

HITACHI 55PMA550 ♦ £6,000 (APPROX) ♦ 0870 9090 760 ♦ www.hitachidigitalmedia.co.uk

Hitachi king-size takes plasma throne



Hitachi makes king-sized plasmas more affordable with its 55in 55PMA550 – but will it have John Archer raiding his piggy bank?

Although we couldn't nail a precise price down due to its unavailability for sale at the time of writing, it appears that the maximum Hitachi's new 55in 55PMA550 plasma TV will cost is £6,000. This makes it a genuine super-sized screen that can be yours for the same money as many 50in plasma screens.

Traditionally, plasmas bigger than 50in carried five-figure price tags – partly because of inherent difficulties in manufacturing panels so large, and partly because of a lack of mass production economies of scale. On paper, then, the 55PMA550 is a seriously attractive proposition.

Hitachi certainly hasn't skimped on the 55PMA550's looks – it's gorgeous. The application of a glass-fronted jet-black screen surround offset by silver trim isn't exactly original; Panasonic, JVC and Pioneer have adopted similar looks. But there's something about the sheer scale of the design applied to the 55in screen that makes your heart beat faster.

The screen's connectivity is also impressive thanks to the free inclusion of a video board, which equips the 55PMA550 with an RGB Scart socket, two sets of component video inputs and composite and S-video alternatives if you are not able to access the higher quality connections. There's no tuner input, though – maybe the thought of a dodgy analogue source appearing on its lovely screen was just too much for Hitachi to bear! The 55PMA550 also sports a 15-pin

D-Sub PC input and DVI digital options. The DVI jack is HDCP compatible, ensuring full compatibility with DVI-carrying DVD players. Despite forcing you to use a bizarrely low-rent remote control, the 55PMA550 provides a foolproof operating system, even though it's stuffed to the rafters with features...

When it comes to pictures, you can choose from several presets, as well as toying with three contrast modes, standard noise reduction, colour noise reduction, a Film Mode that adjusts movie playback to make it smoother, a PAL comb filter for reducing noise on composite feeds, line transient and colour transient improvers for enhancing general picture and colour sharpness, a black level booster, and individual adjustments of the red, green and blue picture elements... Phew! More utilitarian features include picture-in-picture facilities and a number of anti-screenburn measures. Despite the grand size, this screen enjoys a fan-less design, so there's no distracting noise when it powers up.

RATINGS

Highs: Picture, sound, looks, price
Lows: Only one Scart; not especially forgiving of poor sources

Picture	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★½
Features	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★★

All natural

It's clear that Hitachi hasn't skimped on features to keep the 55PMA550's price low. And it turns out that it hasn't skimped on picture quality either. The first thing that strikes you is the exceptional naturalism of the colour tone. If anything I felt that the 55PMA550's colours, particularly when it comes to skin tones, are more natural than those of Hitachi's current smaller screens! The firm quotes 16.77million possible colour combinations.

The fact that the 55PMA550 also boasts an excellent black level response does the colours no harm. Hitachi specifies a contrast of 900:1. Our Highbury Tech Labs rate the real world contrast of the panel at 190:1. The lustre to dark scenes also made us appreciate how unexpectedly bright the picture is for such a large screen – a claimed 1,000cd/m².

Unlike previous Hitachi screens, this model uses e-ALiS technology (Extended

LAB REPORT

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Colour	✓			
Geometry	✓			
Contrast	✓			
Frequency response	✓			
Colour temperature				
(pre-calibration, low setting)			9330K	
(post-calibration)			6630K	
Luminance				
(pre-calibration)			11.8fL	
(post-calibration)			12.4fL	
Contrast ratio				
(pre-calibration)			185:1	
(post-calibration)			190:1	

SIGNAL COMPATIBILITY

DVD (NTSC) 480i	●
DVD & DVB (PAL) 576i	●
NTSC/PAL progressive 480p/576p	●
High definition 720p	●
High definition 1080i	●

FEATURES

Specifications: 55in plasma TV; e-ALiS processing; Film Mode; YNR; CNR; LTI; CTI; black level boost; contrast mode; Matrix surround option; screen wipe and rotation screensavers; on/off timers; multiple aspect ratios; Picture and sound presets; PAL comb filter; auto colour system; colour decoding; SRS Trubass; Perfect volume; 1,000cd/m² brightness; 900:1 contrast; 1,366 x 768 native resolution; HD and progressive scan compatibility; picture-in-picture; freeze picture
Connections: DVI input; D-Sub 15-pin input; RGB Scart; two component video inputs (one RGB); three stereo audio inputs; two PC audio inputs; subwoofer output; three composite video inputs; one S-video input
Dimensions: 1,394(w) x 857(h) x 105(d)mm **Weight:** 63.5kg



'The 55PMA550 offers a level of picture refinement that's at the top of its game'

Alternate Lighting of Surfaces) – a progressive display method developed for 50in and larger screens which illuminates all the pixels in the panel simultaneously. The 55PMA550 also has a prodigious fine detail response. This, together with the black level talent, ensures lots of texture and depth to its images. Remarkably, the impressive fine detail is achieved without generating any serious grain or dot crawl issues either;

the panel driver also suppresses green/grey dot crawl and colour banding.

These achievements are rendered more impressive by the fact that they're achieved on a screen as large as this. However, the sheer size of the screen can catch the 55PMA550 out with low-quality sources. With relatively low bitrate digital broadcasts, for instance, the screen can emphasise the artefacts inherent to the broadcast. Noise in the picture also

increases exponentially with a composite feed. However, if you're careful with your setup, you can keep these source-dependent issues under control.

Finally, it cannot be overstated just how cracking a job the 55PMA550 does with progressive scan DVD or high-definition sources – they look breathtaking. There may have been controversy over the pros and cons of the original, interlaced ALiS panels, but there's no doubt that Hitachi has sidestepped the argument here.

The optional (£250-£300) speakers turn out to be more than mere side dishes to the main picture feast. They've got a wider frequency response than their slender dimensions lead me to expect,

combining a mid-range with the sort of well-rounded treble details that separate the very good from the average. If it's audio tweaks you're after, the 55PMA550 offers a number of presets, plus SRS TruBass, Matrix Surround and an excitingly named Perfect Sound feature, which turns out to be an auto volume leveller.

Conclusion

Hitachi's 55PMA550 is more than just a super-sized plasma at a great price. It's a screen of genuine sophistication, offering a level of picture refinement that's at the top of its game. Actually, I'd venture to say this is Hitachi's best plasma yet, and I'd urge everyone to try and track down a demo. This king-sized set is royalty ■



The AV connections are found at the bottom of the panel



A truly uninspiring remote belies the great aesthetics of the set



The glass-fronted screen may not be original, but it looks great



You can also use the Hitachi panel as a giant PC monitor