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Deal alert! Hisense U6K Series Google TV (55-inch), now $350 (22% off). See details below.

ELECTRONICS › HOME THEATER

The Best 4K TV on a Budget

By Lee Neikirk

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Photo: Lee Neikirk

FYI



November 2023

While videophiles and serious gamers may be better served by brighter, higher-performance LCD TVs or OLED TVs, we recommend the **Hisense U6K Series** for anyone who just wants a very good 4K HDR TV that isn't a burdensome investment. The U6K offers the same core software and hardware as our favorite higher-end LCD TVs do, but at a more budget-friendly price.

How we picked and tested

The latest LCD tech

We look for affordable LCD TVs that still offer advanced specs such as local dimming, quantum dots, and contemporary gaming features.

HDR competency

Our picks not only support the two most common HDR formats—HDR10 and Dolby Vision—but also handle those formats skillfully.

Good user experience

In our evaluations, we prioritize the quality of the built-in smart-TV features. You shouldn't have to add an external source if you don't want to.

Objective testing

We measure each TV's brightness, contrast, and color accuracy using Portrait Displays's Calman software and light and color meters.

Read more →

Hisense U6K Series Google TV

Best 4K TV on a budget

Equipped with higher-performance tech such as mini-LED backlighting and quantum-dot color, this 4K TV boasts definite value. But it isn't bright enough to produce a premium HDR experience.

~~$450~~ **$350 from Best Buy**

You save $100 (22%)

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With delayed shipping

The **Hisense U6K Series** stands out in 2023 as the only budget TV sporting a mini-LED backlight and full-array local dimming—technologies usually reserved for premium LCD TVs to improve contrast and black-level performance. This TV also has quantum dots for better color and offers compatibility with all of the latest AV formats, including Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos.

It comes in screen sizes of 55, 65, and 75 inches (with an 85-inch size reportedly coming soon). The included Google TV smart platform is one of our favorites, and we're always happy to see a budget TV with four HDMI inputs.

The U6K doesn't get nearly as bright as higher-end LCD and OLED TVs, so it isn't the best HDR TV you can buy, and it doesn't have the latest ATSC 3.0 TV tuner, so it's limited to 1080p over-the-air broadcasts. While it doesn't have the 120 Hz refresh rate or HDMI 2.1 compatibility you'll find on the best gaming TVs, it's still a good choice for more casual gamers because it offers low input lag, auto low-latency mode (ALLM), and variable refresh rate (VRR) compatibility. (Check out our TV buying guide for explanations of the tech terms we use here.)

The research

Collapse all

Why you should trust us

I've been reviewing TVs, computer monitors, and other displays and home theater gear for over a decade. I have ISF Level III training and calibration certification, and over the past decade I've tested and calibrated hundreds of TVs—from premium $8,000 flat panels to $100 doorbusters—using hardware such as light and color meters, pattern generators, and input-lag testers.

The 4K TVs we cover in this guide offer great performance at a budget-friendly price, generally around $500 or less for a 55-inch TV. If you're looking for an affordable upgrade to get 4K resolution, high dynamic range video, or the latest gaming features—or if you're looking for something a little larger than your current TV—this is the guide for you.

However, if picture quality is your top priority and you're willing to pay more for a better performer, check out our guides to the best LCD/LED TV and the best OLED TV.

If you're looking specifically for a smaller TV, check out our guide to the best 32-inch TVs. Also, although our picks here provide some important gaming features, if you're a serious gamer you may want to see our guide to the best gaming TVs.

The best TV performers

The Best LCD/LED TV

The Best OLED TV

How we picked and tested

Our goal in every round of testing is to find the lowest-priced 4K TVs that use advanced performance technologies such as **local-dimming backlights** and **quantum dots** to deliver a satisfying viewing experience with the fewest drawbacks. (Read our TV buying guide for explanations of those terms.)

The more affordable TVs from manufacturers such as LG, Samsung, and Sony usually do not include those advanced technologies—particularly local dimming. TCL used to include local dimming in at least one value-oriented line, but the company's revamped 2023 lineup reserves that feature for pricier options. That leaves primarily Hisense, Vizio, Amazon, and Roku as the major contenders in this category—and with the latter two companies focusing as much (or more) on their smart-TV experiences as on pure picture quality, pickings were particularly slim this year.

ably 4K HDR content.

