

# DIGITAL TV RECORDING UNDER \$200? HERE'S HOW

An HD personal video recorder under \$200? It can be done. With analogue TV approaching shutdown (in Mildura anyway), the drive to go digital continues. You could connect an analogue video recorder to the pristine digital TV signals, but your friends will laugh at you. You need a personal video recorder. And while we imagine Geare readers will prefer a do-it-all twin-tuner beast with several

hard-drives hung off its USB ports, there is also a general need for a budget box that can simply upgrade a non-digital TV.

Here are two. The Akai here is an HD set-top box — i.e. without internal storage for recording — but you can add an external hard drive to turn it into a PVR. The Strong comes with a 160GB drive, and it's easy to add much more...



## Strong Australia SRT 5429

Just about from the beginning of digital TV in Australia, Strong has been an inventive participant in the market, with one of the first personal video recorders and, later, what was probably the first effective high definition PVR. It has also explored the entry levels for digital TV, and in this vein, offers the SRT 5429.

As with the Akai opposite, this has only **one TV tuner**, rather than two, but you do get a hard-disk inside, so it's a proper PVR from purchase. The hard drive is only 160GB, rather than the 320 to 500GB commonly on offer on higher-end PVRs. Still, that ought to be good for about 60 hours on the standard definition of ABC1, and 23 hours on OneHD, currently the most data intensive of all the free-to-air TV stations.

It offers **multimedia support** via a USB socket on the front panel, and has HDMI output in addition to composite or component video outputs, with two sets of stereo audio outputs and digital optical audio too.

In addition to the usual MPEG2 video formats usually delivered on digital TV, the unit also supports MPEG4. That future-proofs it for what TV stations are likely to offer in the future, including 3D TV (the stations use MPEG4 for HDTV because of its higher efficiency).

Brand new out of the box, it was just a matter of inserting the supplied batteries into the remote control, plugging in the unit and applying power. Straight away it offered to search for TV stations, and within a few minutes, had captured them all.

We worked our way through the menu structure to see what options were available, and to tweak things a little to our own preferences. The only thing we had to change was to output audio from the default of 'PCM' to 'AC3'. That way we figured that if any proper Dolby Digital 5.1 programs came on, we could enjoy full surround sound. This setting did change the audio output on the HD stations to Dolby Digital, so we feel confident that surround sound would present no problem, if only we could find a program using it.

We also found that we could delete some duplicated stations, and also set up a useful Favourites list of stations.

**To use additional storage**, you just change the "recording destination" to point to a USB hard drive. Loads of room available!

The recording worked well, once we overcame a quirk. To choose an item to record from the EPG you press the green key, which brings up an 'Event Add' screen. This allows the start and end times to be set,

and the repeat mode (Once, Daily or Weekly). But the last item on the list is called 'Mode' and has a default setting of 'View'. That is, by default the timer will merely wake up the box. Make sure you go down to that item and switch it to 'Record'!

One strange flaw in the recording was that the unit would not record for a duration of more than three hours. It would just stop after that time. Strong tells us that a firmware upgrade will have addressed this by the time that you read this.

There is also a **time shift mode**, which you invoke on an as-needs basis by pressing the 'Play' key. Once started, you can pause and then rewind your way around the buffer.

As for picture quality, this unit was excellent. Even SDTV, usually the bugbear of set-top boxes and PVRs due to poor progressive scan conversion, was delivered with remarkably good quality. And if you have better video processing in your TV, well you can use the 'Format' key on the remote control to set the output to 576i/50 and allow the TV to do the work.

At the price of this unit, why would you ever bother to buy a set-top box without recording capabilities? This makes digital recording highly accessible. *Stephen Dawson*

More info: [www.strong.com.au](http://www.strong.com.au)