

in brief

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: a route-planning package and a tourist guide of London, both from the AA; a small CD-ROM drive for notebooks and a 24-speed one for PCs; a budget video-conferencing package; STB's latest graphics accelerator; and a tiny digital camera

AA MileMaster Britain & Ireland

Now that the summer is well and truly here – cue torrents of rain – you might well be thinking of packing the family into the car and heading off for a few day-trips. If so, MileMaster Britain & Ireland from the AA might come in handy. Essentially it's a route-planning package with gazetteers covering restaurants, campsites, B&Bs, golf courses and so forth. Routes can be chosen by either pointing at start and end points on the displayed map or by using the step-by-step 'Build Trip' option, which also lets you specify via points and stop-offs. With that done the program calculates an optimum route for your journey, and displays which roads and turn-offs you should take along the way.

The program comes on a CD-ROM that, annoyingly (though understandably), must be present in the drive while you're using the program. Speed-wise however, it's not bad at all, with most route calculations being returned within a few seconds. The route plans also contain an extremely impressive level of direction.

AA MileMaster Britain & Ireland is not as immediately usable as its main rival, Microsoft's AutoRoute, but the amount of detail contained in it is quite exceptional.

AA MileMaster

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £49.99 (inc VAT)
- AA Multimedia: 01986 896969



Multimedia Training for Windows 95

Computer-based training packages are commonplace and most of them fall into one of two types – either they are fact-packed but boringly presented, or else they have plenty of surface glamour with inadequate content to back them up.

Sierra's Multimedia Training for Windows 95 falls between these two extremes. It has made an effort on the glitz and glamour, taking the theme of a film presentation. 'Oscar Nominees' are used to introduce each chapter, and 'Oscar Awards' are the vehicle for tests at the end.

In between, the inevitable smartly-dressed American gabbles his way through a vast amount of information, much of it irrelevant and incomprehensible to the novice computer user. If you can gear yourself up to keep pace with the flow of facts, though, you should learn something.

There is a whole section of Interactive Exercises and these take life at a slower pace. Unusually, these exercises consist just of sound files – the trainer talks you through a set of popular tasks, such as creating new folders – and you are free to follow the instructions, or not.

This is a training package that stands out only for its mediocrity – the Windows 95 Help section is as informative and decidedly less frantic.

Multimedia Training for Win95

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £24.99 (inc VAT)
- Sierra: 01189 209111



Virtual London

If you're in the market for a tourist guide to London, then you're most likely to try a book – after all, they're easily portable, and it's simple to refer to the pictures and information they contain. Virtual London is quite different. If you want to refer to it on the move you'll need a notebook PC with a CD-ROM drive, but it gives a flavour of London that a book never could.

Entering Dickens' Old Curiosity Shop, clear – though simple – maps let you link to the sights of London. Pictures and videos of attractions like Changing the Guard and Camden Market are very atmospheric, and the sounds and historical data add even more. Better still, some 75 panoramas have been created for the disc using Apple's QuickTime VR technology. This means it's possible to zoom in and walk through the centre of Soho or look at Tower Bridge in detail – it's nearly as good as being there.

There's really not much to criticise about Virtual London. The interface is intuitive but can be fiddly to navigate around, especially as some of the links from pictures don't take you to the relevant article. Apart from that, we were merely left wanting more of the same.

At almost £50, this is expensive. However, it gives a much better feel for the sights and sounds of the city than a paper guide and, although you can't readily use it on the move, it's well worthwhile

Virtual London

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £49.99 (inc VAT)
- AA Multimedia: 01986 896969



PrestoPrint Suite

Nowadays more and more people are investing in a printer at the same time as buying a PC. The majority of these new buyers are opting for colour inkjet models, simply because they offer good-quality output at a low price. If you've got such a setup, Newsoft's PrestoPrint Suite will almost certainly interest you.

It's a collection of useful and fun graphics utilities, ranging from a greetings card designer (PrintMagic) to a full-featured image-editing tool (ImageFolio). You also get PageManager, a drag-and-drop printing and filing tool, and an excellent program called PhotoAlbum that lets you easily create an electronic catalogue of your family snaps.

Without a doubt the most fun of all the included applications is Kai's Power Goo (Special Edition). This is referred to as a 'real-time liquid imaging' system, which in a nutshell means that it gives you a great way of enhancing the finer features of your friends' phizogs (as our screenshot ably demonstrates!). (See also page 75 in the image-editing feature in this issue.)

