movie Club and WH Smith.

Some services also allow you to rent video games and download movies to keep or watch within a certain time frame.

# How online DVD rental works

Subscribing to an online DVD rental service is simple.

Choose a subscription option based on the number of DVDs you'd like to receive each month and/or keep at home at a time.

Subscribe by inputting your details, including your address and credit/debit card information.
 Create a 'wishlist' of DVDs

you'd like to watch and rate them according to priority.

Wait for the DVDs to arrive.
 Keep each DVD as long as you want – there are no late fees.

Return the films in the prepaid envelopes and update your wishlist.

Postage is prepaid and in most cases it's first class for speed of delivery.

Vour subscription fee will be taken by direct debit each month.

### Should I try renting DVDs online?

Renting DVDs online may not be right for everyone, as you can't guarantee which film you'll receive and when. But if you're willing to be flexible and pick the right DVD rental service for your viewing habits, there are definite benefits.

For example, you're unlikely to pay more than around £2 a DVD. In contrast, Blockbuster charges about £3.95 for overnight rental of recent releases. Other DVDs are £3 each or three for £7 for a week.

Many rental sites offer free trials so you can test a service without charge (if you return trial DVDs before a set date).

For more information, see www.which.co.uk/rentDVDsonline.



# **DVD** players



# **1 DVD PLAYER 78% Pioneer DV-300** £50

The DV-300 performed very well in our tests. Sound quality is not perfect, but the picture is excellent. The remote is well set out, and the DVD search functions are precise. Power

consumption on standby is very low. It's cheapest online.

WE LIKE The resume feature means you can stop watching a DVD then pick up from the same point later.

Available Online and independents Compatible disc formats DVD+R/+RW, DVD-R/-RW, DVD-RW (VR Mode) HDMI No Digital output Coaxial



# **2 DVD PLAYER 77% Pioneer DV-600** £150

Despite falling short of perfection in our listening tests, the DV-600 is worthy of Best Buy status. Overall, the picture quality is satisfying and superior

to most comparative models. It's cheapest online.

WORTH KNOWING It has a built-in surround sound decoder – useful if you own a home cinema amplifier.



Available Online and independents Compatible disc formats DVD+R/+RW, DVD-R/-RW, DVD-RW (VR Mode) HDMI Yes Digital output Coaxial and optical

# How we test

## A brief insight into some of our audiovisual tests

## **DVD** players

Our expert panel assesses picture quality. They watch extracts from feature films and look for vivid pictures with natural colours and lots of detail. Fast-moving sports clips reveal any blurring, and test cards reveal any underlying weaknesses.

## **DVD** recorders

Our experts watch a series of movie clips and test patterns on pre-recorded and selfrecorded discs to check motion, resolution and colour accuracy.

## **Set-top boxes**

Our experts spend a long time scrutinising the electronic programme guide (EPG) – the control centre for a set-top box. We measure how quickly the EPG can load listings information – a good box will do it in around 10 seconds, but a bad one can take several minutes.

# No bias

We mask out brand names to eliminate bias and sneak in the same products twice to ensure consistency. Experts are not allowed to confer.

