



Best and worst cheap DVD players

Getting a Best Buy DVD player needn't cost the earth, but buying a cheap and cheerful model can be a false economy



The price of DVD players has plummeted – many models are now on sale for less than £50, and we found some models on sale for as little as £15.

The question is, if you buy one of the cheapest models on the market, will you be pleasantly surprised with its performance, or end up with a device that's plagued with technical troubles?

For this issue, we put a batch of budget players through their paces to see if they could hold their own against their more expensive rivals – with mixed results. On the whole, we found that very cheap

players – typically those under £20 – performed badly.

Picture and sound quality were often disappointing – a high-pitched whistle and a green picture were two problems that we encountered – and several players broke down during our tests. Some models had poorly designed remote controls and confusing instructions. We'd strongly advise you to avoid these ultra-cheap DVD players (see 'Don't Buys').

However, if you move up the price scale a little, there are a couple of gems to be had around the £50 mark. And if you're prepared to spend a little more,

WHICH.CO.UK
You can buy a Blu-ray player for £200. Find out what you'd get for your money at www.which.co.uk/blu-rayplayers

there are several top-notch Best Buys in the £51-£100 price bracket.

In our last reliability survey (*Which?*, July 2008, p30), we found that DVD players are highly dependable – an impressive 97% of respondents said that their machines hadn't needed repairs in the past six years. The top brands for reliability are Philips, Panasonic and Sony.



You'd save £50 if you bought our cheapest Best Buy, the £49 Philips DVP5980/05, instead of the £99 Toshiba XD-E500, but you shouldn't have to worry about either model breaking any time soon.

Best Buys: £50 or less



79% Samsung DVD-HD870 £50

This Best Buy DVD player produces excellent picture quality and has more features than most other budget machines.

It has an HDMI socket so you can connect it to an HD-ready television, although the picture is actually better if you use the Scart socket. You can also connect it to a home cinema system using the coaxial or optical digital audio sockets.

It can play the usual range of discs, including DVD+R, DVD-RW, DVD-R and DVD-RW, and it can also play standard audio CDs and discs containing MP3, WMA and Jpeg files.

The DVD-HD870 has a resume feature, so you can stop watching a DVD and pick up from the same point later on, and bookmarking, which lets you mark your favourite scenes in a movie. However, this information is lost when you take the disc out.

When we checked, this DVD player was cheapest online and at independents.

WORTH KNOWING This player doesn't automatically switch picture formats from widescreen to 4:3, so you'll need to do it manually.

Available Online and independents
Bookmarking Yes **Resume** Yes **MP3** Yes
Jpeg Yes **Digital output** Coaxial and optical
HDMI output Yes



78% Philips DVP5980/05 £49

We were very impressed with the picture quality produced by this versatile DVD player from Philips. It also has some useful features, including parental control, which allows you to block up to 20 discs to ensure that your kids can't watch them when your back is turned.

The multi-disc resume feature stores information for up to five DVDs, so that even if you take the disc out and play another one, it will remember where you stopped viewing and restart it from the right place.

It can play DVD+R, DVD-RW, DVD-R and DVD-RW discs, as well as standard audio CDs, MP3

and WMA files, and photographs stored in Jpeg format. It can also read USB memory sticks.

There's an HDMI output so you can connect it to an HD-ready TV. The picture is fairly good, but it's still better to connect it up using the Scart socket. A digital audio coaxial socket lets you hook it up to a home cinema system.

It was cheapest online and at independents when we looked at prices.

WORTH KNOWING The disc drawer opens slowly, and you can't operate it with the remote.

Available Online and independents
Bookmarking No **Resume** Yes
MP3 Yes **Jpeg** Yes **Digital output** Coaxial
HDMI output Yes

Insider information

Does 'upscaling' really give you an HD-quality picture?

Most new DVD players can be hooked up to a high-definition TV via an HDMI connection. However, conventional discs don't contain the data needed to create true HD pictures. The players therefore perform a digital processing trick called 'upscaling' – they attempt to 'guess' the extra information and produce pseudo HD pictures on the TV screen.

Our research has found that this usually doesn't work and upscaled pictures look worse

than the ones you get when you connect your DVD player to the TV via the humble Scart socket.

Toshiba may be bucking the trend, though. The XD-E500 (see p72) is the best upscaling DVD player we've seen, although the picture is some way off true HD quality.

In reality, a conventional DVD player will never be able to produce picture quality comparable with a Blu-ray player, no matter how many clever digital tricks it performs.

Don't Buys

Two models that failed to impress our panel of experts

40% ASDA SMART PRICE LEDVD0701SP £15

Although this DVD player scores well for power consumption and sound quality, picture quality really lets it down.

We found that the Scart output can cause problems with colour levels on certain brands of TV (including Panasonic). The result is an unacceptable picture that looks very green.