Complementing the suite are over 1,000 clip-art images, which can be put to good use in most of the applications.

Not brilliantly integrated or presented, but PrestoPrint Suite contains everything you might need to get the best results from your PC and printer.

PrestoPrint Suite

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £28.20 (inc VAT)
- Ingram Micro: 01908 260160



QuickCD

The computer industry is one of the fastest moving in the world, and manufacturers are continually striving to make their products smaller, faster and cheaper than before. The latest example is the QuickCD from Memory Technology, which is an external CD-ROM drive designed for use with notebook computers.

A portable CD-ROM drive like this is not unusual, but the QuickCD does have a couple of features that, at least for the moment, set it apart from the competition. First of all it is undoubtedly the slimmest model we've yet seen, being a little under 2cm in height. And secondly, as an eight-speed (8x) device, it is currently the fastest portable model you can buy.

As with most PC Card devices, installing the QuickCD is very simple – just plug in the card, insert the driver disk and away you go. After that it operates in exactly the same way as any of your PC's other drives, assigning itself the next available drive letter ('D:' or 'E:', for example).

The QuickCD is an exceptionally slim and (relatively) fast portable CD-ROM drive. It's not cheap, but it is an ideal solution for notebook PC owners who need occasional use of such a unit.

QuickCD

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £233.83 (inc VAT)
- Memory Technology: 0118 977 1588



VideoLogic Captivator PCI/VC

Video conferencing is not new, but has been expensive. That's set to change, with a budget package from VideoLogic.

Despite sounding worryingly technical, the video-conferencing and video-capture facilities are remarkably easy to set up. Once you've inserted the PCI interface card and installed the software, you're ready to go. You can use a camcorder in conjunction with the card and the bundled trial versions of Internet video-conferencing software.

Alternatively, you can opt for the deal that incorporates a compact Philips desktop colour camera and integrated microphone – just one cable to plug in, so it couldn't be simpler. A full suite of video-conferencing software is included so, if you have access to the Internet, you're ready to see and talk to people round the globe for the price of your usual modem call.

While not brilliant, the quality of both sound and pictures is more than adequate, allowing for up to 30 frames per second at resolutions of 320x240, and it is incredibly easy to grab and edit frames from video sequences you record. The only problem comes with the speed with which you fill up your hard disk.

If you're into gadgets, or know people round the world who are connected to the Net with similar equipment, this is an almost irresistible package.

- £64.63: Captivator PCI card only; £217.38: Captivator PCI card plus camera, microphone and software bundle (prices inc VAT)

- VideoLogic: 01923 260511

VideoLogic Captivator PCI/VC

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



STB Nitro 3D Multimedia Accelerator

The latest graphics accelerator from STB is aimed squarely – if you can say that about a 3D graphics card – at the pennywise gamer. It's reasonably priced, comes with an impressive bundle of games (four Activision titles, including the superb Interstate '76 (reviewed in our July issue), if you shell out for the 4Mb version) and claims top-notch performance.

Certainly, the figures seem to bear this out; it has a maximum resolution of 1,600x1,200 pixels, albeit only in 256-colour mode, and offers refresh rates of up to 160Hz at lower resolutions if your monitor can handle it.

Installing the Nitro 3D wasn't as straightforward as we'd expected, and we had to reinstall drivers several times with little help from the manual. Nonetheless, once it was up and running it behaved perfectly. Interstate '76, for instance, was noticeably less jerky than with our original graphics card and video files seemed smoother too.

STB also supplies a utility called Vision 95, which features a virtual desktop enabling you to open more windows side by side. It also gives the option of an overview window to make navigating round the desktop easier.

The Nitro 3D is a competent performer and great value. Although it is pitched at games players, it is a worthwhile upgrade for any other user as well.

STB Nitro 3D Accelerator

Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- £92.82 (2Mb version); £123.38 (4Mb) (both prices inc VAT)
- STB: 0181 897 1003



DataSafe

Are you worried that other people may see sensitive files on your PC? Concerned that private electronic mail could be intercepted en route? If so, you could be interested in this data encryption system, which scrambles any file of your choice so that a password is required to access it.



