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Digital downloads with a serious twist

Richard Stevenson auditions a premium-priced movie player/server system from Kaleidescape that aims to make his disc collecting days a thing of the past

KALEIDESCAPE HARDWARE HAS been around almost since movies on disc shifted from LaserDisc to DVD. The platform, developed in the US, started out as a system of servers/players for DVD-sourced content with a searchable interface, bringing the sort of movie access convenience we now take for granted with streaming services.

Fast-forward a couple of decades and Kaleidescape's offering is more about bringing quality to that now widely accepted convenience. The Strato C player and fabulously named Terra Prime movie server aim for crystal-clear, reference-quality movie playback as close to commercial digital cinema releases as it's going to get in the home.
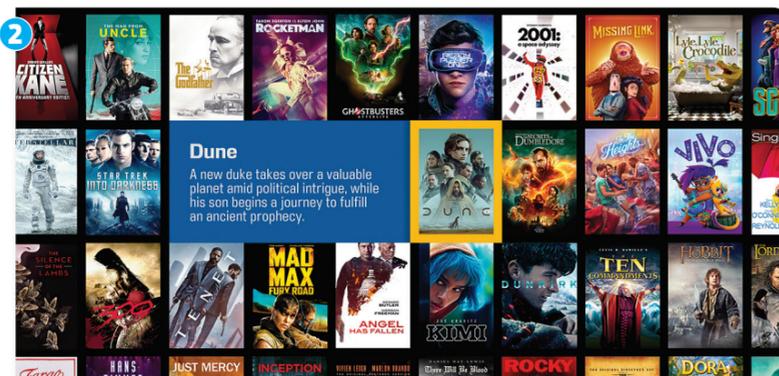
Download and serve
Having formed partnerships with 18 big-ticket movie houses and publishers, Kaleidescape allows you to purchase/rent and download near-uncompressed versions of movies (up to four times the file sizes of Blu-ray) from a vast library. You can then play them as a local source with zero lag or degradation when you like. No throttling of quality or data-rate for limited provider bandwidth, or having to cope with the rest of the household's streaming habits.

That sounds good, but it isn't cheap. Tested here is the Strato C 4K UHD player (£5,000 approx),

and a Terra Prime Solid State server, fitted with 8GB of SSD storage, at around £10,000. Want more capacity? You could step-down to an HDD-based Terra Prime, with 22TB storage, for the same price, and there is an 8TB HDD model for around £5,900.

You can spend plenty more on larger units too. At least once you have purchased a movie from Kaleidescape it's yours forever, so you can delete it to make space on whatever drive array you have and download it once more when you want to watch it again.

The selection of films (and TV boxsets) available is extensive but not exhaustive – a search for *Predator 2*, for instance, draws a blank, while *Star Wars* fans are out of luck. Video quality includes 4K, HD and – rather quaintly – SD, while pricing typically varies between £9,99 and £30,

Dune
A new duke takes over a valuable planet amid political intrigue, while his son begins a journey to fulfill an ancient prophecy.

complete with some anomalies – why is 2013 flick *Man of Steel* in 4K £29.99, while *Dune: Part Two* is £24.99?

Connectivity on both player and server is fairy frugal, with the Strato C featuring a single HDMI output, a trio of digital audio outputs, USB and wired Gigabit Ethernet. There's also a wired IR repeater if you want to hide it out of sight in your custom cinema's kit rack. Just remember that Cat 6 or higher Ethernet and Ultra High Speed HDMI cables are pretty much mandatory, particularly if the run from the Strato C to your display/projector is more than a metre or two. Of course, most Kaleidescape customers will have a tame integrator to hop to the task for them.

The Terra Prime Solid State is basically a stack of top-end SSDs with high-quality circuit boards and components to bring it all together. The price looks steep given the cost of storage, but you could say the same about a cheap CD mechanism and a top-end CD player.

Kaleidescape's setup is on the pro-install side of user-friendly so it took a couple of calls for me to get the system working sweetly (again, most end users will have an installer handle setup). And once up and running, the front end interface is nothing short of iconic. Movie cover tiles fill the screen and scroll vertically and horizontally, popping up details of any you hover over. General access to the library is super intuitive, with various search functions, as is downloading a movie to your server. How long a download takes will be a function of your broadband speed, but Kaleidescape suggests around four minutes for a 4K movie to its SSD hardware.

Strato-spheric
If you have ever compared a streaming service to a 4K Blu-ray of the same movie, it will be

patently clear which is better; the disc picture being sharper, clearer, more richly coloured and more dynamic. Kaleidescape's system produced a disc-like image for every movie I tried, and for some (*The Matrix* for example) it punched more detail and less artefacts in the deep black areas than even the 4K BD. It lifted a slightly grey veil from the lobby scene that I didn't even realise was there, revealing fine detailing in both Neo's matt-black coat and Trinity's gloss-black PVC suit.

This performance is a real eye-opener, and it gets more apparent the larger the screen. On a 65in LG OLED TV it equalled or nudged ahead of the 4K Blu-ray on the majority of films I tested and was perhaps even more impressive with HD content, presumably due to the scaling quality of the Kaleidescape hardware. Meanwhile, on my 130in screen/4K PJ setup, pictures looked astonishingly good. Additionally, the worse your broadband or internet connection, the better this is going to look versus streaming services that dynamically compress content.

It's worth noting that at present a Kaleidescape system won't play Dolby Vision HDR, although this won't be an issue to the majority of projector owners. I can't say I missed it when viewing the OLED set either.

There is support for Dolby Atmos audio, plus DTS:X, and sound too can benefit from the 'Kaleidescape way'. Not so much against a Blu-ray of the same movie but it certainly offered a notable lift in audio performance against Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, *et al*. This was particularly apparent on concert videos where the clarity and detail made streaming services sound congested by comparison. Compare *Sting: Live in Berlin* in DTS-HD MA via the Strato/Terra vs its Apple TV stream and the old crooner sounds very much 'in the room' on the former, but still holed up in Germany on the latter.

Don't count the cost
At this point it's best to gloss over the elephant in the room because, frankly, Kaleidescape's pricing policy looks obscene compared to a Netflix subscription. Our review system is £17,000, with movie downloads on top. To many, including Mrs Stevenson when I suggested buying it, that sounds bonkers. Yet if you have already spent five figures on a PJ or the wrong side of £50,000 on a home cinema to get the best movie experience possible, a Kaleidescape package starts to make sense. I love it ■

HCC VERDICT ★★★★★

Kaleidescape Strato C/Terra Prime (SSD, 8TB)
→ £17,000 → www.kaleidescape.com
WE SAY: A luxury add-on to a high-end theatre setup, Kaleidescape's platform adds premium AV quality to the convenience of on-demand viewing. There's nothing else like it.

1. The half-width chassis of the Strato C allows for two to be installed in a standard 19in rack space

2. Kaleidescape's UI scrolls through movie poster art, and allows quick access to specific scenes

3. The Terra Prime Solid State server is available with 8TB or 31TB storage

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