Satellite & Digital TV ★GOLD★

FERGUSON ARIVA 202E

This new single-tuner HD receiver gets a warm welcome not only because of its retro brand name

FERGUSON IS BACK – albeit in name alone. An enterprising Polish company has acquired the iconic British brand to badge a range of Far Eastern equipment for sale in Europe. This includes AV receivers, speaker systems, mini audio, disc players and digital receivers covering all audio visual platforms.

Of the latter, one of the most interesting is the Ariva 202e. The spec of this single tuner USB satellite PVR is impressive for the price. It's HD-compatible, boasts conditional access hardware, will access some online content and includes blind scan as well as a media player.

Build and connectivity

A conventional midi-sized box, the 202e gives you a practical selection of front panel controls (including menu access), a 4 digit LED display and – under a flap – a single card reader, CI slot and USB port. Turning to the rear panel, you'll find the LNB input (and loopthrough output), HDMI port, analogue AV outputs that include a Scart socket, RS232 port for firmware upgrades, coaxial digital audio output, Ethernet and a second USB port.

You can use both USB ports for storage devices, switching between them at will (with the handset's 'info' key), but some users might want to plug the optional (£10) WiFi dongle into the rear-panel one. You'll then

have a wireless alternative to Ethernet. Internally, construction is busy but neat. There are two largish circuit boards for the switch-mode power supply (which benefits from a rear panel mains switch) and the receiver itself – which is based around a heatsinked dual core STi 'jungle chip'

Associated with this are 8MB of flash memory, which contains the firmware, and 128MB of RAM. The firmware is Ferguson's own, rather than a 'Linux special'. To be honest, the amount of memory is miniscule by Linux receiver standards and so a 'port' of Enigma 2 is unlikely.

Back to hardware matters, separate daughterboards connected to the main board contain the
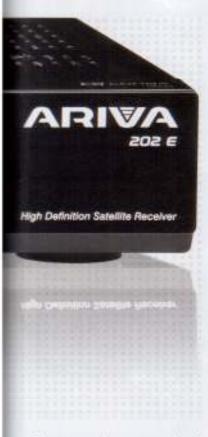
The user interface of the regular 'fast scan' mode is very similar to the blind scan option and there's also a multi-satellite scan

The latest firmware can be downloaded from the Ferguson website to a USB stick, and transferred to the receiver. RS232 is another alternative.

Thanks to its 'by source' option, the Ariva can output video at the resolution of the broadcast. That way, you can rely on the TV's inbuilt scaler

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latter, ports can be set. Signal quality/strength bars are available in each case.

Single or multiple satellites can be searched. You can choose whether radio and/or TV channels should be included, or if the receiver should focus on FTA. Available scanning modes are 'fast' (specific providers), 'fast' (a conventional all-transponder search) and (unusually) 'blind'. This system, which works its way through the band adding channels it finds on the way, is eerily similar to fast scan! Another menu allows individual transponders to be edited, deleted, added or searched (no PID entry, alas). A channel editor allows channels to be deleted, moved or added to one of 32 favourites lists.

A range of other setup menus cover PVR use, parental controls, languages, networking, firmware upgrades and even startup channel. We're particularly impressed with AV setup. For a start, HDMI (up to 1080p) and Scart (which supports RGB, component and composite, but not S-video) can be active simultaneously. There's a 'by source' output resolution option, which outputs the currently selected channel with no scaling, so your TV can do the work. Note that not all TVs will support 576i via HDMI, though. Video adjustment (brightness/contrast/saturation/hue/sharpness) is also included.

Basic use

Once again, the 202e scores highly with its friendly no-nonsense design. The channel list can be sorted alphabetically by satellite, provider or encryption type. HD channels can be listed separately. A pair of handset buttons allow you to progress through channel lists a page at a time; there's also a 'find' button for locating specific channels, and the basic EPG will simultaneously display listings for up to five consecutive channels on its timeline. This information is dependent on broadcasters, and there's no provision for downloaded data or non-DVB EPGs. However, it's easy to use and can set the 32-event timer.