MODEL		S	PECI	FICA	TION				SCORE %				
	PRICE (£)	SIZE (cm) (hxwxd)	BOOKMARKING	RESUME	PLAYS JPEG DISCS	AV/SCART SOCKETS	HDMI OUTPUT	PICTURE	SOUND	EASE OF USE	FEATURES	POWER USE	
DVD PLAYERS													
1 PIONEER DV-300	50	5x42x25		5	✓	✓		*****	****	***	****	*****	78
2 PIONEER DV-600	150	5x42x26		5	$\checkmark$	✓	1	*****	****	***	****	*****	77
3 PANASONIC DVD-S54EBK	100	4x43x28		1	$\checkmark$	✓	1	****	****	***	****	****	70
4 MATSUI MATDVD330	20	4x36x23		5	✓	✓		****	****	***	****	****	69
5 TOSHIBA SD280 EKB	30	4x43x23		n/a	$\checkmark$	✓		****	****	**	****	****	65
6 SONY DVP-NS708H	70	4x43x32		6	$\checkmark$	✓	✓	***	****	***	****	*****	63
7 SAMSUNG DVD-F1080	70	5x24x29	✓	n/a	$\checkmark$		1	***	****	***	****	****	61
8 SONY DVP-NS39	50	4x43x26		6	✓	✓		***	****	***	****	*****	61
9 TOSHIBA SD580E	60	4x43x22		n/a	$\checkmark$	✓	1	***	****	***	****	****	61
10 PIONEER DV410V-K	89	5x42x25		5	✓	✓	✓	**	****	****	****	*****	59
11 LG DVX392H	51	4x43x22	✓	n/a	✓	1	1	**	****	***	****	****	53

#### USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

#### **Specification**

**Price** For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street or online price as we went to press. Prices for other models are a

guide to what you should expect to pay. Go to www.which.co.uk/ compare for the latest prices. Bookmarking Marks scenes so you can find them again quickly. Resume Whether the player can remember where you stopped watching and restart from that point, and on how many discs. **HDMI output** For connecting to an HD-ready TV.

#### Test performance

Picture/Sound/Ease of use Based on assessments by our expert panels. Power use In standby, when switched on, and when playing a disc. Score

# Ignores price and is based on:Picture quality**35%**Sound quality**30%**Ease of use**20%**Features**15%**

# **DVD** recorders

A DVD recorder lets you watch movies just like a DVD player, but it also allows you to record programmes to disc. In standard play, the quality of recorded programmes is far better than anything your old VCR would manage.

Many new models feature a built-in personal video recorder (PVR). They're pricier, but having two products in one box gives you the option of recording either to a disc or to the hard disk drive (HDD). There's no degradation of picture quality when recording to HDD.

If you're already tuned into Freeview via a set-top box, adding a recorder with a built-in digital tuner means you'll be able to record one channel and watch another. However, some models, such as the Panasonic Best Buys, don't include an analogue tuner, so they aren't suitable for those who haven't yet switched to digital TV.



# 1 dvd recorder 77% Panasonic DMR-EZ28 £180

This Best Buy DVD recorder is easy to use, and sound and picture quality are good. The EPG layout is clear, onscreen menus are logical, and the front panel has a bright display. It's cheapest at Argos and Comet.

WORTH KNOWING Standby power

consumption using the special eco

Available Argos, Comet, Currys Tuner Digital Compatible recording formats DVD-RW; DVD+RW; DVD-R; DVD+R; DVD-Ram HDMI Yes Digital output Coaxial

mode is only 1.4 watts.

which? BEST BUY

# Which should you choose?

Still confused about what you should go for? Here's some more information on DVD recorders to help you decide

# If you want to record and archive TV



If you're after long-term storage or the ability to share recordings with family and friends, a DVD recorder, such as the Panasonic DMR-EZ28 (1), is a good option. A basic DVD recorder is the modern-day equivalent of the VCR and lets you record onto discs over and over again. You get two hours of good-quality recording time per disc – you can push it to three or four hours, but quality will suffer.

# If you want maximum recording capacity



For maximum storage, choose a recorder with a built-in hard drive. Thanks to its 250GB hard drive, the Panasonic DMR-EX87 (3) offers a huge 111 hours of recording time. Using the device's own electronic programme guide (EPG) to select the programmes you want to record is simple.

## GREAT SAVINGS WITH HUGHES DIRECT

Hughes Direct is offering Which? members an exclusive discount on our Best Buy DVD recorders until 31 January 2009, offering the Pioneer DVR-560HX-K for £229, Panasonic DMR-EZ28 for £123, Panasonic DMR-EX88 for £314, and the Sony RDR-HXD1095 for £344 (delivery will be £5).

