

Flat-panel TVs have never been cheaper – and your chances of bagging a bargain Best Buy are better than ever

Not so long ago there was only one way to get a Best Buy flat-panel TV – you had to pay through the nose for it. Top quality came with a matching price tag. It's still easy to spend more than £1,000 for the largest screens or top-of-therange models. Only 18 months ago we considered a £700 price tag worthy of a budget buy award. But our tests now reveal that there's often little point in forking out for higher 'specifications', and Best Buys with great picture quality are available for £500 or less.

Although money is getting tighter for many of us, now could be a great time to pick up a bargain. Retailers such as Currys, Richer Sounds and Tesco seem to be falling over themselves to shift stock at cut-down prices. That'll be music to the ears of a nation spending far more cheap nights in front of the telly.

You don't have to compromise on quality if your budget is tight. The pricey Panasonic Viera TX-32LZD80 (1) is a superb 32-inch LCD, but so is the TX-32LXD85 (2) – for £300 less. And there's no need to buy the very latest models. Track down a Panasonic Best Buy from its 2007 range and you could bag a gem for around £400.

Prices may have fallen, but picture quality and innovation continue to improve. Energy-saving light sensors and features such as audio description are increasingly common. Now could be a great time to pick up a bargain

HDTV for free

High-definition TVs are enjoying a surge of new features, and that looks set to continue – so if buying a new set is not on your agenda at the moment, it soon could be. New digital satellite service freesat offers HD channels without the monthly subscription fees common to Sky and Virgin. The first TV with a built-in freesat tuner, the Panasonic TH-42PZ81, was released too late to be included here, but we have full results online at www.which.co.uk/tvs.

HDTV will also be coming to Freeview over the next couple of years. None of the IDTVs in this report will be able to receive Freeview HD channels without a separate receiver. However, a new generation of Freeview HD IDTVs that can tune into the upcoming HD broadcasts will be released soon.

Jargon buster

AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Additional narration for visually impaired people that describes significant visual information, such as body language and scenery. CONTRAST RATIO How dark and bright the picture on a flatpanel TV will go. **EPG** An electronic programme guide is an on-screen channel guide showing programming for the week ahead. Most show programmes seven days ahead.

		odey tills
001	BBC ONE	Minnes Linder 1.
002	BUC TWO	Saborte - Sabo
003	1011	This Morning
004	Charmet 4	The Dig Sig.
005	THE	Trista Goddard
006	ITV2	Judge Judy
007	BEC THREE	This is BBC TH
	HEC FOUR	This is BBC FOR

 HDTV High-definition TV pictures have roughly double the resolution of a standard-definition signal, making them more detailed and realistic. HDTV is available on Sky and Virgin for a monthly fee, or via freesat for free.
 IDTV An integrated digital TV set has a built-in Freeview tuner to receive dozens of digital TV and radio channels free. All of the TVs in this report are IDTVs. Freesat IDTVs will feature in our next report.

SCREEN RESOLUTION The number of pixels on screen.
 1080i AND 1080p The two main types of HD picture. HDTV is broadcast in 1080i, but Blu-ray discs are recorded in 1080p.

Worth waiting for?

New TV ranges are launched every year, but are this year's models really so much better than last year's?

No sooner has the latest TV been launched than a newer, supposedly better model is hitting the shelves and vying for your attention. But don't be taken in by the marketing hype.

Changes from one year to the next are rarely dramatic. Rather, manufacturers may tweak the digital picture processing software, spruce up the styling or add an extra socket.

For instance, this year's

Panasonics have the addition of an SD card slot as standard, and an extra HDMI socket, as well as the obligatory picture-processing software tweaks. But overall – and especially in terms of picture quality – the differences are marginal.

Considering you can pick up last year's Best Buy 32-inch Viera TX-32LMD70 for a little under £400 online, this is worth bearing in mind. Other gems from the 2007 Viera range are the TX-32LXD7, and the 26-inch TX-26LXD7 and TX-26LXD70 HD-ready LCD sets – all are under £500. The Sony Bravia KDL-32U3000 is an even cheaper previous Best Buy, which we found for less than £400 at two online stores.

It's easy to hunt down bargains on the new Which? website. Just go to www.which.co.uk/tvs and select your price range, and we'll list all the high-street or online stores where the set is available.



Buying guide

AUDIO

Our expert panel thought that built-in speakers often lacked punch. For better results, connect the set to your hi-fi via either the red and white phono sockets or the digital audio output. The latter can also carry surround sound and be connected to a multichannel amplifier. Digital surround sound is virtually non-existent on Freeview, but signals can be channelled from other devices (eg DVD players). Though most TVs have pseudo or 'virtual' surround-sound audio, this pales in comparison with the real thing.



