

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

Dave Pollard drowns, drops and dissects six of the toughest torches on the market and still they keep shining

BEST FOR BRIGHTNESS
LED LENSER POLICE TECH FOCUS £36.95



This model of LED Lenser is a favourite with police forces, and we can see why. At just over 5in in length, it sits well in the hand, and it doesn't lack for power. Despite having just one LED, it produced a wide and solid white flood beam; turning the head of the torch converted this to a long-reaching spot, just about matching the much bigger and heavier Mag-lite. The aluminium casing was stylish and tough, with a good grip. The end-mounted on/off switch is a matter of taste but the pouch was a nice touch.

VERDICT: Hello, hello, hello — there's no hiding place from this torch
www.ledlenser.co.uk



BEST FOR WEIGHT
PRINCETON TEC GENESIS £72.45

The aluminium body of the Genesis was so light, we had to check the specification to make sure it really was made from metal and not some new ultra-light material. The design was good, with a comfortable rubberised centre section for grip. It included three coloured lenses — red and green for night-time use and blue (for "following a blood trail"). Despite twin lithium batteries, we found the light performance a bit anaemic compared with, say, the Lenser, and it only had a simple flood beam with no spot option.

VERDICT: Tough and lightweight, but lacking a little in luminescence
www.princetonotec.com



BEST FOR FLEXIBILITY
RING CYBA-LITE N16 XENON £29.39

The rechargeable Cyba-lite includes a nickel-cadmium battery pack, giving plenty of power but making it fairly weighty at 10oz. Although not quite Mag-lite quality, the aluminium case shrugged off our rain shower and was well designed, providing plenty of grip. Six LEDs produced impressive solid flood beams but, uniquely here, for even longer distances it switched to a conventional xenon bulb. Very impressive performance and not expensive either.

VERDICT: A smart mix of LED and bulb technology, and no need to buy batteries
www.ringautomotive.co.uk



BEST FOR BATTERY USE
GERBER OMNIVORE £29.99

At 4.5in this is one of the smaller torches from Gerber. It stood up to our water and drop tests, but the smooth body proved slippery to hold when wet. Its best feature is its ability to take a range of batteries: AA (supplied), AAA or CR123 lithium — the last giving much better performance. Although just 0.7W in power, the single LED spot beam (no flood option) was reasonable in the 60-90ft range, but the reflector produced curious concentric rings around its edges.

VERDICT: The versatility with batteries is smart, but it's best as an indoor torch
www.gerbertools.com



BEST ALL-ROUNDER
INOVA 24/7 £29.95



Billed as the flashlight equivalent of a Swiss Army knife, the multitasking Inova cuts a distinctive shape: a 3in x 2in rectangle with a hexagonal beam selector and no shortage of beam choice. There's low-power and high-power white, plus a red beam (to prevent spots in front of the eyes), then four emergency flashing patterns, including a three-colour distress strobe that wouldn't look out of place in a disco. For the smallest and lightest torch here (it weighs just 2.9oz), performance was very good — it easily extended to 70ft on full beam — but it's the Inova's versatility that really impresses: it can be clipped onto a coat for hands-free usage on the move, fitted to a permanent bracket (for use in a garage or shed), onto a magnetic bracket or onto a headband for close-up work.

VERDICT: Not the most attractive of the torches here but it adapts to many situations and masters most of them
www.inovalight.com



BEST FOR TOUGH USE
MAG-LITE 2D 3W LED £35.99

Mag-lite's flashlights are legendary and seen in almost every American cop show. Made from aircraft-grade aluminium alloy, this model uses two D-cell batteries (not supplied). It's a substantial piece of kit (10in long and weighing 1.5lb), and the LED module can be swapped with a bulb. Although spot performance was excellent, the flood was marred by strange patterns and shadows, suggesting the opposition has leapfrogged it in development.

VERDICT: A magical name and build quality, but needs to come up to date
www.maglite.com



TORCH TESTS

Our tests: All our torches claimed to be at least water resistant, so we gave them a 30-second shower to simulate a heavy downpour — the sort of conditions in which you'll inevitably have to change a flat tyre.

