

Review: It's not an iPhone 5, but so what?

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In this photo taken Monday Oct. 10, 2011, Siri, the new virtual assistant, is displayed on the new Apple iPhone 4S in San Francisco. The 4S will be available Friday in black or white. It will cost \$199-\$399, depending on included storage space, with a two-year service contract with Verizon Wireless, Sprint or AT&T. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

To some people, Apple's new iPhone 4S isn't the complete overhaul they have been hoping for. Its model number, which doesn't include a "5," reeks of the status quo.

That's ridiculous.

Sure, the 4S doesn't render the [iPhone 4](#) hopelessly obsolete, and on the

surface they're nearly identical. But with a faster processor, new software, a voice-activated personal assistant and a souped-up camera, it's a major improvement over the current [iPhone](#).

The 4S will be available Friday in black or white. It will cost \$199 to \$399, depending on [storage space](#). It requires a two-year [service contract](#) with [Verizon Wireless](#), [Sprint](#) or AT&T.

If you have an older model such as the 3GS or are thinking of making the move to the iPhone, it's an excellent excuse to buy one.

The coolest new feature on the 4S is Siri, a software-based [personal assistant](#) who responds to your voice in a somewhat robotic, yet soothing female tone.

Siri can do all sorts of things, from setting your alarm clock to finding a good local sushi joint to playing DJ with your music. She can't bring up specific websites, but she can search the Web for pretty much anything.

Once you let her know who you are and where you live, she can even do complex tasks such as reminding you to call your boyfriend when you leave your house.

She can understand conversational English, which is great because it let me speak as I normally would (though I did have to enunciate well). This means you can say things like, "what's happening today?" or "what's going on today?" and she'll let you know what's on your calendar.

She's also a dictation dynamo, transcribing emails and texts much better than a phone running Google Inc.'s Android software. It would be awesome if she could intelligently insert punctuation marks, but she does get them if you tell her "period" or "exclamation point."

For a particularly difficult test, I read a random paragraph from a copy of "The New Yorker" to the 4S and to an Android smartphone. Siri didn't get all the words correct, but she overwhelmingly beat the competition.

Of course, after spending all this time together, I wanted to know all about Siri. I asked her a bunch of personal questions, with mixed results. Her favorite color is something she doesn't know how to say in English - "sort of greenish, but with more dimensions." She changed the subject when I asked if she was seeing anyone.

Note for foul-language fans: Siri understands profanities, but she may chastise you. She did this to me, so I asked whether she had a problem with my language. She told me to get back to work. I apologized.

Beyond Siri, I was happy to see a better camera on the 4S, which has an 8-megapixel lens compared with 5 megapixels on the iPhone 4. My shots had sharper details as a result. The new camera can also take pictures faster, and a new lens gathers more light so pictures shot in dim lighting look better.

The addition of a camera icon on the phone's lock screen makes it easier to start snapping. Just double tap on the "home" button when the phone is asleep to bring up the icon, and tap that to open up the camera. Also, there's finally a physical camera button on the iPhone as the 4S's volume-up button does double duty.

You can even record high-definition videos in 1080p on the 4S - the best resolution currently available on a consumer camera.

The iPhone 4S has the latest version of Apple's mobile software, iOS 5, which seems geared toward making the phone even easier to use.

One of the best additions here is iMessage, which lets you send texts, photos or videos to other Apple devices over Wi-Fi or your wireless carrier's data network. That makes it easier send texts to iPads and other devices that aren't phones. It also saves you texts, if you're not on an unlimited text plan.

With the iOS 5 upgrade, swiping the top of the screen now brings up a handy notification page, which shows you things such as appointments, reminders, weather and stock quotes.

IOS 5 also gets points for allowing you to step away from your computer: You can set up your iPhone and receive software updates on the device itself, without plugging it in.

In addition, it includes Apple's new iCloud content-syncing software, which can store your content online and push it wirelessly to your devices. If you buy lots of digital content from [Apple](#), you'll like how it can automatically add songs, apps and e-books from Apple's iBookstore to all your iCloud-connected devices. Unfortunately, it doesn't do this with TV shows or movies, so you'll have to go into iTunes on the device to download them or sync the content from a computer.

The iPhone 4S's performance is helped by a new dual-core A5 chip, which is the same processor in the latest iPad. With this chip, the phone can process graphics and complete other tasks much faster. Web pages, especially graphics-heavy ones, loaded faster than they do on the iPhone 4.

Call quality was decent over Verizon Wireless' network, though it sounded a bit flat. Calls are supposed to be improved on the 4S with the inclusion of two antennas that it can use to receive or send data.

With location services on and using a combination of Wi-Fi and 3G

cellular service, I got about six hours of copious texting, websurfing, video-watching and calling out of the 4S. Given this, it should hold up fine during a day of normal use.

If you're not on the market for the latest gadget, you're not entirely left out: iOS 5, which includes iCloud, will be available Wednesday as a free update for the iPhone 4 and 3GS, both iPad models and later versions of the iPod Touch.

If you are lusting after the iPhone, however, the 4S is a great one to get, even if its name doesn't include a "5."

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