SCREEN SIZE

Huge screens do justice to the extra detail of high definition pictures, but are less forgiving to digital processing side effects on standard definition pictures – especially if you sit too close. Sitting 2.8 metres from the TV has traditionally been considered the ideal viewing distance, but the bigger the screen, the further away you should sit. This could be a problem in a small living room.



HD LOGOS

An HD-ready logo means the TV meets the minimum criteria for displaying

1080i HDTV



signals. Most new HDready sets will process a 1080p signal too. A premium-priced 'HD-ready 1080p' set offers a higher screen resolution, but this relatively new official logo is not a guarantee of the best picture. Some of our basic HD-ready Panasonic Best Buys have a relatively low screen resolution, but can process a 1080p signal and deliver excellent pictures.

USABILITY

Check whether the remote is comfortable to hold and well laid out. Cluttered and unresponsive buttons can quickly become annoying. Try out a few basic functions – if they aren't straightforward, alarm bells should ring. Make sure the EPG is legible and quick to scroll through, and switch the TV on and off to see how fast the channel information reappears.

PICTURE

Sales staff often use screen resolution and contrast ratio figures to impress customers. However, flat-panel TVs all use digital processing software to put a picture on the screen. Unless it's spot on, this process can lead to unpleasant side effects. Instead of being wowed by the 'higher the better' numbers principle, keep an eye out for these tell-tale signs: smearing or jittery motion sequences; slight juddering on panning sequences; lack of detail in dark scenes; or banding instead of subtle gradations of colour. Make sure you're shown Freeview or standard DVD pictures and not just HDTV.



84% Panasonic Viera TX-32LZD80 £799

Panasonic continues to produce great TVs – and this sublime 32-inch LCD is no exception. HD-ready



1080p and packed with features, it's easy to use and delivers just about the best picture quality money can buy. Our viewing panel were impressed with the detailed and vibrant SD pictures, and HD pictures are stunning. It's cheapest online.

WE LIKE The on-screen menus and EPG are intuitive to navigate.

Available Currys, Comet, John Lewis Screen resolution 1,920x1,080 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, digital optical, headphones, VGA, SD-card slot Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 110/0.29 watts



65% LG 32LG5000 £415

LG joins Sony in breaking Panasonic's Best Buy monopoly with this gem of an

LCD TV. Usability and sound quality aren't as good as other Best Buys, but picture quality is fine. The most remarkable thing about this 32-inch HD-ready model is its astonishingly effective power-saving light sensor. It's cheapest online.

WELL DONE To LG for persevering after attempts to get the light sensor to work failed on earlier models.

Available Online and independents Screen resolution 1,366x768 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (one RGB), three HDMI, component, digital optical, VGA, headphones Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 110/0.72 watts



2 26-37 INCH 76% Panasonic Viera TX-32LXD85 £560

If you're looking for exceptional quality at an affordable price, go for this excellent HD-ready 32-inch



LCD. Screen resolution is lower than the LZD80 (1), but this has little impact on picture quality. It is easy to use, and features handy extras, including an ambient light sensor and audio description. It's cheapest online. WORTH KNOWING Despite the lower

screen resolution, it still works perfectly with a 1080p Blu-ray player.

Available Currys, Comet, John Lewis Screen resolution 1,366X768 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, headphones, VGA, SD-card slot Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 101/0.4 watts



72% Panasonic Viera TH-**50PX8B** £1,200

If you've got the space, and feel obliged to fill it with the biggest TV possible, this mammoth 50-inch plasma screen should tick all your boxes. Picture, sound and



usability all get the thumbs up from our testers – though energy consumption is as large as the screen size. It's cheapest online.

WORTH KNOWING It uses more power than the Energy Saving Trust's recommended levels.

Available Online, Currys, Comet Screen resolution 1,366x768 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (Both RGB), two HDMI, component, audio out, headphones Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 279/0.25 watts



74% Panasonic Viera TH-37PX80B £800

Stunning picture quality and great usability make this 37-inch HD-ready Panasonic plasma a worthy Best Buy. A slight jittery feel to fine detail failed

to overshadow the excellent high-definition picture. The real disappointment is its below-par sound quality – it's often piercing and shouty. It's cheapest online.



WORTH KNOWING You can connect it up to a stereo for improved audio, but there is no surround-sound output.