Because we're looking for user-friendliness in this category, the quality of the TV's **integrated streaming platform** is more important here than for our other TV guides.

Most of the TVs in this price category have only a 60 Hz refresh rate, which isn't ideal for the hardcore gamer. But they may still include **gaming-friendly features** such as automatic low-latency mode (ALLM) and variable refresh rate (VRR). You can read more about these features in our guide to the best gaming TVs. We do not require the inclusion of higher-bandwidth HDMI 2.1 ports for our picks in this guide because of the TVs' lower refresh rate.

To help us whittle down the list of TVs to test, we rely on reviews from sites we trust, such as Rtings.com and Reviewed.

Learn more

TV Buying Guide

The best way to compare TVs is to put them next to each other and look at them using the same content. We also consider how they perform in relation to the more expensive TVs we test for our best LCD/LED TV guide.

We take each TV out of the box, set it up, and measure it using Portrait Displays's Calman software, in conjunction with a **C6 HDR2000 colorimeter** and a **VideoForge Pro** test-pattern generator, to measure the color, the color temperature, the light output, and more.

For details, read more about how Wirecutter tests TVs.

Our pick: Hisense U6K Series Google TV

Backlight type	mini-LED with full-array local dimming
Refresh rate	60 Hz
Color tech	quantum dots
HDR formats	HDR10, HDR10+, HLG, Dolby Vision
HDMI connections	four HDMI 2.0, one eARC
Smart-TV platform	Google TV
TV tuner	ATSC 1.0

In years past, we've seen heavy competition in this price category from companies such as TCL and Vizio, but in 2023 the **Hisense U6K Series** stands out among its peers as the only value-oriented TV that's equipped with mini-LED backlighting, full-array local dimming, and quantum dots. As a result, when it's playing certain content, the Hisense U6K can look just as good as TVs that cost twice as much—so it's an especially good choice if you're focused on picture quality but don't want to spend a bundle.

The U6K is like a premium LCD TV, only with less horsepower. The main difference between the Hisense U6K and its pricier sibling, the U8K (our runner-up pick for the best LCD/LED TV), lies in its brightness. Whereas the U8K averages around 1,500 nits of brightness, the U6K averages around 500 nits—that's in line with what you can get from other TVs at this price level, but it's obviously a big step down from the brightness of a more premium model. You're most likely to notice the difference while watching HDR content or viewing the U6K in a bright environment.

Otherwise, the U8K and U6K are remarkably similar performers in many other respects, especially in their local-dimming prowess. We had some difficulty telling them apart—it was hard but not impossible—when viewing some of our favorite black-level demo scenes.

Though the U8K is naturally brighter, the U6K matched it both in shadow integrity (the black levels stayed the same around moving bright objects) and in bloom mitigation (the glow from bright objects didn't bleed into the shadows around them). The U6K occasionally had lighter, more grayish letterbox bars, but I noticed that effect only because I was watching in the dark.

U6K's with one of its closest 2023 competitors, the TCL Q6.

Honestly, both TVs looked kind of scuzzy playing *Amadeus* on DVD: Neither TV did particularly well in upscaling the DVD's 480p resolution to the native 4K resolution, causing the image to look noisy and overly grainy. But even though the TCL Q6 was slightly brighter, the U6K looked much better in comparison: For example, the flames on the candelabra held by one of Salieri's servants contrasted with the surrounding darkness in a much more satisfying way on the U6K than on the Q6.

Whether you're watching a DVD or playing the latest video game in HDR, the U6K's better image contrast and black-level performance will make that content look better than it would on any TV in this price category that doesn't have mini-LEDs and local dimming.