Pressing the info button displays, as is usual, EPG-derived programme details, but press it again and a 'mini-EPG' for the selected channel is shown. The handset's coloured buttons engage teletext, select subtitles or toggle between soundtracks and when a menu is onscreen, the same buttons access relevant functions like submenus.

As with all other digital receivers, the 202e can be quickly switched between radio and TV modes, and although this receiver may be short on gimmicks like picture-in-picture modes, it's the first receiver we've reviewed in ages to throw in some games (specifically Tetris, Sudoku and Othello).

PVR and multimedia

Recording is exclusively to USB devices; it's a pity that you can't arrange for recordings to be streamed to networked storage, as you can with many Linux boxes. Something the 202e does share in common with these is the ability to

Ethernet port, Sharp tuner and card reader. The handset also has a pleasant feel, with glow-in-the-dark standby and joypad controls.

Setup

Clear and unambiguous menus contribute to impressive flexibility and ease of setup. An 'antenna configuration' submenu switches between fixed or DiSEqC 1.0/1/1 systems and motorised (DiSEqC 1.2/IUSALS) dishes. It's then a case of selecting the satellites you want from a list (new ones can be defined if need be). The 'antenna setup' menu behaves differently for fixed and motorised dishes. For the latter, you can set a position for each of the previously selected satellites: for the

view one channel while another from the same transponder is recording. In doing so, it partially-addresses the limitations of only having one tuner.

In addition to recording, which can be in programme stream (PS) or conventional transport-stream (TS) format, timeshift/chasing playback is supported. The media player is used to access the unit's own recordings. This is also compatible with a number of (categorised) multimedia formats. Among them are JPEG, XviD, MP3, FLAC and MKV. It's a shame that the full potential of networking hasn't been realised here; you cannot 'pull' such content from your home network and must instead rely on playback via USB devices.

Some networked content is, however, available to the 202e. There's the seemingly obligatory YouTube, complete with search facility, although its naughtier sister YouPorn wasn't working properly (the supplier has assured us this will be fixed). On top of these are the Picasa photo application, weather forecasts, a RSS reader and Google Maps. Finally we have an internet radio application, but it's hampered by a limited choice of stations.

Performance

As far as video and sound goes, the Ferguson fares very well indeed with HD and SD channels alike. Furthermore, there were no lip-sync issues with video files played out from USB storage devices. There are a few downsides, though. Firstly, searches are slow, and there's little distance between conventional and blind scans. The latter, performed on 28.2E, found more channels –

suggesting that the pre-programmed channel database is incorrect or out of date.

Incidentally, if you upgrade the firmware all of your existing channels are wiped – thankfully, the 'upgrade by USB' menu has a 'dump' option to back up your channels. Finally, with our 45cm multi-feed dish the 202e shows it isn't quite as sensitive as some receivers we've tested. A 60cm dish was sufficient to pull in all mainstream European services, though ■ Martin Pipe

Verdict

Overall, this receiver is a budget priced cracker – an excellent route to FTA HD reception 'on the cheap'. It's easy to drive, responsive, and is capable of fine AV performance (especially via HDMI). It also offers some worthwhile features and is definitely worthy of consideration.

TEST AND MEASUREMENT

POWER USAGE						VIDEO FORMATS	
Idling	n/a	FTA scan: 8m1s	FD scan: 11m32s	FTA scan: 16m20s		MPEG-2	●
In use	9W	Full scan: 8m48s	Full scan: 17m30s	Full scan: 16m20s		FLV	●
Standby	<1W	Blind scan: 11m20s	Blind search: 16m27s	Blind scan:		AVI	●
						MP4	●
						MKV	●
						MOV	●
						WMV	

POWER USAGE This receiver maintains a creditably low power consumption that is comparable with 'big-name' Freesat products

SEARCH: 28.2°E The Ariva 202e searches Astra2/Eurobird at a snail's pace, relative to most other receivers

SEARCH: 19.2°E More comparable with Linux receivers than 'proprietary' boxes – which tend to be much faster

SEARCH: 13°E Admirable in many respects – but this receiver is a definite slouch when it comes to channel-finding