To find out more details about this offer and other member-only discounts from Hughes Direct, log on to www.hughesdirect.co.uk/which or call 01473 321883. This offer is subject to availability.

Each month Which? members can take advantage of the great deals offered by Hughes Direct. All goods are guaranteed to be a minimum of 10% below high-street prices published in Which? product reports, and if you find the same product cheaper elsewhere (including delivery) within seven days of purchase, Hughes Direct promises to refund 110% of the difference.

#### ONLINE

Learn how to connect your DVD recorder to your TV at www.which.co.uk/ settinguptv



# 6 DVD RECORDER **71% Sony RDR-HXD1095** £450

This DVD recorder/PVR combi delivers very good picture and sound quality on pre-recorded DVDs, although picture quality drops on self-recorded material. It's quite easy to use. It's cheapest

at Argos and Comet. WE RECOMMEND Use the regular EPG – the GuidePlus+ option doesn't add much value.



Available Argos, Comet Tuner Analogue and digital Compatible recording formats DVD-RW; DVD+RW; DVD-R; DVD-R; DVD-R; DVD-RW(VR) HDMI Yes Digital output Coaxial

# Contacts

 Bush 0871230 1777

 www.albaplc.com

 Goodmans 0870 873 0080

 www.goodmans.co.uk

 Grundig 0871230 1777

 www.gondmans.co.uk

 Humax 0870 247 8800

 www.humaxdigital.co.uk

 LG 0870 873 5454

 www.lge.co.uk

 Logik 0844 561 3333

 www.currys.co.uk

 Matsui 0844 561 3333

 www.currys.co.uk

 Panasonic 0870 535 7357

www.panasonic.co.uk Philips 0845 601 0354 www.philips.co.uk Pioneer 0870 600 1539 www.pioneer.co.uk Proline 0870 542 5425 www.comet.co.uk Samsung 0870 242 0303 www.samsung.com/uk Sony 0870 511 1999 www.sony.co.uk Toshiba 0870 442 4424 www.toshiba.co.uk TVonics 0870 803 0551



# 2 DVD RECORDER 77% Pioneer DVR-72% Panasonic 560HX-K £280

It may not have the biggest hard drive, but this DVD recorder/PVR has both a digital and an analogue tuner. Picture and sound quality on

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pre-recorded DVDs are very good, and picture quality holds up well on self-recorded material.

It's reasonably easy to use. We found it cheapest online.

WE LIKED You can record your CD collection to the hard drive and create a 'virtual jukebox'.

Available Online, independents Tuner Analogue and digital Compatible recording formats DVD-RW: DVD+RW: DVD-R: DVD+R: DVD-Ram: DVD-RW(VR) HDMI Yes Digital output Coaxial



# **3 DVD RECORDER DMR-EX87**£349

The picture quality of this Best Buy is excellent. It has a digital tuner, and you can store 111 hours of standard-play recordings on the hard drive. The eight-day EPG is easy to use. Power use is very high in standby, though. It's cheapest online. WORTH KNOWING

#### Unlike standalone PVRs and many combination models, it can't pause live TV.

Available Online, independents Tuner Digital Compatible recording formats DVD-RW: DVD+RW; DVD-R; DVD+R; DVD-Ram **HDMI** Yes Digital output Coaxial

4 DVD RECORDER

# 72% Sony RDR-GX350 £130

An analogue-only DVD recorder, the Sony RDR-GX350 is in danger of being made obsolete by rivals with digital receivers. But it still represents the very best of an older technology. When plaving standard DVDs, it delivers excellent picture and sound quality. It's cheapest on Amazon. WORTH KNOWING The Sony is far from future proof.

