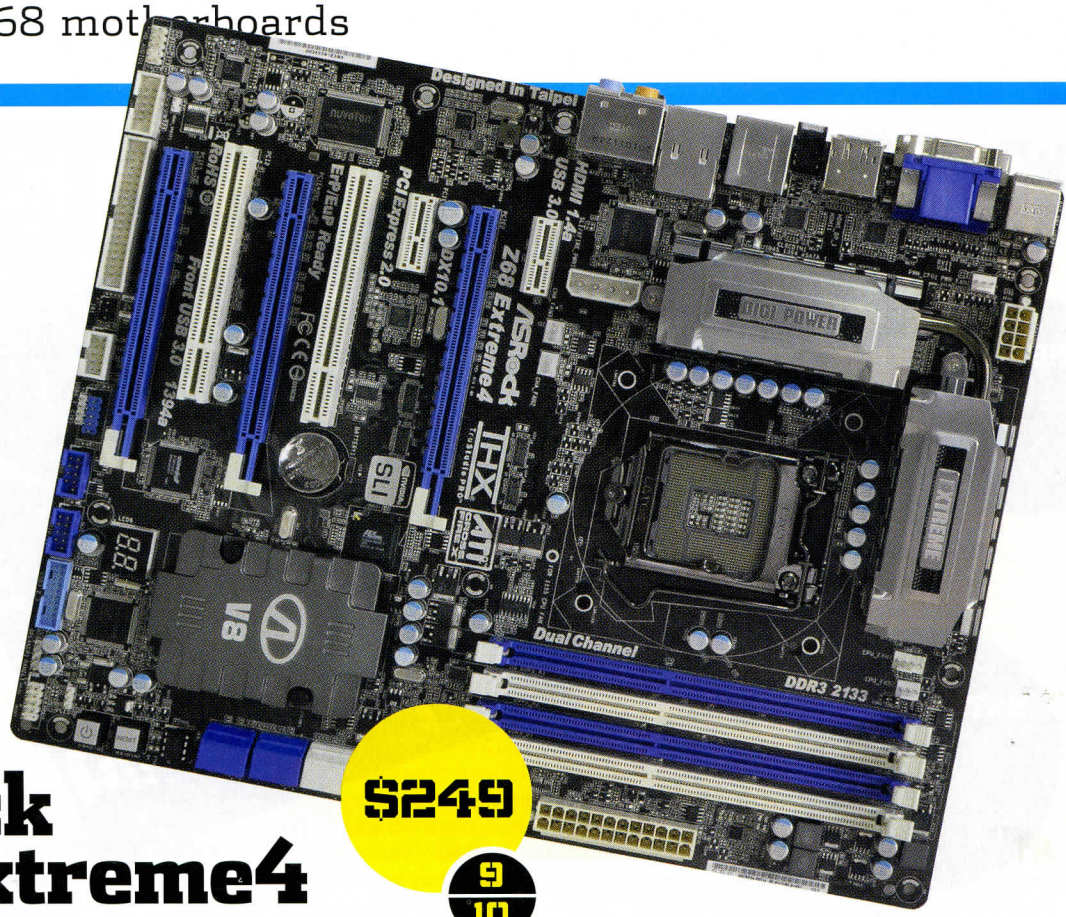
- D-SUB, DVI-D, HDMI AND DISPLAYPORT
- 4 X USB 3.0, 4 X USB 2.0, 4 X SATA 6GB/S, 4 X SATA 3GB/S, 1 X ESATA 3GB/S



APC MAGAZINE apc EDITOR'S CHOICE

$249

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ASRock Z68 Extreme4

This up and comer has it all

@ www.asrock.com ✔ Feature-packed; excellent price. ✖ Windows software lacklustre.

ASRock might not be quite as well known as GIGABYTE and MSI, but over the last year its budget-priced offerings have proved to be extremely popular with the enthusiast crowd. This niche is hard to please, but ASRock's blend of high performance at an affordable cost has established its boards as great entry-level overclocking platforms.

Despite the Z68 chipset running relatively cool, ASRock has added more cooling. The heatsinks around the socket are so high they make it tricky to access the top-left screw when mounting a CPU heatsink. A nice touch is the addition of HSF holes for older Socket 1156 coolers, along with the usual Socket 1155 mounts. As with all Z68 boards, the main chipset heatsink is passive, ensuring silence. The usual range of SATA cables and power adaptors are included, but the 2 x USB 3.0 ports on a 3.5in bay adaptor are most welcome.

This board's stand-out feature is the addition of a PLX PEX 8608 chip, delivering a PCI-E bridge, which allows many features to remain active at once – five onboard interface controllers combined with two PCI-E x1 slots use half the Z68's PCI-E 2.0 lanes, with the other half directed to a single PCI-E x16 slot. Installing dual video cards for SLI or CrossFire support sees the two graphics PCI-E lanes drop to x8 speed, while adding a third sees the final slot drop to x4 speed. Filling the final slot doesn't necessitate the disabling of other features.

USB 3.0 is provided via dual Etron controllers, while a Marvell controller delivers additional SATA/eSATA at 6Gb/s, which provides a very healthy performance boost to SSDs, even if they're running at just 3Gb/s. Onboard power and reset switches are handy for out-of-case testing, while a Port 80 LED allows easy failure diagnosis. The BIOS IC is removable should you corrupt the BIOS during flashing. Tweakers will appreciate the CMOS button on the I/O port, removing the need to fiddle with jumpers.

Those familiar with the blue BIOS screens of old will find the new UEFI BIOS a delight to work with. Replacing the plain text driven interface with a GUI that can be navigated by mouse, it makes BIOS tweaking a breeze. Unlike other mouse-driven BIOS GUIs, this one only requires a single mouse click to activate each option, rather than a double-click. One-touch overclocking is available from here, and we found it worked perfectly with our i5-2500k, hitting a stable 4.6GHz without the need to fiddle with any confusing settings. If you'd rather do it manually, this BIOS has all the necessary options, even providing the ability to overclock the 2nd gen Core 2's integrated GPU separately.

Lucid Virtu support is also included, allowing the use of the CPU's integrated GPU for all video decoding while a discrete video card is also installed. A Realtek ALC892 audio chip delivers 7.1 HD audio, which can be configured using the THX TruStudio Pro software. Unfortunately the Windows overclocking interface is limited compared to the competition. Balancing this out is the inclusion of ASRock's proprietary Xfast USB software, which can double USB performance, including USB 3.0.

We expected an extremely high price tag, but at this price we can see why this up-and-coming brand is proving so popular.

Bennett Ring