

There's never been a better time to buy a **Blu-ray** player, and to help you decide we've brought you a comprehensive run-down on virtually every HD player on the planet...

# Group Test

BLU-RAY PLAYERS £190-£1600

## High-def heaven: Blu-ray players to suit every budget

### What's new?

We're including 15 – yes, fifteen – Blu-ray players in this extensive test. We've pitted our Award-winners at every price point against fresh or price-reduced rivals. New models include two from Pioneer, the BDP-51FD and the BDP-LX08. These sit alongside new entry-level units from Sharp and LG, together with a £1600 high-end player from Denon, the DVD-3800BT.

### What do I get for my money?

All these players offer high-definition 1080p/24fps images and DVD upscaling to the tune of 1080p. They also let you experience high-definition audio formats such as Dolby TrueHD but can vary in the way that they deliver it. Build quality can vary, but the high-end machines are especially sturdy fellows.

**"Build quality can vary, but the high-end machines are especially sturdy fellows"**

### SAVVY SHOPPER

#### 1 System matching

It's important to consider the multichannel amplifier that you're going to be plugging your new Blu-ray player into. If it isn't able to decode HD audio formats onboard you'll need a Blu-ray player to do the job for you.

#### 2 Is profile important?

Not all of these Blu-ray players meet Profile 2.0 standards. Bizarrely, many of the more expensive players are only Profile 1.1. We're yet to see any truly great BD-Live content but Profile 2.0 players can handle the content on certain Blu-ray discs better than others and have their firmware upgraded via their Ethernet port.

#### 3 Don't forget DVD playback

The vast majority of these players are second generation machines and are much improved when it comes to DVD upscaling. Most are extremely competent, but the more expensive models are particularly impressive. Put them to the test.

### RATINGS EXPLAINED

Five stars means a Blu-ray player performs superbly across the board and fully justifies its asking price. A four-star model shouldn't be sniffed at could be a great option for those with certain needs. Three stars is an average unit that might, for instance, be ridiculously cheap. Two and one-star products should be ignored completely.

★★★★★

Excellent

★★★★☆

Very good

★★★☆☆

Average

★★☆☆☆

Below par

★☆☆☆☆

Don't bother



**BD-Live:** A feature found on certain Blu-ray titles that lets you access extra features online. This is done through the Ethernet connection





**BLU-RAY PLAYERS**  
**THE CONTENDERS**



  
**Samsung BD-P1500**  
 £190  
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**Sony BDP-S350**  
 £220  
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**Panasonic DMP-BD35**  
 £220  
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**Sony BDP-S550**  
 £240  
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**Sharp BD-HF21H**  
 £245  
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**LG BD300**  
 £250  
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**Sony PlayStation 3**  
 £300  
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**Panasonic DMP-BD55**  
 £390  
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**Pioneer BDP-51FD**  
 £400  
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**Onkyo DV-BD606**  
 £400  
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**Yamaha BD-S2900**  
 £570  
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**Pioneer BDP-LX71**  
 £600  
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**Pioneer BDP-LX08**  
 £700  
 Page 64

  
**Denon DVD-2500BT**  
 £800  
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**Denon DVD-3800BD**  
 £1600  
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BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Pioneer BDP-LX08



£700

**WE'D HARDLY CALL** Pioneer's '51FD and 'LX71 Blu-ray players aesthetically challenged, but there's no accounting for taste, so the company has a style-oriented player up its sleeve.

**"Hellboy II looks magical on Blu-ray. Black depth and detail are superb"**

The BDP-LX08 is a sleek 4cm thinner (top to bottom) than its siblings. It will combine with a matching home cinema receiver to form a Pioneer BD home cinema system. The player's aluminium top plate and black acrylic front are about as minimalist as you can get. Press 'open' on the aluminium remote control and the front panel drops to reveal a disc drawer and display.

While the player looks different on the outside, however, everything internal is the same as that found under the bonnet of the 'LX71.

**FOR**  
Slim design; class-leading picture and sound performance

**AGAINST**  
Price; only Profile 1.1; no DTS-HD Master Audio decoding upgrade until Feb/March

**VERDICT**  
Its credentials are unquestionable, but the 'LX08's slimline design isn't enough to justify the price premium over Pioneer's cheaper Blu-ray players

The LX08 boasts the same user-friendly GUI (Graphical User Interface). It also features Pioneer's Precision Quartz Lock System (PQLS), designed to deliver jitter-free CD playback over HDMI. You'll need to partner the player with a compatible Pioneer AV receiver (such as the SC-LX81) to access this functionality.