DataSafe is a compact little program that fits on just one 3.5in disk. Installing it is easy enough and running it is also quite simple. DataSafe uses the metaphor of a safe – you drag a file into the safe and lock it with a combination. This is an eight-character password, using letters and symbols, so is very difficult to ‘crack’. Anyone now wanting to look at this safe file will need to know its combination, so you can be reasonably sure that the file is secure.

You can also send a safe file via e-mail. If the recipient also has DataSafe, you can simply attach or embed the file but it is also possible to send a self-extracting version of the file to someone without DataSafe. In either case, you have to tell the recipient the combination to use – and you have to do this in person, by telephone or some other method.

A straightforward way of keeping your sensitive files under lock and key – but it is rather expensive.

	DataSafe
○ £59.99 (inc VAT)	Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ CrossAtlantic:	Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
0171 228 7036	Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Panasonic KXL-600A

Barely a month goes by in the *What PC?* office without some electronic marvel causing us to drool desirously and (almost) reach for our chequebooks. This month, the saliva-soaked item is the Panasonic KXL-600A – the smallest digital still camera we’ve ever seen.



Not much larger than a packet of slim cigars, the KXL-600A breaks with traditional camera design and is held vertically. The positioning of the viewfinder at the top of the camera makes it suitable for use with either eye, and the shutter release falls comfortably to hand just below the lens.

A serial lead and software transfers images to a PC but notebook owners have a much neater option. The KXL-600A stores images on small 2Mb flash memory card – 96 images in standard mode (320x240 pixels) or 24 in fine (640x480 pixels). Pop this out, slot it into the supplied PC Card holder and the stored JPEG images can be read from it directly.

Image quality of the KXL-600A is good. Pictures are a little underexposed but are clear enough, even in standard mode, though colours could be a little brighter.

If you have good cause to buy a digital camera, the low cost, reasonable performance and sheer versatility of the KXL-600A make it tempting.

	Panasonic KXL-600A
○ £299.57 (inc VAT)	Features ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ Panasonic:	Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
0500 404041	Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

TEAC CD-524E

CD-ROM drives keep on getting faster: it’s unusual for a new PC to be supplied with anything less than an eight-speed (8x) drive, and even 16-speed is becoming common. This latest drive from TEAC, though, boasts a spin rate up to 24 times the speed of the first CD-ROM (single-speed) drives.



In fact, for complicated design reasons, most of the time it spins more slowly than this, but TEAC still claims an average of just over 19-speed. This means 2.9Mb – and a maximum of 3.6Mb – of data can be transferred to your hard disk each second.

What is useful is that the CD-524E has a low seek time, meaning it can actually get to work very soon after you access it. Our tests showed an average of around 130ms (about a tenth of a second), which is very reasonable indeed.

The drive itself looks pretty standard, with an eject button, volume control and headphone socket adorning the front panel. There is no indication of the ‘go-faster’ insides, apart from noise levels well above our old eight-speed drive.

If you’ve got an old, double-speed CD-ROM drive – or no CD-ROM drive at all – then this model from TEAC is an excellent upgrade. If you’ve already got a newer, faster drive though, even the extra speed of the CD-524E may not be worth the £140 purchase price.

	TEAC CD-524E
○ £139.82 (inc VAT)	Performance ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ TEAC: 01923 225235	Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

ViewSonic Optique V773

When you buy a PC, it usually comes with a 14in or 15in monitor. While such sizes are perfectly suitable for the needs of most users, larger 17in models can be useful if you need that extra bit of workspace. A major monitor manufacturer like ViewSonic has plenty of products that’ll fit the bill and the Optique V773 monitor is its latest offering.



Like all monitors, the V773 doesn’t need a great deal of effort to get working. Simply plug it into your PC’s monitor port and, to get the best performance, install the supplied Windows 95 driver. After that, all you need to do is use the control panel buttons to adjust the screen attributes to your own liking. These include the usual settings of horizontal and vertical positioning, brightness and contrast.

The V773 can display a maximum resolution of 1,280x1,024 pixels on its 17in (15.8in viewable) tube. And, at the popular 1,024x768 resolution it can refresh the screen 86 times a second, meaning the displayed image is both steady and sharp.

Good 17in monitors are myriad, and the V773 doesn’t really have anything to make it stand out from the crowd. However, it is priced very competitively.

	ViewSonic Optique V773
○ £362 (inc VAT)	Build quality ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ ViewSonic:	Ease of use ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
0800 833648	Value for money ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall ★ ★ ★ ★ ★