

have realised this, and throughout this test you'll see devices specifically designed for a particular use and performing other tasks as well—sort of like a jack of all trades and master of one.

FLASH-BASED PMPs BELOW RS 5,000

Sure, PMPs scale with price, and you get exactly what you pay for, but not everybody wants a high-end PMP with excellent performance and features to boot. That doesn't mean that a value-based player has to be a compromise. *Au contraire*, sub-Rs 5,000 players have a host of features that were previously available only on much costlier models. Part of the diminishing cost is due to the sharply declining prices of flash memory—prices have dropped to quarter of their values a year ago. Equally to blame is the increasing popularity of PMPs—nothing mysterious, just the simple laws of economics at work. So, you can get a very good sounding PMP, with features like FM radio, text document support, and basic add-on features like an alarm, stopwatch, and even PIM features like contact management.

Features

Of all the players we received, the concept of a watch that's an MP3 player as well was somewhat exciting. The Aigo U Watch MP3



Apacer Stone AU351
Performance at extreme value

is a nice little item—cool and funky-looking with all the settings of a good MP3 player, including an equaliser. It loses out on FM support, and of course, video playback isn't possible. It's also let down by an un-intuitive and painful menu system, and the fact that you'll have a cord dangling from your wrist doesn't help any. Transcend's T.Sonic 840 comes in a piano white facia with a solid steel back that is (thankfully) not chrome plated, but matte—no smudges! It's a full-fledged multimedia player with music, photo and video capabilities, and has a pretty good screen to boot. The buttons seem a little tacky, but not as bad as some of the other players. iRiver's S7 is another cool looking player—its front surface looks like a magic cube with indented intersecting grooves built into it. The S7 is meant to be worn around your neck—and it's certainly attractive enough. YES had four players in this comparison—and all their players in this category have been in our labs last year. Creative's Zen Stone and Zen Stone Plus are very compact looking players shaped like pebbles—the difference being the screen on the Plus.

The Sansa Shaker was another novelty—it looks like a salt cellar (hence the name), and

although it isn't feature-rich it's good for kids, owing to its tough body. Apacer's AU581 sports a grey metal finish that is dominated by crisp blue OLED. Zebronic's had the smallest screens in test—both the Beta and the Gamma are compact, solidly built, and sport small screens. Zebronic's Gamma has a very nice feature where the screen fades in if the player is on and then un-paused, so your ears don't get blasted. The Sansa Duo—the NWD-B103F and B105F—are designed to look like large flash drives, and they have the no hassle of a USB cable—just plug the player into a USB port. Needless to say, the Sansa are built really well, and their plastic bodies. The Sansa white finish is bright, and being overly flashy. A Sansa pen-drive-like player, the Sansa Express and the Sansa Express and Transcend T.Sonic 840 have well laid-out menus—the Sansa is very simple and uncluttered—a boon when dealing with a small screen—while the Sansa 840 scores on usability with its much larger screen and

How We Tested

We divided our PMPs into two categories:

- 1. Flash-based
- 2. Hard Drive-based

We further divided the flash category into price based segments:

- 1. Flash-based players up to Rs 5,000
- 2. Flash-based players from Rs 5,001 to Rs 10,000
- 3. Flash-based players above Rs 10,000

For a look at the features we graded, turn over to our tables. For performance, we tested the audio and video performance of each player. Audio performance has been given greater weightage, simply because this is more of a priority for most people.

On the video front, we judged each player's display quality in general for multimedia content.

Alongside is a list of the audio tracks used and what we looked at in each track.

Good music requires equally good gear, and the bundled earplugs aren't any good if one is to make a comparison. We used a pair of supra-aural Grado SR60s, a

Tracks	What We Looked At
Eagles—Hotel California	The lead guitar in the beginning, drum bass, male vocals. There are a couple of places where minor nuances like the the artists hand movement along the guitar body can be heard, something we looked out for
The Corrs—Brid og ni Mhaille	Very good track for female vocals. Voice timbre, accurate tonal balance and vocal texture is of utmost importance. Accompanying instruments are mostly higher frequencies, soundstaging is also important
Charlotte Church—Bridge over Troubled Water	Strong female vocals. Charlotte Church has a lot of depth to her voice and can take low and high octaves equally well
Pink Floyd—Speak to Me / Breathe	Sensitivity to low volume sounds, soundstaging, and accurate reproduction of electronically produced sounds
Dire Straits—Sultans of Swing	Guitar work is exemplary here. We look for clarity, and detailing around the 500 Hz mark (guitar frequency)
Guns N' Roses—November Rain (Live)	Fast drum attack, good array of instruments, lots of guitar fill-in
Eric Clapton—Layla	Male Vocals, and a lot of intricate guitar work make this one of the best blues songs to check for music quality
Chand Sifarish (Fanaa)	Good vocals, and a super hit song, drum and tabla accompaniment make for a melodious number with a lot of nuances to pick up
Beedi (Omkar)	Female vocals, and a fast number, gives us a good idea of how the player will perform on most indipop albums

circum-aural Audio Technica ATH A900, and Bose's Intra Ear earplugs for our testing purposes. These headphones allowed us to listen to the finer nuances of each track. Each song was rated on a

scale of 1 to 10, taking an average of performance on each headphone. As a result, we tested each PMP with their bundled earplugs and rated their earplugs against the trio of reference cans.