Available Online, Argos, Currys, Comet, John Lewis Screen resolution 1,024 x 768 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, headphones, VGA, SD-card slot **Multiple** picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 178/0.56 watts



67% Panasonic Viera TH-42PX80B £899

This HD-ready 42-inch plasma is the money-saving alternative to the 42PZ85B (19). Apart for some gripes about the sound quality the PX80B is a great choice for picture quality, value and features. We liked the clarity and detail of the sound, but higher frequencies can sound harsh, and our panel felt that the tonal balance was wrong. It's cheapest online.

WE LIKE The light sensor cuts power use by about 30% in a dimly lit room.

Available Argos, Currys, Comet, John Lewis Screen resolution 1.024x768 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, headphones, VGA, SD-card slot Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 208/0.55 watts



70% Sony Bravia KDL-32W4000 £899

Sony's feature-rich HD-ready 1080p set comes close to stealing the limelight from Panasonic. Our viewing panel were impressed by the SD picture quality, and our listening panel remarked on the 'good performance trapped in a small box'. It's easy to use, but a poorly laid-out remote lets it down. It's cheapest online.

WE LIKE The 'picture frame' feature allows you to display a fixed photo on screen for a set period of time.

Available Online, Currys, Comet, John Lewis Screen resolution 1,920x1,080 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, digital optical, headphones, VGA, USB Multiple picture settings Yes Power (on/standby) 124/0.19 watts



19 40-50 INCH

67% Panasonic Viera TH-42PZ85B £1,300

This pricey HD-ready 1080p set delivers in most of the areas where Panasonic normally excels. It's easy to use, full of features, and high-definition pictures look superb. However, our tests found that SD pictures via RGB Scart suffered from several problems. It's predictably power

hungry, too. Cheapest online. WORTH KNOWING Panasonic's energy-efficient prototype plasma range is expected to launch in 2009.

Available John Lewis Screen resolution 1,920x1,080 1080p Yes Primary sockets Two Scart (both RGB), three HDMI, component, audio out, digital optical, headphones, VGA, SD-card slot Multiple picture settings No Power (on/standby) 343.6/0.34 watts

Carbon concerns

Consumer electronic equipment accounts for almost a quarter of the average household electricity bill. But a blend of new technology and common sense will keep your energy bills down and your carbon footprint in check

■ SCREEN SIZE The bigger the TV screen, the more energy it uses. For instance, a 32-inch LCD typically uses around 110 watts, while a 40to 42-inch LCD gobbles up about 160 watts.

AVOID PLASMA

Your choice of flat-panel technology is also key. An LCD typically consumes a third less power than a similar-sized plasma screen. STANDBY Switch off your TV when it's not in use and avoid using standby. TVs left in standby cost the UK £71m a year in wasted electricity.



■ LIGHT SENSORS A light sensor automatically adjusts the backlight on the TV according to how light or dark the room is – and can



dramatically cut power consumption. For instance, the LG 32-inch Best Buy (5,) and Philips 32PFL7603D (14) both have power consumption at less than 50 watts. Some 'dynamic' light sensors adjust the backlight according to the brightness of the content on screen.

Some TVs can blank the screen when tuned to a digital radio channel. It's still not quite

thanks to a brilliantly effective light sensor, very low standby power consumpti and radio

as green as listening via regular DAB radio but does save power. The Sharp and Sony models all have this handy feature.

GREEN BUYS The most energy-efficient TV in the table is the Sharp LC-26D44E-BK (10, left). It uses 69 watts when switched on, and less than 1 watt in standby, and features radio blanking, although its sound quality and usability mean we can't heartily recommend it. If you don't want to compromise too much on overall quality and are determined to bag a big screen, look no further than the Sony Bravia KDL-40D3500 (20). It misses out on Best Buy status by the slimmest of margins but, thanks to a brilliantly effective

> or, very low standby power consumption and radio blanking, it is a great green choice.

GREAT SAVINGS WITH HUGHES DIRECT

Hughes Direct is offering Which? members an exclusive discount on our Best Buy TVs up until 30 November 2008, offering the Panasonic TX-32LXD85 for £490, Panasonic TH-50PX8B for £774 and the Sony KDL-32W4000 for £719 (plus delivery fee of £10-£25). To find out more details about this offer and other member-only discounts from Hughes Direct, go 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 highstreet 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.

