

MacBook Air a lovely, pricey machine

November 5 2010, By Troy Wolverton



I didn't dwell a lot on the MacBook Air when Apple first unveiled it in January 2008. Its thin profile and light weight were definitely impressive. But with an \$1,800 price tag for the base model, slow processors, only an 80-gigabyte hard drive and no DVD drive, the notebook was too expensive, too underpowered and too limited to get me too excited.

So when rumors surfaced that [Apple](#) planned a new version, I wasn't expecting a lot. But after getting my hands on one of the new MacBook Airs that Apple unveiled last month, I've been more than pleasantly surprised.

In fact, I love it.

In revamping its lineup of MacBook Airs, Apple made some key changes. First, it introduced a smaller model. Previously, your only choice was an Air with a 13-inch screen; now you can get a smaller, lighter one with an 11-inch screen.

And it trimmed the prices. The new entry-level [MacBook Air](#), the one with the 11-inch screen, is priced at \$1,000. A new Air with specifications comparable to the previous entry model, including its 13-inch screen, now costs just \$1,300.

That's still high but within the range you'd pay for a high-end Windows-based [laptop](#).

The Air's big difference from most of those other higher-end machines - besides running Apple's much easier-to-use [Mac operating system](#) - is that it doesn't have a [hard drive](#). Instead, Apple is packing the Air with flash memory - the same chip-based storage found in the [iPhone](#), iPod and iPad.

This isn't the first time you've been able to get a laptop with flash-based storage; that was an option with the previous version of the Air and on machines from other manufacturers. But such machines have often been phenomenally expensive.

Flash prices, though, have dropped rapidly. While you still pay a premium for it, Apple has shown that you can now get a [notebook](#) with a decent amount of flash storage at a fairly reasonable price.

And flash has advantages over hard drives that are starting to make the trade-off in terms of price and storage space more than worth it. The most notable of these benefits is speed.

One of the things I've long hated about computers is just how long they

take to get up and running. Even brand new ones can often take minutes. My experience with the Air was completely different. Thanks to flash, it boots up in about 14 seconds. That's faster than many laptops resume running after being in standby mode, yet alone how long they take to boot up from a standing start.

And when the Air resumes running from standby mode, it takes less than three seconds. It's just amazing.

But the speed is apparent beyond that. The Air has a relatively slow processor from Intel. But thanks to the speed of the flash drive, you'd hardly know it. You don't have to wait for the computer to spin up the hard drive or read the data off it; instead, it's transferred nearly instantaneously. I didn't realize just how much of a drag a hard drive can be on a computer's performance until I started playing around with the Air.

And the Air's flash storage has other advantages. Because there are no hard disks spinning and you don't need a fan to cool them, it's completely silent. It's also much thinner and lighter. The Air is only 0.68 inches at its thickest point - and a near-razor thin 0.11 inches at its narrowest. The 11-inch laptop weighs 2.3 pounds, while the 13-inch one weighs 2.9 pounds.

I often lug a laptop around with me in my backpack when I go to conferences or meetings. By the end of the day my back and shoulders are often sore.

Not so with the Air. I carried it around with me all day last week and hardly noticed it was there.

To be sure, the Air isn't perfect, and it obviously isn't for everyone. Even the entry-level model is pricey. It's a Mac, so it costs extra to run

Windows software. And as fast as it is at everyday tasks, it isn't necessarily suited for graphics-heavy games or processor-intensive tasks such as video rendering.

Moreover, the entry-level model has just 64 gigabytes of storage, a scant amount considering you can now find laptops with 500-gigabyte or larger hard drives for hundreds of dollars less. With that little space, you may not be able to store all of your music, videos and photos.

Still, for its light weight and blazing fast speed, I think the Air is more than worth the trade-offs.

APPLE MACBOOK AIR:

-Troy's rating: 4.8 out of 5

-Likes: Light; ultrathin; very speedy

-Dislikes: Pricey; demo model crashed; small storage space

-How much: \$999 to \$1,599, depending on model

-Web: www.apple.com

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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