The 'LX08 allows you to access the preset and customisable video settings in Pioneer's Video Adjust menu to help achieve the best picture quality for your display device. It is also equipped with the same high-grade audio and video DACs found in the 'LX71, so you won't be surprised when we say that picture and sound quality are up to the same high standard.

*Hellboy II: The Golden Army* looks magical on Blu-ray. Images

are beautifully clear and three-dimensional. All the bizarre creatures that appear throughout the film look enchanting and life-like. Black depth and detail are nothing short of superb.

Hellboy's attempts to dismantle the Golden Army are met with solid, taut explosions and powerful, direct surround sound effects. The characters' dialogue sounds dramatic and coherent.

Even during CD playback, high frequencies maintain a refined and natural tone – the player's ability to time accurately is a world away from the majority of disc-spinners on display.

However, when you consider Pioneer's very own £400 '51FD is just as good a player, is the slimline design worth the extra cash? We think probably not.



**TECH SPECS**  
OUTPUTS HDMI, optical, component, multichannel analogue, phono  
INPUTS n/a  
DECODES all except DTS-HD Master Audio  
BD PROFILE 1.1  
DIMENSIONS (HWD)  
8x42x36cm  
WEIGHT 6kg

Denon DVD-3800BD



£1600

**FROM THE FRONT,** the '3800BD looks pretty much identical to its cousin, the '2500BT. From the rear, it's clear that this is a different proposition. The HDMI output for sending 1080p/24fps images and HD audio is not alone.

Beside it, there are two sets of component video outputs (one

**"The black depth is sensational and colours are perfectly balanced"**

uses RCA connectors, the other BNC), a set of eight-channel analogue outputs and dedicated stereo outputs for CD playback.

Denon has gone to town in an attempt to raise the bar for sound performance. Inside that heavy-duty chassis you'll find Denon's AL24 processing and high-grade audio DACs. Besides bitstreaming the soundtrack, the '3800BD can decode all HD audio formats and output them, either through the multichannel output or over HDMI.

**FOR**  
Solidly built; scintillating picture quality; sounds dynamic, rhythmic and detailed

**AGAINST**  
Only Profile 1.1; remote could be more intuitive

**VERDICT**  
The '3800BD has raised the Blu-ray benchmark. Currently, this is the pinnacle of high-end Blu-ray playback

The result is that Blu-ray soundtracks have never sounded as detailed, refined or expressive. When Meryl Streep bursts into song with *Mamma Mia!* the Denon brings the musical to life. Differentiation between bass notes is remarkable, as is the solidity of her vocals and the natural sound of the accompanying instruments.

Switch to CD, engage the Pure Direct mode (all video circuitry is turned off) and the '3800BD bowls you over with its accurate timing and rhythmic delivery.

Even greater attention has been paid to the pictures. The player features a 10-bit Realta sXt2 HQV video processor; you can tinker with picture settings and save them in one of five memory presets.

Once again, the Denon steps up to the plate with unbelievably crisp, detailed and well-defined pictures. The machine produces a level of clarity that no other Blu-ray player can currently match. Across both Blu-ray and DVD, black depth is sensational, colours are perfectly balanced and there's a frightening sense of three-dimensionality.

Our only minor gripes are that the Denon is only Profile 1.1 and that the buttons on the remote could be more responsive. These aside, this Denon player is an enthusiast's dream: a breathtaking Blu-ray player capable of a listening experience that impresses even by strict audiophile standards.



**TECH SPECS**  
OUTPUTS HDMI, component, optical, coaxial, phono, multichannel analogue  
INPUTS SD Card  
DECODES All HD audio formats  
BD PROFILE 1.1  
DIMENSIONS (HWD)  
14x43x40cm  
WEIGHT 10.3kg

## Yamaha BD-S2900



£570

**YAMAHA HAS PUNCHED** its way back into the AV mainstream, with a raft of exceptional AV amplifiers. It hopes to repeat that success with the BD-S2900.

Initial impressions are promising. This is a smart, solidly built unit; but it doesn't impress to quite the same degree as the Denons and Pioneers at and around this price point.

Slot in the *Transformers* Blu-ray, and the Yamaha reveals its premium credentials with a clean, stable picture full of vibrant colours and punchy whites. The early chase scene

**FOR**

Good picture quality; capable sonic delivery

**AGAINST**

Only Profile 1.1; can't decode HD audio formats; price can't match performance

**VERDICT**

A solid player from Yamaha but cheaper, more accomplished rivals have the performance edge

also proves that the Yamaha is an excellent handler of motion.