The U6K runs the Google TV smart-TV platform and is compatible with all of the major HDR formats. Photo: Lee Neikirk

You can see what the director intended (mostly). Like other Hisense TVs, the U6K is equipped with the Filmmaker Mode picture preset. I measured this mode in the SDR (standard dynamic range) and HDR10/Dolby Vision formats and found it to be satisfyingly accurate—not perfect, but

In addition, the U6K is compatible with all of the major HDR formats, so whether you stream via Amazon Prime Video (which favors the HDR10+ format) or Apple TV (which favors the Dolby Vision format), you'll see the best-looking version of whatever you're watching. It's also capable of decoding Dolby Atmos audio, though you need an external sound system (such as a good soundbar) to really get the benefits.

It's a good gaming TV for the price. More-sophisticated gaming features—chiefly, higher refresh rates and advanced HDMI 2.1 features—are still primarily the province of expensive TVs, but Hisense adds as many as it can to the U6K without pushing up this TV's price.

Though you don't get a native 120 Hz panel, you do get features that are key to a better gaming experience, including VRR (variable refresh rate) for smoother gameplay and ALLM (auto low-latency mode) to automatically switch the TV into its lowest-input-lag picture mode when it detects a gaming console. I tested a 4K video signal at 60 Hz and measured the input lag at 17.5 milliseconds, which is just as good as the results I saw from premium LCD TVs I tested this year.

One caveat regarding gaming is that this TV can't handle VRR and local dimming at the same time, so you have to choose whether to prioritize cinematic contrast or smoother motion. If you're serious about gaming, you may want to look at the TCL Q6, which offers better input lag and can play sub-4K resolutions at 120 Hz.



The U6K's Bluetooth remote is bulky and plasticky, but it's loaded with useful buttons—including direct access to six popular streaming services. Photo: Lee Neikirk

The Google smart-TV interface is still one of our favorites. I used the U6K's Google TV platform side by side with the same interface on the pricier U8K, and I found the experience to be almost identical on the two TVs. The U6K was marginally slower in its overall navigation, and apps such as YouTube took a hair longer to launch, but this is another instance where you'd notice the difference only during a direct comparison.

Google TV continues to be one of the more intuitive and familiar options among smart-TV software platforms, though your mileage may vary if you're relatively unfamiliar with Google. My only complaint about Google TV here is that some of its initial content recommendations are bizarre. But who knows, maybe I'd love *Werewolf Bitches from Outer Space*.

It's sturdier than the budget TVs of yesteryear. The U6K won't win any design awards, but its build quality is better than what you used to get in this price range. It has some small flourishes on the back side of the panel in the form of solid dividing lines, and you can mount the feet in two positions: wider spacing for a bit more stability or narrower spacing if you have a smaller TV stand.

The U6K's remote control is physically identical to the pricier U8K's, though it has some cosmetic differences in its button symbols for mysterious reasons. And the TV's connectivity selection is

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Flaws but not dealbreakers

It isn't a great choice for displaying older media. It was especially hard for me to enjoy the *Amadeus* DVD on the U6K because its video processing and upscaling simply aren't at the level of higher-end TVs. Other DVDs or older video games may look noisy on this TV.

Upscaled text (such as for closed captioning) looks notably bad on the U6K, too. I also noticed some occasional softness (lack of sharpness) in 1080p content streamed over YouTube, though this effect was apparent only during a direct comparison with a more expensive TV; I doubt that I would have spotted it otherwise.

The viewing angles won't please a crowd. If you're hoping to gather a large group around the U6K, the folks on the far ends of the couch may have some complaints.

While the TV's mini-LED backlighting and local dimming give it naturally high contrast (which means it has more to lose as you move away from the center), its off-angle viewing isn't nearly as good as what you can find on pricier TVs.

This is a common problem with LCD TVs in general, but it's something to keep in mind if you're planning to wall-mount the TV in a larger viewing space so that lots of people can watch.

You'll likely want to control your lighting. The U6K isn't dim, but it isn't especially bright, either. You can still enjoy the TV during the day or with the lights on, but if you want it to look its best, you should avoid placing it in a room with a ton of sunlight or ambient lighting.

Recommended settings

If you want the Hisense U6K to look its best and most accurate (read our TV buying guide to see what we mean by "accurate"), put it in the Filmmaker Mode picture mode. However, this mode is on the dim side, so it's better for nighttime viewing. If you need a brighter picture, we recommend switching to the Theater Day mode, which adds some brightness to lights and colors.

