

Hands-On With the Helio Ocean

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This messaging phone just might kick the T-Mobile Sidekick to the curb.

The Helio Ocean was released to reviewers today. As the number-one enemy of T-Mobile's Sidekick III and top competitor to Apple's upcoming iPhone, the excitement around this potential "ultimate messaging phone" is enormous. I've only spent a few hours testing it so far, but the Ocean looks very promising.

The Ocean is a chunky slider phone, narrower but just as thick and long as PDA-phones like the T-Mobile MDA. It'll fit in a pocket, but it'll weigh your pocket down. Most notably, it feels significantly smaller than the Sidekick.

The 320 by 240 screen is far higher-resolution than the Sidekick's 240 by 160 screen. The Ocean's display slides smoothly two ways: vertically, to reveal a flat but very nicely sized number pad, and horizontally, to reveal a keypad of little, well-separated oval keys. Both keypads have enough space between the top row of keys and the screen, so you won't have any trouble typing on the top row (as happens on many slider phones.) When you switch orientations, the screen rotates almost instantaneously.

For details on how it is as a phone, wait for my full review. Needless to say, it makes calls. Helio uses Sprint's network so network coverage is very good. It has a speakerphone, and supports mono and stereo Bluetooth headsets – but I haven't actually tested those out yet.

What I have been doing is configuring the messaging software, the Ocean's star feature. Setting up the free Helio Mail account that comes with the phone, Yahoo! Mail, and my own IMAP account went very smoothly. I also logged into both Yahoo! and AIM IM systems simultaneously. Oddly, the phone seems to give you push-style alerts when Yahoo! mail and various IMs arrive, but not Helio or IMAP mail. I'll have to figure out why.

The Web browser handles full Web pages, though not Flash or other fancy accoutrements. It displays them in single column mode, not desktop-view mode, though you can read all the way down most pages. One excellent feature: a built-in RSS detector, so you can bookmark feeds from Web pages. Web pages load pretty quickly, as you'd expect from an EVDO connection.

There's an MP3 player in here, too. The Ocean quickly detected my card full of music and let me play songs by album, artist, or track name. I could drop songs on the phone using mass storage mode with a PC or a Mac, or sync with Windows Media Player on a PC. There's also a mode

called "Helio Sync" that I want to check out – maybe it will let me sync calendars and contacts?

The Ocean also has a 2-megapixel camera, and preliminary results are good: I took some shots outdoors, and they didn't wash out bright areas as badly as some other phones. The 320 by 240 video mode records at a jerky 8 frames per second, but the images are pretty sharp. I found that the phone works fine with a 2GB MicroSD card, but rejects a 4GB card.

If the Ocean has one Achilles heel, it might be bugs. Now, I've only had my test unit for a few hours, but I've run into a few quirks in the software. I'll report back when I do my full review.

To some extent, the Ocean is everything I wish the LG enV VX9900 was – a great messaging phone with very good multimedia capabilities. Unfortunately, Verizon's awful choice of e-mail software doomed the enV in that regard.

And although the Ocean faces down the iPhone and the Sidekick with dignity, it still won't kill them off. The iPhone will integrate with your library of purchased iTunes content, something the Ocean can't do. And the Sidekick is available with both prepaid and T-Mobile family plans, which are critical for the Sidekick's primary under-21 audience.

Once you've outgrown the Sidekick, though, it looks like it'll be a good time to dive into the Ocean. Check back here at PCMag.com for our full review soon to find out just how the Ocean stands up to the competition.

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