Available Amazon, Argos Tuner Analogue Compatible recording formats DVD-RW: DVD+RW: DVD-R: DVD+R: DVD-Ram: DVD-RW(VR) HDMI Yes Digital output Coaxial



# 5 DVD RECORDER 71% Panasonic **DMR-EX88** £450

Picture and sound quality are good on this DVD recorder/PVR for both pre-recorded and self-recorded DVDs. Power consumption isn't too bad - select the 'eco' mode, which turns off the display when in standby. It's cheapest at Argos and Comet.



WE LIKED It has a USB socket and an SD card slot, making it easy to transfer images from a digital camera.

Available Argos.Comet Tuner Digital Compatible recording formats DVD-RW; DVD+RW: DVD-R: DVD+R: DVD-Ram HDMI Yes Digital output Optical

MODEL	SF	PECIFICAT	ION	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE									
	PRICE (£)	SIZE (cm) (hxwxd)	HARD DRIVE CAPACITY (hrs)	PLAYBACK PICTURE	PLAYBACK SOUND	RECORDED PICTURE (SP)	RECORDED PICTURE (LP)	SOUND	EASE OF USE	POWER USE			
DVD RECORDERS													
1 PANASONIC DMR-EZ28 <sup>a</sup>	180	6x43x35	n/a	****	****	****	***	****	****	****	77		
2 PIONEER DVR-560HX-K <sup>b</sup>	280	8x42x34	23	*****	****	*****	****	*****	***	***	77		
3 PANASONIC DMR-EX87 <sup>b</sup>	349	6x43x33	111	****	****	****	**	****	****	**	72		
4 SONY RDR-GX350 <sup>a</sup>	130	7x43x29	n/a	*****	****	****	****	****	***	****	72		
5 PANASONIC DMR-EX88 <sup>b</sup>	450	6x43x35	89	****	****	****	***	****	***	***	71		
6 SONY RDR-HXD1095 <sup>b</sup>	450	8x43x33	105	*****	****	***	***	*****	***	***	71		
7 PHILIPS DVDR5570H/05 <sup>b</sup>	270	7x44x34	40	****	****	****	***	****	**	**	66		
8 LG DRT389H <sup>b</sup>	130	6x43x30	n/a	***	****	*****	***	*****	**	****	65		
9 PROLINE DVDR800D <sup>b</sup>	100	6x43 x35	n/a	****	****	***	***	****	**	***	62		
10 SAMSUNG DVD-SH875M XEU <sup>a</sup>	280	6x43x31	53	****	****	**	*	*****	**	***	56		

a DVD recorder b DVD recorder-PVR combi

#### **USING THE TABLE**

The more stars the better.

#### **Specification**

Price See p51 for full details. Hard drive capacity (hours) The stated recording capacity

## (in best quality mode) for models with combined hard-drive recorders.

### **Test performance**

Playback picture Picture quality for playing back pre-recorded DVDs.

Playback sound Sound quality for playing back pre-recorded DVDs. Recorded picture (SP/LP) Recorded picture quality when using standard or long-play mode. Ease of use How easy it is to use

the front panel and remote controls and to access and navigate the menu systems. Power use Based on consumption in standby, when on, and when on and playing or recording a disc.

#### Score

Ignores price, and is based on: 30% Picture quality Sound quality 30% 20% Ease of use Features 15% Power consumption 5%

# Set-top boxes

We have two Best Buy set-top boxes. With the TVonics MDR-250 - which costs just £50 – you'll be able to watch Freeview channels. The Humax Foxsat HD is £150, but enables you to use freesat - the new TV service that's basically the satellite equivalent of Freeview. See our full guide, opposite, for more.

To watch freesat you'll also need a satellite dish, but once you've paid for the box, dish and installation there are no ongoing monthly subscription costs.

# Which? online Tune in to freesat

As we went to press, we heard that a freesat personal video recorder - the Humax Foxsat-HDR – will be in the shops from mid November. Go to www.which.co.uk for more details.

