

after hours: *family*

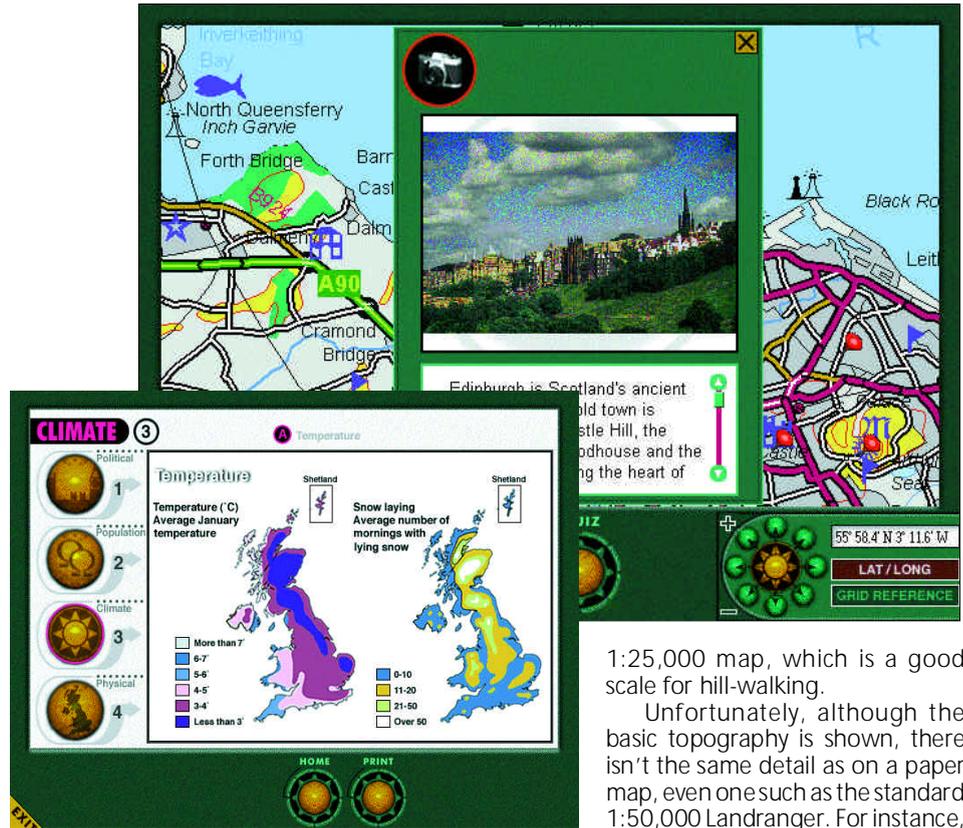
This month we tour the globe with a collection of multimedia atlases to see what interesting facts and figures we can glean

A multimedia atlas could be the perfect complement to a CD-ROM encyclopaedia. In our February issue we reviewed Microsoft's Encarta World Atlas. This month we take a look at three more atlases of the world, and one of Britain, to see if your home library can be complete without one.

Ordnance Survey Interactive Atlas of Great Britain

On launching the Ordnance Survey Interactive Atlas, you are greeted by an aerial video of the Snowdon Horseshoe, which soon fades into a map of the area. It is these OS maps of Great Britain which provide the main content of this disc.

The whole of Britain is covered at scales ranging from 1:6,000,000 (an overview of the entire country) to 1:250,000. These can then be zoomed even further, until they are displayed at the same size as a



1:25,000 map, which is a good scale for hill-walking.

Unfortunately, although the basic topography is shown, there isn't the same detail as on a paper map, even one such as the standard 1:50,000 Landranger. For instance, ▶

family/multimedia news

In conjunction with Oxford University Press, The Learning Company is currently developing the **Oxford Multimedia Encyclopaedia**. This latest rival to Microsoft Encarta should be available from the end of March, with an expected street price of around £30.

The Learning Company: 0181 246 4000



Maxis has announced its second voice-activated storybook. Like its predecessor *Marty and the Trouble with Cheese*, **Where's Morgan** is aimed at children who are too young to use a mouse or keyboard. Its mouse star, Marty, engages in educational games with children in a bid to make early learning fun.

Maxis: 0171 505 1500

Toymaker LEGO has teamed up with Mindscape Interactive to launch an educational game, **Adventures on LEGO Island**. It's a com-



pletely non-violent game in which children play members of the Brick and Brickolini families and meet other characters, each with their own personality, as they solve puzzles and whiz around the island on a jet ski or a skateboard. It should be available at the end of this summer for around £30, and is aimed at children from six years old.