It's a terrific Blu-ray performer, but in comparison to the (around £170 cheaper) Pioneer BDP-51FD it gives a little away in terms of outright detail and sharpness.

It does do a fine job with DVDs, however, casting a detailed and stable image that's a real match for rivals at this price.

The Yamaha sounds weighty, dynamic and detailed in both

stereo and surround, but it doesn't quite have the extra subtlety and expressiveness of the class-leaders. Also, if you're looking for onboard HD audio decoding, the Yamaha is a let-down with neither Dolby TrueHD nor DTS-HD Master Audio catered for.

If you're paying this much for a Blu-ray player, then Blu-ray playback should be better. Cheaper Pioneer machines beat this Yamaha hands down.



**OUTPUTS** HDMI, component, optical, phono, multichannel analogue  
**INPUTS** n/a  
**DECODES** Core DTS/Dolby Digital  
**BD PROFILE** 2.0  
**DIMENSIONS (HWD)** 10x44x32cm  
**WEIGHT** 5.8kg

## Pioneer BDP-LX71



£600

**THIS PIONEER PLAYER** might not be as slimline as its 'LX08 sibling, but it's just as stylish. And the BDP-LX71 is a fully fledged Blu-ray player, coming complete with coaxial, optical and seven-channel analogue outputs and HD audio decoding (though not of DTS-HD Master Audio).

Fed the Blu-ray of *Blood Diamond*, the Pioneer produces an image full of punch, vibrancy and insight. The colour palette is vivid enough to produce lush scenery, while also having to reproduce skin tones with balanced, natural realism.

**FOR**

Superb looks and build quality; rich, refined sound; detailed picture

**AGAINST**

No onboard DTS-HD master Audio decoding; only Profile 1.1; similar performance available for less

**VERDICT**

Lacks the versatility of some rivals but picture and sound quality still excel

Switch to *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* on DVD, and the 'LX71 further impresses by happily contrasting the snowy landscape with the black of the night sky.

The Pioneer is an expressive and subtle performer of sound with both HD audio and CDs. Onboard decoding is very good, but if you have a price-appropriate amp, we'd let that do the job.

DVD playback is also detailed and sharp, but can't quite match

the benchmarks set by the more expensive players on the market. The player's only real problem is self-inflicted: Pioneer has added new players to its range, including one that's £200 cheaper. Video and sound performance are virtually identical and the only major difference is the lack of touch-sensitive buttons on the cheaper model.

If you really want that feature, the 'LX71 remains a fantastic buy.



**OUTPUTS** HDMI, component, optical, coaxial, phono, multichannel analogue  
**DECODES** All except DTS-HD Master Audio  
**BD PROFILE** 1.1  
**DIMENSIONS (HWD)** 12x42x36cm  
**WEIGHT** 5.7kg

## Denon DVD-2500BT



£800

**THE DENON DVD-2500BT** is aimed at dedicated home cinema enthusiasts. It doesn't have any analogue audio outputs, or even coaxial or optical digital sockets.

If you want one, you'll need a multichannel amp or processor that can accept audio signals over HDMI and decode them.

The Denon's premium credentials are immediately apparent. This beast bears little resemblance to the generally slimline players at the budget end of the market. Not only does it benefit from almost bomb-proof build quality, but it's also stylish (in an industrial way), and has a large display panel.

**FOR**

Excellent Blu-ray performance in every regard; excellent DVD playback; classy build quality

**AGAINST**

Only a transport, so it won't be for everyone; only Profile 1.1

**VERDICT**

A great way to watch Blu-ray discs and DVDs -- a great home entertainer

Thrown a copy of *The Happening* on Blu-ray, the '2500BT delivers amazingly natural colours, razor-sharp edge definition and silky-smooth motion. It excels in detail, and that lends an extra degree of three-dimensionality to pictures. When action moves to gloomier indoor scenes, it produces great blacks and low-light insight.

It also upscales standard-def DVDs to 1080p in scintillating style, with *Training Day* appearing as sharp, detailed and vibrant

as we're used to from the very best standalone DVD players.

These superb pictures are complemented by an exceptional sonic delivery. The Denon produces a robust, detailed, dynamic sound whether you're listening to a HD audio soundtrack or a simple CD.

As long as your kit can handle the audio decoding, this Blu-ray player is one of the finest models on the market -- it really can transport your disc collection to another level.