It's not an easy player to use – the remote control has small



buttons that are scattered about, the instructions have few diagrams and there's no front-panel display.

It doesn't have an HDMI output for connecting to an HD-ready TV, and there's no 'resume' feature, so you can't stop watching a disc and pick up where you left off later on.

37% PROLINE DVD15601 £40

While DVD picture quality with the Proline DVD15601 is mediocre, the sound quality when playing CDs really lets it down – an audible high-pitched whistle ruins the experience.

Although the remote control is well laid out, some buttons are small and others are wobbly and spongy. The front-panel display is cramped and its reflective surface makes



it tricky to read. The instructions are daunting – they lack detail and images and have few connection diagrams.

This DVD player is light on features, and although it can be connected to an HD-ready TV via the HDMI output, the upscaled picture is no better than the picture you'd get via the Scart socket.

Best Buys: £51-£100



79% Samsung DVD-1080P7 £65

This Best Buy Samsung player produces excellent pictures. Like the cheaper Best Buy Samsung DVD-HD870 (see p71) it plays the usual disc formats, as well as audio CDs and discs containing MP3, WMA and Jpeg files.

It also has resume and bookmarking functions, but, in both cases, if you take your disc out the player won't remember where you got to.

If you want to listen to movies in surround sound, you can connect this DVD player to a home cinema system using the digital audio sockets. It also has

an HDMI socket, so you will be able to connect it to an HD-ready TV.

The instruction manual is clear and accessible, so you should be able to find your way around this DVD player easily.

When we checked, it was cheapest online and at independents.

WORTH KNOWING The front-panel display is dim and hard to read in a brightly lit room, and it only shows the time.

Available Online and independents
Bookmarking Yes **Resume** Yes **MP3** Yes
Jpeg Yes **Digital output** Coaxial and optical
HDMI output Yes



77% Toshiba XD-E500 £99

Toshiba is on the right track with this Best Buy. You can connect it to an HD-ready TV via an HDMI lead, and, although the 'upscaled' pictures are some way off the true high-definition quality that you'd get from a Blu-ray player, they are very good. In fact, this is the best upscaling model we've seen.

Sound quality is good, too, and you can connect this model to a home cinema system (see p66 for Best Buys) using the coaxial or optical digital output.

The Toshiba XD-E500 can play discs containing Jpeg and MP3 files, and has a bookmarking function so you can tag your favourite movie scenes.

Power consumption is good – it uses 0.9 watts in standby and 8.4 watts when playing a disc.

Our experts found the player reasonably easy to use. The remote is well laid out, but the instructions could be better – the text and diagrams are small, and on the quick-start guide the text is so tiny it's almost unreadable.

When we checked prices it was cheapest at Currys.
WORTH KNOWING It doesn't have a resume function, so you can't stop a disc and start watching it later from where you left off.

Available Currys **Bookmarking** Yes
Resume No **MP3** Yes **Jpeg** Yes
Digital output Coaxial and optical
HDMI output Yes



78% Sony DVPNS78H £70

You'll get a good picture with this Best Buy, although our experts detected a little bit of graininess. There is an HDMI socket, but as this is a standard-definition device, it produces 'upscaled' images that lacked sparkle, according to our experts.

Sound quality is good, although the audio from other top-end models was more refined.

The resume function works with up to six discs, and you can program in Pins for up to 40 DVDs – handy if you want to control what your kids watch.

The display panel is bright and easy to read, but doesn't have

many controls. Although the remote is rather unintuitive, it can control televisions from most major manufacturers.

This is one of the most energy efficient DVD players we've seen – it uses only 0.1 watts in standby. Its instruction manual is quite technical, though. It was cheapest online and at independents when we compared prices.

WE FOUND It's very slow to load a DVD and get a picture on the TV screen.

Available Online and independents
Bookmarking No **Resume** Yes
MP3 Yes **Jpeg** Yes **Digital output** Coaxial
HDMI output Yes



Which.co.uk DVD formats explained

Your DVD player may be compatible with DVD-R, DVD-RW, DVD+R, DVD+RW, DVD-RAM or dual-layer discs, but what does this jumble of letters mean? Our guide at www.which.co.uk/dvdformats tells you everything you need to know.



USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification

Price See p41.

Bookmarking

Tags scenes so you can find them again quickly. **Resume** Whether the player can remember where you stopped watching a disc and restart from that point, and on how many discs. **MP3** Can play discs

containing MP3 audio tracks. **Jpeg** Can play discs containing Jpeg digital images.

Digital output

The type of output for connecting to a home cinema system. C = Coaxial; O = Optical. **HDMI output** For connecting to an HD-ready TV (see 'Insider information', p71).

Test performance
Picture quality/

Sound quality/Ease of use Based on the opinion of our expert panel. **Power consumption** Both in standby and when switched on and playing a disc.

