

Budget DVD player £120

Panasonic DVD-S35



The entry-level machine in Panasonic's latest DVD player range epitomises the phrase 'value for money'. For just £120, it decodes MP3, WMA and JPEG files, sports component video output and plays DVD-RAM and DVD-Audio discs.

There's a catch with DVD-A, though – the deck doesn't sport six-channel analogue audio outputs, meaning that it will only play discs in two-channel. It's not a wasted exercise, as you can still enjoy the benefits of DVD-A's high resolution.

Like all of Panasonic's current range, the DVD-S35 is very slim (60mm high to be precise) and sports silver and black styling. The fascia is relatively uncluttered, and unfortunately, so is the rear panel, largely due to the lack of S-video and electrical digital audio output. The inclusion of component video output is partial redemption, and thankfully, the single Scart outputs RGB. Optical digital and analogue audio phonos are also provided.

Operation is easy thanks to the practical remote, while the onscreen menus are smart and logically designed. Among other things, the setup menu lets you choose which type of file takes preference when a mixed WMA/JPEG disc is loaded.

Talking of which, the JPEG viewer is magnificent. Images are presented in a grid, and can be viewed as a slideshow or individually. Images can be displayed with an information box giving the resolution, date and time it was taken.

This deck boasts an avalanche of other features, all accessed from the onscreen display. These include a 100-stage manual zoom with six presets, Dialogue Enhancer, Advanced Surround (VSS), user-defined image adjustments and two Cinema presets.

PERFORMANCE

This healthy features roster is backed up by delicious pictures from the RGB Scart and component outputs. Sound performance is the only weak

link in the chain – DVD-A playback isn't as assured as its range-topping big brother, the DVD-S75. Strong woodwind solos sound forced and shrill, plus the lack of a multichannel element also lessens the enjoyment. CDs sound slightly distorted, especially with top-end sounds.

A great DVD deck in many respects, let down only by its sound performance. But given that most £120 decks don't even play DVD-A, Panasonic should be applauded.

Specification

KEY FEATURES

DVD/DVD-Audio/DVD-R/DVD-RW/Video and VR modes/DVD+R/DVD+RW/DVD-RAM/CD/CD-R/CD-RW/VCD/SVCD/MP3/WMA/JPEG playback; Dolby Digital/DTS bitstream output; manual zoom with six presets; Advanced Surround (VSS); User-defined/Cinema picture presets; Dialogue Enhancer; NTSC output; Position Memory; programme & random play; JPEG viewer; five-speed search; slow motion; dynamic range compression; sleep timer; parental control

SOCKETS

One Scart (RGB-capable); component video output; composite video output; stereo audio output; optical digital audio output

TEST DATA

Video jitter: 9ns (below average)
Signal-to-noise ratio: -71.6dB (good)
Chrominance AM/PM: -70.8dB/-61.3dB (excellent/average)
Chroma crosstalk: -61.7dB (excellent)
Frequency response at 5MHz: (S-video): -4.71dB (excellent)
(composite): -5.03dB (very good)
Audio jitter: 336.9ps (good)

CONTACT

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PICTURE★★★★★
SOUND★★★★★
FEATURES★★★★★
EASE OF USE★★★★★
VALUE★★★★★

Verdict ★★★★★

Feature-packed and a great performer

Budget DVD player £120

Pioneer DV-464



It's not often that we get excited by a deck's onscreen menu system deserves comment in a test, but Pioneer's really is a joy, both to use and to behold. This stretches to a fetching user interface for MP3 and Windows Media Audio use.

Not surprisingly, this is a slimline silver deck, with the sort of looks that were once reserved for high-end gear.

The Scart socket to the rear is RGB-capable and is joined by S-video and composite video outputs, along with both electrical and optical digital audio sockets and standard stereo phono outs.

Format compatibility includes MP3, WMA and JPEG files while playback options run the usual gamut of programmed, repeat and A-B repeat options, plus slo-mo and a zoom.

The zoom is worth further comment, however, as it actually does 'zoom in' when used, rather than merely blow the picture up instantly.

Disc information, including a bitrate indicator, can be accessed during playback, which gives you another chance to use that gorgeous onscreen display.

Audio settings include the familiar Dynamic Range Control (set to off by default) and Virtual Surround mode for those who do not have a home cinema sound system. At the budget end of the market, this is not an unlikely scenario.

Picture parameters can be adjusted via the Video Adjust menu, letting you tweak contrast, brightness and chroma level (colour intensity) and save the settings.

PERFORMANCE

As well as being a pleasure to use, the Pioneer DV-464 turns in a powerful performance. Images are bright, sharp and detailed, with excellent colour rendition.

Some tricky passages, which caused other decks in this test to

throw out glitches, are handled with ease, and functions such as slo-mo and smooth zoom are a joy.

Audio playback was very good, although we would recommend those making do with their TV and the Virtual Surround setting to invest in an amp and speaker setup – there really is no comparison.

There's no doubt about it, this deck from Pioneer is a winner and its user interface will appeal to even the most inexperienced customer.

Specification

KEY FEATURES

DVD/DVD+R/DVD-R/DVD+RW/DVD-RW/CD/CD-R/CD-RW/VCD/MP3/WMA/JPEG playback; Dolby Digital/DTS compatible; PAL/NTSC playback; onscreen display; zoom; frame advance; slow-motion; Video Adjust; DRC; Virtual Surround; repeat/programmed play; parental control; remote control

SOCKETS

One Scart (RGB-capable); one S-video out; one composite video out; one electrical and one optical digital audio out; one stereo audio out

TEST DATA

Video jitter: 3ns (very good)
Signal-to-noise ratio: -72.7dB (good)
Chroma AM/PM: -71.5dB/-61.6dB (excellent/excellent)
Chroma crosstalk: -54.8dB (average)
Frequency response (S-video) at 5.8MHz: -7.24dB (very good)
Composite video at 5.8MHz: -7.39dB (very good)
Digital audio deviation: 177.3ps (excellent)

CONTACT

Pioneer ☎ 01753 789500
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PICTURE★★★★★
SOUND★★★★★
FEATURES★★★★★
EASE OF USE★★★★★
VALUE★★★★★

Verdict ★★★★★

Another fine Pioneer machine