Mindscape: 01444 246333

Latest in the One Small Square series from Virgin Sound and Vision is **Seashore**. Aimed at six-year-olds and above, it's a multimedia exploration of the shoreline environment. It features 3D models, four games and even an aquarium screen saver. **One Small Square; Back Garden** is also scheduled for release shortly.

Distributed by Funsoft: 0181 748 7565



contour lines are further apart and although the key has symbols for them, neither churches nor public phone boxes are shown on the computer maps.

Interestingly, the maps are drawn as layers. This means that you can customise the maps, showing just the bare topography if you want, by removing roads and rivers. However, as each layer is drawn individually, the maps displayed very slowly, even on our Dell P200 test machine.

More importantly, media pins have been placed at points of interest. By clicking on them, these display information and pictures about tourist attractions and historic sites. The information was generally interesting, but we were disappointed that several of the pictures were of very poor quality when expanded. There are also a number of videos on the CD-ROM, although you can only display these in a tiny window.

The CD-ROM includes a collection of comparative European statistics, together with colour-coded maps giving British information such as climate and population. JS The Ordnance Survey Interactive Atlas is a good disc. It's full of interesting information, and it's nice to have maps of Britain so easily accessible. It's a shame that it's spoiled by

some minor details, and particularly that the CD-ROM is so slow.
 ○ £39.99 (inc VAT)
 ○ Attica: 01908 570113

OS Interactive Atlas of GB Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486DX, 4Mb of RAM (8Mb recommended), 4Mb of hard disk space (8Mb recommended), 2x CD-ROM drive, 256-colour display, 16-bit sound card.

Compton's Interactive World Atlas

The Interactive World Atlas is part of the Compton's Home Library, which was recently launched in the UK by The Learning Company. It claims to let you 'Discover and Explore Every Country in the World' and, by and large, it does.

Unfortunately, it doesn't do this by means of maps, as the ones supplied are so bare as to be useless for anything other than a general overview of the country. It is possible to customise the level of detail – adding or deleting cities or rivers, for example – but the display is so small that custom maps can become almost unreadable.

This is a shame, as the rest of the disc presents a huge amount of information quite attractively. A

'Profile' button calls up a summary of any chosen country, together with an essay on its people and culture, and a range of statistics: these are impressively detailed, even for the smallest nations.

Moreover, for most countries there is a selection of typical music – unfortunately only very brief excerpts of each piece – together with pictures and a few videos. More videos tell you about weather patterns and the earth, covering a range of geographical and environmental topics such as volcanoes and rainforests.

Although the interface was a little confusing at first, with a bit of practice it was easy to find our way around. It would have been nice, though, to be able to expand the atlas at full-screen resolution, and it's unfortunate that the on-line links run only through AOL. JS

Compton's Atlas is an excellent source of general information about the countries of the world. However, it's a dreadful atlas, simply because its maps aren't up to scratch.
 ○ £39.99 (inc VAT)
 ○ The Learning Company: 0181 246 4000

Interactive World Atlas Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 486 DX33, 8Mb of RAM, 1.5Mb of hard disk space, 256 colour display, 2x CD-ROM drive, Windows 3.1 or higher, sound card.

WWF Interactive World Atlas

Attica has produced its World Atlas in association with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and is pledged to donate £50,000 to the WWF during the atlas's first year on sale. In return, the WWF has provided a range of environmental facts and pictures which form part of the atlas.

This information, accessed either by a menu option or through media pins which link the words, pictures and videos to specific locations, is excellent. It has exactly the right amount of detail to satisfy a casual enquirer and raise concern about the environment, twinned with attractive images.

Other media pins tell you more about countries or natural phenomena. It's a shame that neither the text nor the pictures could be seen in a bigger window, especially as the content is well worthwhile.

Yet more information, notably a multilingual glossary of geographical terms as well as a whole



section about the world's flags and the myths associated with them, can be found through the menu bar. There is also a good selection of statistics.

