

PICTURE PERFECT

George Hinton tests a selection of products designed to help you receive the best television pictures possible while you're on tour

When you arrive at your holiday CL you want to set up your television, but have no idea in which direction the nearest transmitter sits. You need a signal strength meter, or, increasingly often as we switch to digital television, a satellite finder. We tested a variety of readily-available meters using both an installed through-roof Status 530/5 directional antenna with booster in a motor caravan and a Maxview MXLo22/DVBT digital tourer high-gain TV aerial.

1. VISION PLUS TV SIGNAL FINDER

GOOD RESULTS

A 9V battery is included, as well as an F-to-coax adaptor with this unit. There is also a socket to accept a 3.5mm jack plug from a 5-12V DC transformer. Usage is the same as for the other LED types and using our touring aerial, it would illuminate up to two of its green LEDs over an arc of 30°, allowing us to easily pinpoint the precise direction of the transmitter. As with the Labgear unit, there seems no reason why this should not be permanently installed in line, as it has its own on/off switch.

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £16
Type: LED
Signal range: 50-90dB/μV
Supplier: Leisurepower
Contact: 01925 234888; leisurepower.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY: Andy Parkington at Radius

2. NIKKAI A55HJ

SIMPLE DESIGN

This is a simple design, powered either by the external 9V battery and adaptor supplied, or from an external power supply from a DVB-T receiver. Like most of these meters, it has threaded F-connectors, so if your aerial has a co-axial plug you will need an adaptor (Maplin part number QP41U). Up to four green LEDs can illuminate to show received signal strength in 10dB steps from 60-90dB/μV. If you are close to a transmitter, 90dB/μV might be too strong and you would need to put an attenuator in line to moderate the signal. That is probably the case where we did our testing, within 10 miles of the Crystal Palace transmitter. However, it was easy to establish where the signal was strongest. From a different location with a conventional pole-mounted touring aerial we got two LEDs to illuminate, and over an arc of 30°, which still made it easy to pinpoint the strongest signal. There is no on/off switch – it powers up when you plug the battery in.

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £14.99
Type: LED
Signal range: 60-90dB/μV
Supplier: Maplin Electronics
Contact: 0844 557 6000; maplin.co.uk

3. MAXVIEW MXLo13

SENSITIVE LED

This four-LED type meter with internal battery compartment (9V battery supplied) also has a built-in attenuator to allow more precise alignment. The fifth LED is a red one to simply indicate 'power on'. Two F-type to co-axial adaptors are included, and the unit can be left permanently in line to a fixed aerial if desired (not outdoors), using heavy-duty self-adhesive 3M Velcro (supplied). To use, swing your aerial to illuminate as many blue LEDs as possible, then turn down the attenuator until the last LED just goes out. Then swing the aerial a small amount to see if you can get the LED to re-light – this will be the strongest signal reception position. This is almost as accurate as the analogue meter. Need a touring aerial? Maxview packages this signal finder with its MXLo22/DVBT digital tourer high-gain TV aerial for £45.99 (mast extra).

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £19.95
Type: LED
Signal range: 60-90dB/μV
Supplier: Maxview Electronics
Contact: 01533 813300; maxview.ltd.uk

4. FRINGE PRO TV & SAT FINDER

HIGH TECH

This costs a bit more but does more, being compatible with both digital and analogue TV and satellite dishes. It has a co-axial socket for your aerial and two F-sockets for satellite receiver and dish connections. Twelve red LEDs give an accurate indication of signal strength and there's also an audio function – a sound rises in pitch with signal strength. An internal 9V battery is included, and a green LED shows when it is switched on. This is easily the most sensitive LED meter, with an arc of less than 10° around the peak signal. If you have a dish to set up it has a connecting lead and adaptors. Fringe also offers a simpler UHF finder at under £30 and a high-sensitivity finder at £34.50. This was the only British-made unit of those tested.

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £39.95
Type: LED
Signal range: 60-90dB/μV
Supplier: Fringe Electronics
Contact: 01623 643802; fringeelectronics.co.uk

5. LABGEAR DVB-T FINDER 27866R

GOOD VALUE

At this very competitive price you can hardly complain that a 9V battery is not included. You do get an F-to-coax adaptor, and you won't need a battery if you happen to have a 5-12V DC transformer, as there is a socket to accept a 3.5mm jack plug from one. Usage is the same as for the other LED types, but sensitivity is slightly different. The arc for our known strongest transmitter was approximately 50°, with two green LEDs illuminated. This was a little looser than some others, but still enabled a reasonable pinpointing of transmitter direction. There is also a manufacturer's local rate telephone helpline and website. As it has its own on/off switch there seems no reason why this should not be permanently installed in line, but you would have to make your own mounting arrangements.

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £9.20
Type: LED
Signal range: 50-90dB/μV
Supplier: TLC Electronics
Contact: 01293 565630; tlc-direct.co.uk



NEXT MONTH WE LOOK AT A SELECTION OF WALKIE TALKIES

6. NIKKAI A55JB

MOST ACCURATE

This is more sophisticated than its LED sister. It has the same power requirement, but when turned on the dial illuminates and the needle moves up one notch to 'on'. You set the dB attenuator dial so that the needle is mid-scale, then adjust your aerial to get the needle as high as possible. Above mid-scale the meter begins to emit a high-pitched whistle, so you can adjust the aerial by ear. Optimum picture quality will be when the needle is at the top of the scale with the noise (dBu) level set between 0 and 2. If you have a TV reception booster fitted, as many caravans and motor caravans do today, you will have to disconnect it while seeking the best signal. It's slightly more complex to use than the LED-type meters, but gave a far more accurate result.

AT A GLANCE
RRP: £19.99
Type: analogue
Signal range: 70-80dB/μV
Supplier: Maplin Electronics
Contact: 0844 557 6000; maplin.co.uk