



Building a Home Lab 2026

From Pi to rack. The hardware tiers, the services to run, and the first 30 days.

5

HARDWARE TIERS

\$50

STARTER (PI)

10W

MINI PC IDLE

\$100s/yr

SAVINGS VS SAAS

Hardware tiers

Tier 0 — Pi

\$50-\$150 · 5W idle
Pi-hole, Home Assistant, light
Docker

SWEET SPOT

Tier 1 — Used mini PC

\$100-\$300 · 15W idle
5-15 Docker services. eBay
EliteDesk.

Tier 2 — Modern mini PC

\$300-\$800 · Ryzen 7
Many services + local LLMs
(8-27B)

Tier 3 — Mac mini M4

\$600-\$1200 · 6W idle
Apple Silicon Neural Engine
for AI

Tier 4 — Used enterprise rack

\$500-\$5000 · 80-150W · Loud, hot. Most homelab YouTubers
love it; most users happier with Tier 1.

Tier 5 — Custom NAS build

\$1000-\$5000 · Quiet, energy-efficient. ZFS on 4-8 big drives.
Storage-focused.

Services to actually run (in priority order)

FIRST

Pi-hole / AdGuard Home

Network-wide ad blocking. Highest-
impact first service.

Tailscale

VPN to your home from anywhere. No
port-forward complexity.

Vaultwarden

Self-hosted Bitwarden. \$36/yr saved
instantly.

Nextcloud / Immich

Dropbox / Google Photos replacement.

Jellyfin / Plex

Media server. Netflix replacement for
owned content.

Home Assistant

Smart home hub. Local-first automations.

PRO TIP

Idle wattage matters more than
peak. ~30W vs 15W idle = ~\$15/yr at
\$0.12/kWh. Multiply by years.

DON'T EXPOSE TO PUBLIC INTERNET

Keep the homelab off the public
internet by default. VPN in via
Tailscale. Anything admin-panel
sensitive stays private.

FIRST 30 DAYS

1 Day 1-3

Pick tier. Order. OS install.

2 Day 4-7

Docker + Pi-hole as first service

3 Day 8-14

Reverse proxy + Tailscale

4 Day 15-21

3-5 services (Nextcloud, Jellyfin, Vault)

5 Day 22-30

Backups + monitoring + document

SOFTWARE STACK

1 Proxmox VE

Homelab favorite: Linux + hypervisor

2 Ubuntu / Debian

Simple, well-documented, Docker host

3 Docker + Compose

Standard for all services

4 Caddy / Traefik

Reverse proxy + auto TLS

Full guide: djenterprises.ai/blog/home-lab-2026

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