

Review: MacBook Air uses iPad technology to add brawn to beauty

December 2 2010, By Mark W. Smith



When the MacBook Air first launched almost three years ago, it was very expensive and not all that powerful. Things have changed.

The Air is still impossibly thin. Both the 11-inch and 13-inch models taper to a minuscule .11 inches.

Turn the screen sideways and it practically disappears.

But now packed into that svelte - and still expensive - frame is a powerful computer that easily handles nearly any task you throw at it.

Building on many of the technologies that power the wildly successful

[Apple iPad](#), the engineering teams in Cupertino, Calif., have rethought the inner workings of the MacBook Air.

The big change is a switch to flash-based storage, allowing for a quiet, cool, more iPad-like computing experience.

The result is an incredibly thin and light enclosure, longer [battery life](#) and instant-on - Apple's term for the laptop's deep sleep that freezes apps in motion and draws very little [battery power](#).

Apple says deep sleep will allow the Air to stand by for as long as 30 days.

I found the battery life to be just shy of Apple's advertised five hours for the 11-inch model and seven hours for the 13-inch.

There is some real power within this tiny aluminum frame, too. I tried to hang both machines by launching 10 programs and opening 15 tabs in Apple's Safari Web browser, but neither model showed signs of slowing.

You probably won't want to edit hours of high-definition video on these machines, given the comparatively slower processors, but for anything else you shouldn't run into any roadblocks.

Simply put: You don't need the fastest processor on the market if the hardware and software are as finely tuned as they are on the Air.

NOT A NETBOOK

The 11-inch model is the biggest surprise.

Until now, this ultra-small category of laptops has been defined by a dirty word in the tech world: netbook.

Netbooks have deservedly built a reputation for being sluggish, plasticky, maddening machines that make it hard to do just about anything.

But the 11-inch MacBook Air packs a full-size laptop keyboard and a super-sharp screen with more pixels than Apple's 13-inch MacBook Pro, all in a package that weighs just 2.3 pounds.

It's cool, too. The only time I heard the fan kick on was when I was taxing it with high-definition Flash video.

And while the \$999 starter model comes with a paltry 64 GB of storage, it's a no-brainer as a satellite companion to a desktop computer.

ON THE OTHER HAND

There is always room for improvement, though. For the Air it comes in furthering its mission to cut the cords that bind us.

Neither Air model has 3G wireless access built in. While WiFi is becoming ubiquitous, there are always spots where you need connectivity and won't have it.

Apple also needs to work on its software delivery.

Some of its software - like the iWork desktop publishing suite - is available only on a compact disc or as a pre-loaded option when you order on Apple's Web site.

So for the Air, which lacks a CD/DVD drive, there's no way to get iWork installed if you buy in-store without also buying the optional external DVD drive.

Users can, if they have another machine at home, wirelessly use the CD/DVD drive of that computer and use the disc just as if the Air had a drive.

But we're stuck between the Air's release and the launch of Apple's Mac App Store, which will allow for computer software downloads much like its smartphone app download service. Apple says the Mac App Store is coming soon.

The Air ships with a USB drive that allows for fresh operating system installs. A similar option should be made for Apple's other software titles.

The MacBook Air also inexplicably has shelved the backlit keyboard of its previous generation - a real perk if you find yourself typing in low-light conditions.

PRICES SURE TO DROP

Is the new MacBook Air expensive? Yes.

Prohibitively so? Probably.

But we're clearly not going back to the days of clunky, warm, back-breaking portable computers prone to hard drive failures as they get jostled around in messenger bags and backpacks.

As prices of the needed components drop, expect the innovations contained in the [MacBook Air](#) to spread to every [laptop](#) on the market.

And we'll all be much better off - and a bit lighter.

MACBOOK AIR

11-inch model

Size: 11.8-by-7.56-by-.68 inches

Weight: 2.3 pounds

Battery life: Up to 5 hours of Web use; 30 days standby

Processor: 1.4 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo

Inputs: Two USB 2.0, Mini DisplayPort, headphone, built-in Webcam and microphone

Prices: 64GB model for \$999; 128GB model for \$1,199

13-inch model

Size: 12.8-by-8.94-by-.68 inches

Weight: 2.9 pounds

Battery life: Up to 7 hours of Web use; 30 days standby

Processor: 1.86 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo

Inputs: Two USB 2.0, Mini DisplayPort, headphone, built-in Webcam and microphone, SD card slot

Prices: 128GB model for \$1,299; 256GB model for \$1,599

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