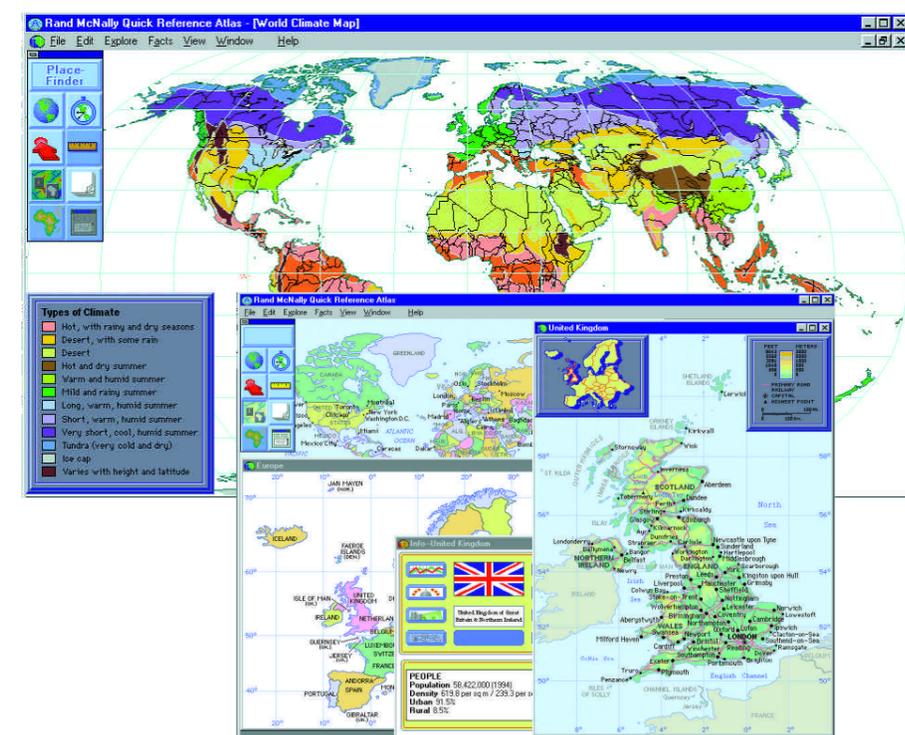
Most importantly, the maps are perhaps the most detailed of any of the atlases reviewed in this issue, and provide a good balance between superficiality and an overcrowded screen. Although they don't match the detail provided by Microsoft's Encarta Atlas, the only things we missed were city information and plans, so they should satisfy most people.

As with the Ordnance Survey Atlas, the maps are drawn in layers. This slows the screen redraw, but gives the flexibility to customise each one to your own tastes. JS Although it's not as slick as the Encarta World Atlas, the WWF World Atlas is

excellent value. Its maps are good, it's packed with useful information – and it supports the WWF. What more do you need?
 ○ £29.99 (inc VAT)
 ○ Attica: 01908 570113

WWF Interactive World Atlas Presentation	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: Pentium processor, 16Mb of RAM, 4Mb of hard disk space, Windows 95, 2x CD-ROM drive, 16-bit sound card, 256 colour display (will run on a 486 with 8Mb RAM and Windows 3.1 but will suffer performance degradation).



AA Multimedia Quick Reference Atlas

This AA-branded atlas is a re-boxed version of a two-year-old American product from Rand McNally. This explains the Rand McNally badging that appears during the install routine, and at the top of the application window. It may also explain why the information included on the disc is written in a curious mixture of American and British English – we found, for example, the word 'center' in the same paragraph as 'theatre'.

As a reference tool, this package suffers from an almost total lack of depth. The maps are small scale, marking major towns but showing almost no topographic detail: our screenshot below shows the UK on maximum zoom.

The maps showing population density, economic activity and climate are even worse. They show the whole world in one view, and can be neither zoomed further nor even viewed full-screen. Reliant on colour coding, they are too small to give more than a very general impression of the information they claim to supply.

Some information is supplied about each country, presumably justifying the 'reference' tag. At its best – for Britain or the USA for instance – this includes a number of reasonably interesting statistics, and informative, though short, articles covering each country's population and history. Unfortunately, for too many countries, little more than the statistics is available, and all the information is two years out of date.

At around £25, the AA Atlas isn't expensive for a CD-ROM, even though it makes no use of multimedia. It would score better for value were it not for the fact that you can buy a decent paper atlas, with far more detailed maps, for under a tenner. JS

The AA Multimedia Quick Reference Atlas is fast and fairly simple to use. Unfortunately, its content is too superficial for it to be a worthwhile buy. Even if it's got enough information to satisfy you, you'd do better to buy a paper atlas at half the price.

○ £24.99 (inc VAT)
 ○ AA Multimedia: 01256 492880

AA Multimedia Atlas Presentation	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Minimum requirements: 386, 4Mb of RAM, Windows 3.1 or greater, 256-colour graphics, CD-ROM drive.