Score

Ignores price and is based on:
Picture and sound quality **60%**
Ease of use **20%**
Features **10%**
Power consumption **10%**

Blu-ray and downloads

Now that the Blu-ray format has won the high-definition DVD war, prices of Blu-ray players are falling – you can buy a decent model for around £200. Blu-ray disc prices are also tumbling, and it may not be long before Blu-ray eases out conventional DVDs altogether.

However, Blu-ray players will play ordinary DVDs, so if you buy one you won't have to start your movie collection all over again.

Meanwhile, downloading movies from the internet and watching them on a computer or MP4 player is an increasingly popular option – perfect for those who don't like discs cluttering up their home.

You'll pay £6.99-£10.99 to buy a film from Apple iTunes, and £2.49-£3.49 to rent one. You'll pay a pound more for high-definition movies.

If you're renting a film, you have up to 30 days to start watching it, and, once you've



started, 48 hours to finish it — but you can watch it several times during this period.

A copy-protection system means you can't burn downloaded films to a DVD.

Contacts

Argos argos.co.uk
0845 640 2020

Asda asda.co.uk
0500 1000 55

Curtis
curtisint.com

Logik
currys.co.uk
0844 561 3333

Matsui
currys.co.uk
0844 561 3333

Panasonic
panasonic.co.uk
0870 535 7357

Philips
philips.co.uk
0870 601 0354

Pioneer
pioneer.co.uk
0870 600 1539

Proline comet.co.uk
0870 542 5425

Samsung
samsung.com/uk
0870 242 0303

Sony sony.co.uk
0870 511 1999

Technika
tesco.co.uk
0845 456 6767

Tesco tesco.co.uk
0845 456 6767

Toshiba
toshiba.co.uk
0870 442 4424

| MODEL | | SPECIFICATION | | | | | | | | WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE | | | | SCORE (%) |
|--------------|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-------------|--------|-----|------|----------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------------|-----------|
| | | PRICE (£) | DIMENSIONS (cm) (h x w x d) | BOOKMARKING | RESUME | MP3 | JPEG | DIGITAL OUTPUT | HDMI OUTPUT | PICTURE QUALITY | SOUND QUALITY | EASE OF USE | POWER CONSUMPTION | |
| £50 AND LESS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | SAMSUNG DVD-HD870 | 50 | 5x43x22 | ✓ | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C,0 | ✓ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | 79 |
| 2 | PHILIPS DVP5980/05 | 49 | 4x44x24 | | 5 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | 78 |
| 3 | MATSUI MATDVD330 | 25 | 4x36x23 | | 5 | | ✓ | C | | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | 69 |
| 4 | PHILIPS DVP3120/05 | 29 | 4x36x25 | | | ✓ | ✓ | C | | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 68 |
| 5 | SAMSUNG DVD-F1080 | 40 | 5x24x29 | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 63 |
| 6 | SONY DVP-NS39 | 47 | 4x43x26 | | 6 | ✓ | ✓ | C | | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 62 |
| 7 | TOSHIBA SD280 EKB | 34 | 4x43x23 | | | ✓ | ✓ | C | | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★ | ★★★★ | 62 |
| 8 | CURTIS DVD1047UKS | 20 | 5x26x28 | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ★★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★ | ★★★★★ | 61 |
| 9 | LOGIK LD3330 | 36 | 5x43x27 | | | ✓ | ✓ | C,0 | ✓ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | 58 |
| 10 | TECHNIKA DVDAW08 | 18 | 4x36x22 | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | 43 |
| 11 | TESCO Value DPA08 | 15 | 5x23x25 | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 43 |
| 12 | ASDA Smart Price LEDVD0701SP | 15 | 5x26x23 | | | ✓ | ✓ | C | | ★ | ★★★★ | ★★ | ★★★★★ | 40 |
| 13 | PROLINE DVD15601 | 40 | 5x36x30 | | | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★ | ★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 37 |
| £51-£100 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 14 | SAMSUNG DVD-1080P7 | 65 | 5x43x23 | ✓ | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C,0 | ✓ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | 79 |
| 15 | SONY DV PNS78H | 70 | 4x43x22 | | 6 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★★ | 78 |
| 16 | TOSHIBA XD-E500 | 99 | 5x43x23 | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | C,0 | ✓ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★★ | 77 |
| 17 | PANASONIC DVD-S33 | 52 | 4x43x26 | | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C | | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 70 |
| 18 | PANASONIC DVD-S53 | 90 | 4x43x28 | | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 70 |
| 19 | PANASONIC DVD-S511 | 92 | 4x43x29 | | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 63 |
| 20 | PANASONIC DVD-S54EBK | 85 | 4x43x28 | | 1 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★★★ | ★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 63 |
| 21 | PIONEER DV-400V-S | 79 | 5x42x27 | | 5 | ✓ | ✓ | C | ✓ | ★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★ | ★★★★★ | 56 |