Contacts

Freesat www.freesat.co.uk Freeview 0870 111 1270 www.freeview.co.uk JVC 0870 330 5000; www.jvc.co.uk LG 0870 873545; www.lge.co.uk Panasonic 0870 535 7357 www.panasonic.co.uk Philips 0870 900 9070; www.philips.co.uk Polaroid 0870 911 0025 www.polaroid.com/uk Samsung 0870 726 7864 www.samsung.com/uk Sharp 0800 262958; www.sharp.co.uk Sky 0870 240 4040; www.sky.com Sony 0870 511 1999; www.sony.co.uk Toshiba 0870 442 4424; www.toshiba.co.uk Virgin Media 0845 840 7777 www.virginmedia.com

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Don't snap up this Polaroid

Polaroid is not a big name in the world of flat-panel TVs. And on the evidence of the TLU-03723B (16) it will need to work much

harder to make strides into the market. This 37-inch HD-ready LCD is like a throwback to the early days of diaital technology. The Polaroid failed to impress us in any of our rigorous tests, but it's the lamentable picture quality that really clinches its Don't Buy award.

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification

Price For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price as we went to press. If we couldn't find them at major high-street retailers, we give the most common online price. Prices for other models are a guide. For the latest prices, go to www.whichcompare.co.uk. Screen Diagonal size in inches.

HD-ready 1080p Has a 1,080line resolution, and can process the 1080p HD signal used in Bluray DVD movies. See 'Buying guide', p53. 1080p Can process a 1080p signal. Those without a tick switch to 1080i.

Features

Scarts Number of sockets (number with high-quality RGB signal in brackets). HDMI Number of HD-media inputs.

Which? online

Search for bargain Best Buys, read scores of TV reviews and more

it even simpler for you to compare products and get the most out of your money.

and you will not only find the full results from our latest tests and up-to-date advice on the latest technology, but

Our new-look website makes you can also browse reviews of models we have tested in the past.

And finding a great deal Visit www.which.co.uk/tvs on a Best Buy has never been easier, with thousands of retailer prices updated all day, every day, at www.whichcompare.co.uk.



televisions

Standard-definition pictures are poor. Using the Scart RGB input, we found that images look

> flat, dull and smeary – problems highlighted by our technical tests. Motion problems and blotchy images drove our panel to remark that the Polaroid was not fit for purpose. High-definition pictures suffer from poor resolution and noticeable banding. Don't let the £450 price tag fool you into thinking this is a bargain. It's not.

consumption and presence of power-saving features.

Score

Ignores price and is based on:								
Picture quality	40 %							
Ease of use	20 %							
Sound quality	20 %							
Versatility	10 %							
Power use	10 %							

OUR RESEARCH

When selecting TVs to test, we consult manufacturers, market intelligence reports and industry experts, then check availability on the high street and online. Tested models include top sellers from the most popular brands, products with innovative features, models from some lesserknown brands and widely available Best Buys from previous tests.

Search

26-37 INCH

- 1 PANASONIC Viera TX-32LZD80
- 2 PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD85
- 3 PANASONIC Viera TH-37PX80B
- 4 SONY Bravia KDL-32W4000
- **5 LG** 32LG5000
- 6 TOSHIBA Regza 37CV505DB
- 7 TOSHIBA Regza 37XV505DB
- 8 LG 37LG3000
- 9 SAMSUNG Series 4 LE32A457C1DXXU
- 10 SHARP LC-26D44E-BK
- 11 TOSHIBA Regza 32AV505DB
- 12 JVC LT-26DA9BJ
- 13 SAMSUNG Series 4 LE26A457C1DXXU
- 14 PHILIPS 32PFL7603D / 10
- 15 SAMSUNG Series 5 LE32A558P3FXXU
- 16 POLAROID TLU-03723B

40-50 INCH

- 17 PANASONIC Viera TH-50PX8B
- 18 PANASONIC Viera TH-42PX80B
- 19 PANASONIC Viera TH-42PZ85B
- 20 SONY Bravia KDL-40D3500
- 21 SONY Bravia KDL-46W4000
- 22 LG 47LG5010
- 23 LG 47LG6000
- 24 LG 42PG6000
- 25 LG 42PG3000
- 26 TOSHIBA Regza 42XV505D
- 27 TOSHIBA Regza 40ZF355DB
- 28 JVC DynaPix LT-42DR9
- 29 PHILIPS 42PFL5603D / 10
- 30 SAMSUNG Series 4 PS42A457P1DXXU
- 31 SAMSUNG Series 6 LE40A656A1FXXU
- 32 SAMSUNG Series 5 PS50A558S1FXXU
- a HDMI socket also supports PC resolutions

MODEL



Audio output Coaxial (C) or

optical (O) are digital outputs that

can be hooked up to surround-

traditional red and white plugs

Computer input Connect via

HDMI. Light sensor Adjusts

light. Audio description

sighted viewers.