In most picture modes, the U6K employs some form of motion smoothing. Although this tech can sometimes make faster-action content such as sports and nature documentaries look smoother and more detailed, we recommend turning it off when you're watching TV or movies. Go to ***Picture > Advanced Settings > Motion Enhancement*** to turn it off. We also recommend turning off noise reduction and digital noise reduction and setting the color space to Auto.

How to set up your TV

Simple Tips for Getting the Best Picture From Your New TV

Other good 4K TVs on a budget

If you want snappier gaming: **TCL's Q6 Series (2023)** is available in the same range of screen sizes as our top pick, for roughly the same price. But because it has neither mini-LED backlighting nor local dimming, the Q6 doesn't look nearly as good as the U6K when showing TV and movies. I also noticed that the Q6's Google TV operations were slower in comparison.

The Q6 is a little brighter than the U6K, however, and it favors a generally flashier picture overall. More important, it supports alternative timing modes that are important for competitive console and PC gaming—1080p at 120 Hz and 1440p at 120 Hz—despite the fact that it has a native 60 Hz refresh rate. The TCL Q6 is available with either the Google TV or Fire TV smart platform.

If you're willing to buy an older model to save money, or if you want a 50-inch screen size: While our top pick from 2022, the TCL 5-Series, is pretty much gone now, you can still track down last year's runner-up, the **Hisense U6H Series**. The U6H is actually a bit brighter, on average, than the newer U6K, but its local dimming isn't as good, and it tends to crush shadow details and blow out highlights a little more often compared with the newer model (a drawback that you wouldn't notice as much in a brighter room). It's also available in a 50-inch size, whereas our current pick isn't.

What to look forward to

Vizio has confirmed two new lines for 2023: the **Quantum** and the **Quantum Pro**. The lower-priced Quantum line does not utilize local dimming, so we don't plan to test it. The step-up Quantum Pro line looks more promising in its specs (full-array local dimming, quantum dots, and a 120 Hz refresh rate) but is available only in 65- and 75-inch sizes for $700 and $1,000, respectively, so we won't consider it for this value-oriented guide. We do plan to test it for our main LCD/LED TV guide, though.

The competition

We tested the 65-inch version of **Amazon's Fire TV Omni QLED TV**, and though it proved to be a solid performer, it didn't quite match our pick in picture quality. This TV's chief failing is that it doesn't

[redacted]

odes. hich works as smoothly here as on the more powerful Fire TV devices we've covered in our guide to media streaming devices.

After testing the new **Roku Plus Series TV**, we're struggling to justify its slightly higher pricing compared with our pick, which outperformed the Plus Series in brightness, color range, and overall dynamic range. Though the Plus Series TV's built-in Roku software is as zippy and fluid as you may expect from a TV made by Roku, our top pick's Google TV platform is no slouch, and its picture quality is much better.

We don't intend to test **LG's UR9000** or **UR8000**. These entry-level 4K TVs are priced very modestly, but they lack the advanced hardware (mini-LEDs, local dimming) and features of our pick and don't save you a meaningful amount of money.

We dismissed **Samsung's CU8000** and **CU7000** because they use edge-mounted LED backlights, lack local dimming, and—according to review sources we trust—offer notably limited HDR brightness (less than 300 nits).

We dismissed the **TCL S4** from consideration because it doesn't have local dimming, uses an IPS LCD panel (which results in poor contrast), and lacks advanced gaming features.

This article was edited by Adrienne Maxwell and Grant Clauser.

Meet your guide

Lee Neikirk

Lee Neikirk is a senior staff writer reporting on TVs at Wirecutter. He has been testing and reviewing AV gear since 2012 and is an ISF-certified TV calibrator. When he's not fussing over pixels, Lee is either jamming on a guitar, playing video games, or driving around endlessly trying to find beach parking.

Further reading



All the TVs Wirecutter Recommends

The Best OLED TV

The Best Gaming TV for PS5 & Xbox Series X

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