Panasonic's PZ81 plasma TVs and LZD81 LCD TVs have integrated freesat receivers. We've tested the 42-inch plasma model, and you can find the results at www.which.co.uk/tvs.



# 1 SET-TOP BOX

The Humax Foxsat HD is the best freesat box available. Our experts thought that the highdefinition picture quality was very good, while standarddefinition quality

and sound were satisfactory.

The on-screen EPG displays eight channels at a time in two-hour blocks. It's easy to use and the useful search facility allows you to look for the programme you want by keyword, genre or the time and day.

This box uses only 1.7 watts in standby. It also has a 'parental lock' feature that adults can use to make channels they deem unsuitable for children accessible

only by using a fourdigit Pin. It's cheapest at Argos.

WE LIKE Setting the box up and getting going is easy, as the instructions are clear. The remote control is well laid out and has aood-sized buttons. Available Argos, Comet, John Lewis, Tuner freesat Scarts 2 Scart link Yes HDMI Yes Digital output Optical



# 2 SET-TOP BOX **78% Humax Foxsat HD** £150 **74% Tyonics MDR-250** £50

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The TVonics MDR-250 Freeview set-top box is about the size of a paperback book. Picture and sound quality are fine in line with other Freeview receivers.

It's easy to navigate around the user-friendly EPG. The remote control is well laid out and has a useful 'Help' button for on-screen instructions. The manual is good overall - it's well structured with clear diagrams but it doesn't contain much information on

how to connect the box up for recording. Power consumption

is frugal: it uses only 5.2 watts when on and 1.6 watts in standby, meeting

the requirements of the Enerav Savings Trust. It's cheapest online.

WE LIKE This box has an aerial output, so if you have an older television without a Scart socket you can use this box to convert it to digital reception.

Available Online, independents Tuner Freeview Scarts 2 Scart link Yes HDMI No. Digital output Optical

MODEL		SPECIFICATION									WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE			
	PRICE (£)	Freeview or Freesat	SIZE (cm) (hxwxd)	NO OF SCART SOCKETS	UHF MODULATOR	SEVEN-DAY EPG	TIMER	ANALOGUE AUDIO OUTPUT	DIGITAL AUDIO OUTPUT	EPG	EASE OF USE	POWER CONSUMPTION		
SET-TOP BOXES														
1 HUMAX Foxsat HD	150	freesat	5x29x23	2		✓	1	✓	✓	*****	****	****	78	
2 TVONICS MDR-250	50	Freeview	4x20x9	2	$\checkmark$	✓	1		✓	****	****	*****	74	
3 BUSH DFTA16	35	Freeview	5x27x17	2		✓	1		✓	*****	***	***	65	
4 TVONICS MFR-300	50	Freeview	3x8x9	0	$\checkmark$	✓		1		****	***	*****	65	
5 GRUNDIG GUFSAT01SD	60	freesat	5x26x19	2		✓		1	$\checkmark$	*****	***	**	64	
6 BUSH BFSAT01SD	50	freesat	5x26x18	2		✓		1	$\checkmark$	*****	***	**	62	
7 GOODMANS GFSAT100SD	60	freesat	5x26x18	2		✓		1	✓	*****	***	**	62	
8 GRUNDIG GUFSAT01HD	150	freesat	5x26x18	2		✓			$\checkmark$	*****	***	*	59	
9 BUSH BFSAT01HD	120	freesat	5x26x18	2		✓			✓	*****	***	*	57	
10 GOODMANS GFSAT200HD	140	freesat	5x26x18	2		✓			$\checkmark$	*****	***	*	57	

#### USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better. **Specification** 

Price See p51 for full details. UHF modulator For connecting to an

older TV set without Scart sockets. Analogue audio output For connecting to your hi-fi. Digital audio output For connecting to a surround-sound decoder.

#### **Test performance**

EPG How easy the on-screen TV auide is to use. Power consumption Measured when on and in standby.

