

PIONEER DVR-720H ♦ £750 (APPROX) ♦ 01735 789 500 ♦ www.pioneer.co.uk

Hard-disk heaven



A cutting-edge DVD recorder and 160GB hard-disk drive in this skinny puppy? Jim Hill lifts the lid on Pioneer's new flagship recorder

Pioneer has a penchant for unfeasibly skinny DVD players and more experience than most in DVD recorder manufacturing, but this time its engineers have excelled themselves with a masterpiece of miniaturisation. The DVR-720 is the slimmest and, until recently, highest capacity DVD/HDD recorder in the UK.

The DVR-720 sits at the top of Pioneer's DVD recorder range, but it's only the capacity of the hard-disk and presence of i.Link that pegs it above the £600 DVR-520.

Remarkably, this slim Jim rolls a massive 160GB hard-drive, a sophisticated DVD recorder, and an analogue TV tuner into just 59mm of height. This means you can record TV continuously for 204hrs – that's over a week dude! However, technology moves swiftly on and recorder manufacturers are playing a numbers game with HDD capacity. Turn to the Panasonic news story on page 9 to find out why Pioneer's claim of 'highest recording capacity ever' was so short lived.

Well connected

Some of the Pioneer's other attributes are possibly more useful. The addition of an RGB Scart input means you can record digital TV (remember the internal tuner is merely analogue) from a Freeview or Sky box at its highest quality. Previous models were limited to S-video. The i.Link socket, unusually, is a two-way interface, which means you can record both from and on to a digital camera



RATINGS

Highs: High capacity hard-disk; lots of editing features; excellent recording quality via Scart
Lows: Complicated OSD; no component video output

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

digitally. Given the Pioneer's depth of on-board editing features, this could be quite an attractive USP.

The recorder section burns on to DVD-R and DVD-RW, the 'official' recording format of the DVD consortium. Blanks are marginally cheaper and more widely compatible than DVD+R/RW and DVD-RAM media, so this is a good thing, although it doesn't have the advantage of double-sided DVD-RAM or dual-layer DVD+R. Familiar VCR features like VideoPlus and T-V Link are available alongside the digital-only features such as chasing playback. This is like Panasonic's Timeslip and allows you to record and play simultaneously. The difference is that you can fast-forward the recording you are watching right up to the 'live' point. There are also four recording modes that vary the amount of compression applied to extend recording capacity.

Pioneer drives rarely have trouble reading the latest formats and as you'll see from the compatibility table, the

DVR-720 checks all the boxes including MP3 and WMA audio files, and JPEG picture files. We have yet to see a recorder that can also play DVD-Audio and SACD media though.

The only other things the Pioneer can't do is output a progressive scan signal – there are no component video outputs – and output a digital video signal. Given that the company's DVD players and plasma displays are all HDMI equipped, this is bit disappointing. No doubt the next generation will catch up.

Setup breeze

Setting up the DVR-720 is simplified by the auto install feature, which searches for all TV channels and sets the internal clock from Teletext. The onscreen menus are comprehensive and configure

LAB REPORT

PLAYBACK

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Video jitter (5ns)		✓		
Signal-to-noise ratio: Composite (-71.9dB)		✓		
S-video (-75.9dB)	✓			
Chroma AM/PM:				
AM (-75.5dB)	✓			
PM (-71.1dB)	✓			
Chroma crosstalk (-55.1dB)		✓		
Freq response @5.8MHz:				
Composite (-0.62dB)	✓			
S-video (-0.65dB)	✓			
RECORDING				
Chroma (SP)				
AM (-56.6dB)	✓			
PM (-57.7dB)	✓			
Frequency response@4MHz				
Fine (-0.8dB)	✓			
SP (-0.91dB)	✓			
Frequency response@2MHz				
LP (-0.6dB)		✓		
EP (-0.5dB)		✓		

DISC COMPATIBILITY

DVD-V	●	Video CD	●
DVD-A	●	Super Video CD	●
SACD	●	DivX/MPEG-4	●
CD	●	DVD+R	●
MP3	●	DVD-R	●
WMA	●	DVD+RW	●
JPEG	●	DVD-RW (Video)	●
CD-R	●	DVD-RW (VR)	●
CD-RW	●	DVD-RAM	●