**OUTPUTS** HDMI, component, optical, phono, multichannel analogue  
**INPUTS** SD Card  
**DECODES** n/a  
**BD PROFILE** 1.1  
**DIMENSIONS (HWD)** 14x43x29cm  
**WEIGHT** 9.4kg

TEST  
RESULT

Our giant *Group Test* comes to an end with **Pioneer** and **Denon** players finally taking the plaudits in a truly tough contest

## BEST BLU-RAY PLAYER UNDER £500

**SKIP OVER THE** average offerings from LG, Sharp, Samsung and Onkyo and you still find yourself spoiled for choice. Sony's 'S350 and 'S550 are stylish players and fantastic value for money. This easily cements their five-star status. The Panasonic 'BD35 and 'BD55 are more expensive than their Sony counterparts, but they are superior machines and worth the extra. In reality, you can't go wrong with any of these machines. However, the stand-out player is the Pioneer BDP-51FD. Picture and sound quality is on a par with the Pioneer 'LX71 – and it's £200 cheaper. That's a fair few movies...



## TELEVISION

**SONY KDL-40W4500** ★★★★★ £910  
An Award-winning 40in LCD TV that looks sensationally sharp and detailed, especially with Blu-ray images

## MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIER

**YAMAHA RX-V1900** ★★★★★ £1000  
A real gem that sounds solid, dynamic and steers surround effects with accurate ease

## SPEAKER PACKAGE

**B&W 685 THEATRE 1** ★★★★★ £1206  
Crank up the Yamaha and let this powerful, exciting speaker package entertain you

## Pioneer BDP-51FD



£400



## Denon DV-2500BT



£800



## BEST PLAYER OVER £500

**IT WAS** always going to take a mammoth effort by the other players in this group to beat the Denon DV-2500BT. Ironically, it is the more expensive Denon that comes closest to toppling it. There's no doubt the '3800BD sounds better and produces a superior picture. The only reason that it misses out on being crowned best on test is that the 100 per cent price premium is just too hard to justify.

The Pioneer players walk away with four stars mainly because the cheaper '51FD is now on the scene. Build quality and styling might be better on the pricier machines, but we'd rather save the cash.



## TELEVISION

**PIONEER KRP-500A** ★★★★★ £2800  
Sensational plasma TV that comes with its own external 'media receiver'

## MULTICHANNEL AMPLIFIER

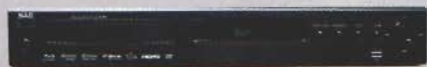
**PIONEER SC-LX81** ★★★★★ £1500  
This powerful amplifier pulls no punches with its detailed, dynamic and agile sound

## SPEAKER PACKAGE:

**DALIKON 6 5.1 PACKAGE**

★★★★★ £2235  
The perfect complement for the SC-LX81, the Dalis impress with their sheer sense of scale and deep, precise, bass deployment

## OUT THIS MONTH...



NAD T587 £860

NAD's debut Blu-ray player is Profile 2.0 and can decode HD audio onboard and output as LPCM over HDMI. It does, however, lack multichannel analogue outputs.



PIONEER BDP-LX91 £1700

Pioneer's flagship player includes dual HDMI outputs, BD-Live functionality, and individual DACs for each channel of its eight-channel analogue outputs.



SONY BDP-S5000ES £1200

Sony's player includes a new chassis design, eight-channel analogue outputs and onboard decoding for all HD audio formats. Read more at [www.whathifi.com](http://www.whathifi.com).

**BLU-RAY PROFILES** Blu-ray players have evolved over the months; each iteration of player firmware improves speed of operation (particularly disc-loading times) and access to interactive features. The latest firmware version is Profile 2.0; a Profile 1.1 design will play discs, but may be clunkier to use.

**FRAME RATE:** Blu-ray pictures are stored at 24 frames per second (fps). Your TV must be able to handle this to keep motion natural.

**HDMI** High-quality digital connection for taking video and audio signal from a compatible source.

**24FPS** Film is shot at 24fps (frames per second of picture), and is played back in cinemas at the same rate. Video, on the other hand, is shot and played back at either 25fps (UK) or 30fps (USA and Japan). So film has to be converted

to 25fps or 30fps for transfer to DVD, which can be done either by speeding up the footage (25fps), or repeating some frames (30fps). On Blu-ray, video is stored at its native 24fps rate, ensuring a more film-like experience. TVs that can't display 24fps convert the signal to another format (usually 30fps), which can result in motion problems.

**BD-LIVE** A Blu-ray feature that lets you access extra features online. Through your Blu-ray disc menu – and Ethernet connection – you can check out additional features, such as games and bonus film extras online. Profile 1.1 software on some BD players is a little slow-moving with this 'Java' content, but the latest version, Profile 2.0, speeds everything up nicely – so if your player is a firmware-upgradeable model, it's well worth updating.