In addition, we dropped them from a height of 3ft onto a hard floor to see how they stood up to some typical rough and tumble. All shone through, which meant we could then evaluate their beam performance, build quality and availability of accessories, such as a pouch and belt clip.

Other features to look for are:

Batteries: Some run on conventional alkaline batteries (or rechargeables), but the best are those that use lithium batteries — smaller but more powerful, particularly when cold.

Beams: "Flood" gives a wide-angle beam, which is bright close to the user but fades rapidly over distance; "spot" narrows the beam but travels further — choose which best suits your needs. Some torches have the facility to turn from one beam to the other.

Bulbs: Old-fashioned glass bulbs have been largely superseded by LEDs — they're almost impossible to break and produce lots more pure white light for a lot less power, which means batteries last much longer.

Prices shown are the best found online

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E-MAIL FROM AMERICA

Mark Harris
IN SEATTLE — NEW TECH CITY

I can get a deep-fried Twinkie delivered to my front door in 20 minutes. I can start a class-action lawsuit against trans-fat makers from the comfort of my sofa, then get my tummy tucked before lunch. In a land where instant gratification is practically part of the constitution, the transition to digital television was never going to be a drawn-out process, which is why the entire country is hurtling towards an

all-or-nothing switchover on February 17 next year. Overnight, traditional TV signals will be turned off, leaving any American without a digital receiver staring at a blank screen.

Just to remind you, the point of digital switchover is to improve broadcast quality and to free up bandwidth, which can be used for new services. The federal government is approaching the day with all the subtlety of a military campaign. There are big ads and flashy websites, of course, and a sensible law has ensured that every new TV sold since March 2007 is digital-ready. Perhaps most remarkably, viewers are being paid to watch TV. Every household can apply for up to two \$40 (£20) vouchers towards the cost of digital set-top boxes.

Compare that with the British digital switchover, which is happening at the pace of a cricket Test match — including breaks for tea. There hasn't been as much as a penny from the Treasury to help people buy new

equipment, while the publicly funded BBC has blown £200m on an ad campaign so incomprehensible that half the TV sets sold in the UK last year weren't digital-ready.

It makes you wonder how the Americans, with a disparate and fragmented broadcasting system, can get their act together while in Britain, with a public broadcasting behemoth, things move at a glacial pace.

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GADGETS OF THE WEEK

Ferrari FFX pedal kart
£1,239 www.bergtoys.co.uk

WHAT IS IT? A pedal-powered go-kart modelled on Ferrari's limited-edition FFX race car, thankfully without the latter's £1.3m price tag. This is no string and soapbox affair; instead, watch as your offspring strap into the race-style bucket seat, grip the leather-look steering wheel, change smoothly through the seven gears and monitor top speed and lap times on the dashboard computer. Disc brakes, semi-slick 12in racing tyres and aerodynamic side skirts complete the package.



SHOULD I BUY ONE?

Go-karting is the training ground for future Formula One champions, so if you want to give your children the best possible start before they graduate to powered karts, look no further.

Sony Bravia E4000 series
From £650 www.sony.co.uk

WHAT IS IT? Hanging a flatscreen TV on the wall means dispensing with a bulky stand and freeing valuable lounge space, but the disadvantage is that when it's not in use you're left with a black hole on the wall that often seems to suck up the light. Sony's E4000 series of LCD TVs, out this month, earn their keep even after you've finished watching by acting as giant digital picture frames. Available in a choice of four living-room friendly finishes and in 26in, 32in and 40in screen sizes, they will display either your own images from a USB memory stick or one of six pre-programmed works of art, such as this Van Gogh, in high-definition glory — in the case of the two largest screen sizes, top-of-the-range 1080p resolution. Like the rest of Sony's Bravia range, the build quality and specs are top-notch, including three HDMI inputs and both analogue and digital tuners built in.



SHOULD I BUY ONE? Not if you're a tree-hugger. Sony claims its "picture frame mode" consumes only 35% of the energy of normal TV use, but that's still 35% more than turning it off.
Matthew Bingham