Test performance

analogue VGA socket or digital

brightness according to ambient

Additional narrative for partially

SD picture Rating of standard-

definition playback via Freeview

and DVD. HD picture Rating of

high-definition playback via

satellite and Blu-ray. Sound

assessments and technical

measurements. Ease of use

Based on expert assessment.

Versatility Based on the number

and functionality of features such

as sockets. Power use Measured

Based on expert panel

for connecting to a stereo.

sound equipment. Phono (P) are

TELEVISIONS

SPECIFICATION					·	FEATURES					·	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE						SCORE %
	PRICE (£)	TYPE	SCREEN (in)	HD-READY 1080P	1080P	SCARTS (RGB)	HDMI	AUDIO OUTPUT	COMPUTER INPUT	LIGHT SENSOR	AUDIO DESCRIPTION	SD PICTURE	HD PICTURE	SOUND	EASE OF USE	VERSATILITY	POWER USE	
										_	_							
	799	LCD	32	~	√	2 (2)	3	P,0	√	~	√	****	*****	****	****	****	***	84
	560	LCD	32		√	2 (2)	3	Р	√	√	√	****	*****	****	****	****	***	76
	800	Plasma	37		√	2 (2)	3	Р	√	~	√	****	****	**	****	****	**	74
	899	LCD	32	~	√	2 (2)	3	P,0	√ a	 Image: A start of the start of	~	****	*****	****	***	****	***	70
	415	LCD	32		√	2 (1)	3	0	√ a	~		****	****	***	***	**	***	65
	700	LCD	37	_	 Image: A start of the start of	2 (1)	3	P,0	√ a		 Image: A start of the start of	***	****	****	***	**	**	61
	800	LCD	37	1	√	2 (1)	3	P,0	Va		~	***	****	****	***	**	**	61
	700	LCD	37		 Image: A start of the start of	2 (1)	3	0	Va			****	****	**	***	**	**	58
	550	LCD	32		✓	2 (1)	3	P,0	√ a		~	****	****	**	***	**	**	56
	383	LCD	26			2 (2)	2	Р	1			***	***	**	**	***	****	52
	450	LCD	32			2 (2)	2	Р				***	****	**	***	**	**	52
	390	LCD	26			2 (2)	2	0				***	****	**	***	**	***	51
	450	LCD	26		✓	2 (1)	3	P,O	√ a		✓	***	****	**	***	**	***	50
	675	LCD	32		✓	2 (2)	4	P,C	√ a	✓		***	****	**	**	**	****	49
	749	LCD	32	1	✓	2 (1)	3	P,0	√ a		✓	***	****	**	***	**	**	49
	450	LCD	37			2 (2)	2	P,0	✓			*	**	**	**	**	**	21
	1,200	Plasma	50		✓	2 (2)	2	Р			1	****	****	****	****	***	**	72
	899	Plasma	42		✓	2 (2)	3	Р	✓	✓	✓	****	*****	**	****	****	**	67
	1,300	Plasma	42	1	✓	2 (2)	3	P,O	1	✓	✓	***	*****	****	****	****	*	67
	800	LCD	40	1	✓	2 (2)	2	Ρ	1	✓	✓	***	****	****	***	***	***	65
	1,700	LCD	46	1	✓	2 (2)	3	P,O	√ a	1	1	***	*****	****	***	****	**	63
	1,100	LCD	47	1	✓	2 (1)	3	0	🗸 a	✓		***	****	***	***	**	**	57
	1,399	LCD	47	1	✓	2 (1)	4	0	✓a	✓		***	****	***	***	**	**	56
	900	Plasma	42		✓	2 (1)	4	P,O	🗸 a			***	****	***	***	**	**	55
	800	Plasma	42		✓	2 (1)	3	P,O	🗸 a			***	****	***	***	*	**	53
	1,000	LCD	42	1	✓	2 (1)	3	P,O	1		✓	***	***	**	***	**	**	50
	1,499	LCD	40		✓	2 (2)	3	P,O	1			**	****	***	****	***	**	49
	825	LCD	42	1	✓	2 (1)	3	P,O		✓		***	****	**	**	**	***	48
	1,000	LCD	42	1	✓	2 (2)	4	P,C	√ a	1		***	****	**	**	**	***	48
	800	Plasma	42		✓	2 (1)	3	P,0	✓		✓	***	***	**	***	**	**	47
	1,050	LCD	40	1	✓	2 (1)	4	P,O	✓a		1	**	****	****	***	***	**	46
	1,022	Plasma	50	1	✓	2 (1)	3	P,0	🗸 a		✓	**	****	**	***	**	*	35