FEATURES

Specifications: 160GB hard-disk drive; DVD-R/RW recording; Nicam TV tuner; 32-event/one-month timer with VideoPlus/PDC, OTR, easy timer; T-V Link; four record modes (1-6hrs) and 32 MN (manual) steps; two channel 256Kbps Dolby Digital Audio recording (linear PCM for Fine); input video adjustments; auto audio record levels; bi-directional i.Link; record protection; auto 10 or 15min chapter marking; high-speed copy; one-touch copy; disc back-up; playlist editing; satellite control; chasing playback; 30-disc history; commercial skip; MP3/WMA/JPEG playback; multibrand TV remote

Connections: RGB Scart in; two S-video in; two composite video in; i.Link in; analogue stereo in; RGB Scart out; S-video out; composite video out; i.Link out; optical digital audio out

Dimensions: 420(w) x 59(h) x 339(d)mm
Weight: 4.2kg



Pioneer has crammed a lot of technology into its new recorder

'You can record television continually for 204 hours - that's over a week'

language, TV standard, DVD-RW formatting (the default is the editable VR mode) and picture and audio settings. This is done by the daunting-looking remote control, but don't worry, the remote is your friend. It's logical and well-labelled.

The disc navigator menu for accessing your own HDD and DVD recordings is particularly well executed. It lets you divide and organise your recordings into animated thumbnails complete with audio that rolls as soon as you click on them.

VR mode on DVD-RW and HDD uses a non-destructive editing system, which means you can divide, move and merge recordings like a MiniDisc without deleting anything. An undo function lets you literally undo the last edit. You can

also label each chapter using a virtual keyboard. In video mode, the editing suite is limited to erasing and titling.

It's just as well the editing and labelling of the hard drive is so flexible, given its capacity. What's even better is the speed at which you can dump recordings from HDD to DVD - a hair-parting 48x faster than real time. Recording the other way - DVD to HDD - can only be done in real time with non-copy protected discs.

The RGB Scart input is key to Pioneer's performance success. Every set-top box worth its salt can output an RGB signal via Scart and I found recordings made from Freeview channels almost indistinguishable from the live broadcast (which was not that great to begin with). But equally, it means that when you are

not recording, the Pioneer is passing an RGB signal from set-top to TV without degrading it to S-video on the way.

Recording from the internal analogue TV tuner means you can make use of the 32-event timer with PDC and VideoPlus. If you don't have those codes to hand, you can make use of the easy-timer with its innovative time-line programming. Depending on your signal, however, the results are always going to be grainier than a digital broadcast.

Recording in Fine or SP modes gives you the best results, while LP mode drops the resolution to 352 x 576, which is on a par with VHS. EP mode is spreading things a bit thin, but is still surprisingly watchable.

With regular DVD playback, the RGB Scart is your best bet in the absence of component connections. Picture quality is crisp and vivid with bold colours and strong contrast. On the audio side, there's an optical digital connection for feeding Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks to a digital amplifier. Sadly, there is still no standard for a digital audio input and

therefore no way of copying Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtracks.

Conclusion

For a component that stands less than 6cm high, the DVR-720 achieves a lot. The wealth of editing features gives you plenty of archiving flexibility in an easy-to-understand way, while the i.Link input makes all this available to digital camcorder users too. Due to the RGB Scart input, you get to make great quality recordings with adequate playback performance.

A component video output would have been nice and an HDMI output even better, but until digital Freeview tuners become available on DVD recorders, there's nothing else that's missing. And the 160GB hard-disk should be enough for any TV addict. The only shadow over the DVR-720 is cast by its newest challenger, the Panasonic DMR-E500, which on paper looks like it will give the Pioneer a run for its money. As the recorder market heats up, so too does the competition ■



Concealed front AV inputs include S-video for camcorders



The remote looks complex, but it's actually very logical



You can record on to the HDD or directly on to DVD



At 59mm high, the Pioneer is remarkably compact