#### Score

This ignores price and is based on: Performance and ease of use 60% 30% Features 10% Power consumption

## SET-TOP BOXES

## FREESAT: YOUR FAQs ANSWERED

#### Everything you need to know about the new BBC/ITV service

What is

freesat?

Freesat (from the BBC and ITV) is the satellite equivalent of Freeview, the digital terrestrial TV service. It includes high-definition content and, once you've paid for the box, dish and installation, there are no monthly subscription costs.

To take advantage of the high-definition content you will need an HD-ready TV. All our Best Buy LCD and plasma TVs are HD ready and ideal for the job (see www.which.co.uk/tvs).

#### How is freesat different from Sky Freesat?

Freesat shouldn't be confused with the Sky service of the same name, which has been available for a few years.

Sky Freesat is also available for a one-off equipment and installation payment and delivers a similar number of digital TV channels. However, there is no high-definition TV option on the Sky service.

For Sky HD you have to pay costly monthly subscription costs although the highdefinition content is superior to anything available on freesat at the moment.

Can I get Q freesat anywhere in the UK? Virtually all households will be able to receive freesat,

though there may be planning restrictions about satellite dishes in some areas. Also, you may not be able to get freesat if you live in the shadow of a large building and the dish can't be positioned to see the satellite properly.

Where can I buy freesat? Freesat is available from high-street retailers, such as Comet, Currys, John

Lewis and Argos.

How much will it cost? For a freesat box, prices start at £50 for the basic Bush BFSAT01SD model (6) and rise to around £150 for the Humax Foxsat HD (1) and Goodmans GFSAT200HD (10). The Bush model is cheap because it cannot receive high-definition TV.

If you buy a new freesat box, you'll probably have to get the dish and cables installed too. High-street stores selling the boxes also provide access to outsourced installation services. The cost will depend on how many rooms you want to receive a freesat signal.

Argos and John Lewis offer single-room



You'll have to buy a dish

installation for £80. Comet has a pricing structure in place for multiple-room installations: One room = £79.95 Two rooms = £119.95 Three rooms = £159.95 Four rooms = £189.95

#### What happens if I already have a dish?

If you already have a dish there's a good chance you'll just be able to plug and play. John Lewis offers a dish check for £50 if you're not sure.

The new boxes connect to the satellite via a standard LNB IN socket.

If you're a Sky user and connect a freesat box to your Sky dish while still under contract, there is a chance you will be invalidating your warranty.

How many channels will I get? More than 130 digital TV, regional TV, radio and interactive channels are available. Freesat says this will rise to around 200 channels by the end of the year. Listings include most of the familiar digital channels from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4, plus a few less familiar names, like the Movies4Men film channel. However, some content is missing, like the History Channel and

even Five. For a full list, see www.which.co.uk/ freesat.

Can I get an integrated freesat TV?



Watch BBC programmes, such as Planet Earth, in HD

Panasonic launched the PZ81 range of integrated freesat plasma TVs in June. They are available in 42, 46 and 50-inch sizes and cost about £200 more than a regular Panasonic Freeview IDTV.

What about highle definition TV? Being able to

watch HDTV without having to pay a monthly subscription is one of the biggest selling points of the new freesat service.

High-definition TV (HDTV) is being broadcast - but only in bite-sized chunks.

The BBC HD channel is available, but screens HDTV programmes for only five hours a day -



Freesat: no history shows

between 7pm and midnight. The rest of the time there's an HDTV preview tape set to loop.

The ITV HD channel is also available - and exclusive to freesat viewers. Like the BBC content, it is restricted, but every time the HD logo pops up on an ITV programme, it means it's available in HD.

Freesat says there will be more HD in the future. The programmes you get at the moment are the cream of the current crop and include Silent Witness, Heroes, Planet Earth and Torchwood.

Don't forget that to watch HD programmes you'll need an HD receiver and an HD-ready TV.



Services like freesat and Freeview supply to the old signal. Visit