

Review: Galaxy S III strong contender to iPhone

June 20 2012, by ANICK JESDANUN



This June 19, 2012 photo shows Samsung's new Galaxy S III phone, left, next to an iPhone 4S in New York. The Galaxy S III, which looks and feels like an oversized iPhone, is available next week. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

(AP) — Until I started watching videos on Samsung's new Galaxy S III phone, I never thought of the iPhone's display as small.

The Galaxy's screen measures 4.8 inches (12.2 centimeters) diagonally, compared with 3.5 inches (8.9 centimeters) for the [iPhone](#). That translates to a display area that's nearly twice the size. Yet the Galaxy is thinner and lighter.

Apart from that, the Galaxy shares the iPhone's curvy and shiny design, along with a center button that wakes up the device from power-saving mode or takes you from whatever you're doing to a home screen.

Unlike the iPhone, the Galaxy runs on faster 4G cellular networks (AT&T markets its iPhones as 4G, but the network is based on older technology). The Galaxy also comes with a new wireless technology called near-field communications, which can be used to share files and make purchases.

Pictures taken with the Galaxy were sharper and had better light balance than those with the iPhone, based on a handful of test shots I took. The Galaxy's tool for measuring data usage — for those of us no longer on unlimited plans — surpasses what comes with the iPhone.

All that makes the Galaxy a strong contender to Apple's popular device.



This June 19, 2012 photo shows Samsung's new Galaxy S III phone, in New York. The Galaxy S III, which looks and feels like an oversized iPhone, is available next week. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

I understand the comparison isn't entirely fair. The iPhone 4S is about eight months old, and there's a new model expected this fall. Last week, Apple previewed changes to the phone's operating system, promising improvements to its Siri virtual assistant, a mapping service with voice navigation and more.

But the reality is the new Galaxy is available now — not in September or October.

All four national wireless companies and regional carrier U.S. Cellular will sell the Galaxy, which runs the latest operating software from

Google, a flavor of Android known as Ice Cream Sandwich.

The basic model with 16 gigabytes of memory will cost \$200 with a two-year contract through AT&T, Verizon Wireless, Sprint and U.S. Cellular. That's comparable to the iPhone's \$199. A 32 GB model will cost \$250, which is cheaper than a comparable iPhone at \$299. T-Mobile will charge at least \$30 more than others, though it may still be cheaper overall with lower monthly data fees over two years.

The Galaxy phones will be available in white or blue. AT&T will also have a red version this summer, but it won't carry the 32 GB model. Availability starts this week, though dates vary by wireless company.

Now back to Galaxy's screen.

The Galaxy shines when displaying widescreen video. That's because much of the display's increase is in width rather than in height when the phone is held on its side, or landscape mode. The iPhone wastes some display real estate to make wider videos fit. There are unused strips of black above and below those videos.

When watching a foreign movie through a Netflix app, the Galaxy's larger screen makes the subtitles much easier to read. I can read them fine on the iPhone, but my eyes kept zeroing in on the text to do so, making me miss the action.

The colors on the Galaxy also appeared richer, thanks to a screen that uses organic light-emitting diodes, rather than a standard LCD.

All that video can deplete your data allowance in no time.

On the iPhone, the tool for measuring data usage isn't easy to find. You have to choose "General" in your settings, then "Usage," and then

"Cellular Usage." There's info there on the amount of data sent and received, but no total. You have to remember to manually reset the counter each month on the day your billing cycle starts.



This June 19, 2012 photo shows the data usage screen on Samsung's new Galaxy S III phone, in New York. The Galaxy S III, which looks and feels like an oversized iPhone, is available next week. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

On the Galaxy, "Data usage" is the third item from the top under "Settings." You can tell the phone when to warn you that you're about to

reach your cap for the month. You can also automatically disable data usage when you've reached a pre-specified point to avoid extra charges. You don't have to do any math to get the total used, and the counter automatically resets each month. You can also see which apps use the most data.

Before I go further, I'll say a few things about where the iPhone still excels.

— The iPhone has more software from outside parties, extending the device's functionality. Many apps are written only for the iPhone and other Apple devices. Versions for the Galaxy and other Android phones sometimes come months later and lack all of the features.

— The iPhone works better than Android devices in corporate settings. Android, for instance, lacks the tools needed to access Wi-Fi at my office or the corporate email system (though some might consider that a plus for Android).

— The iPhone has Siri, the virtual assistant that hears your voice commands and talks back.

The Galaxy introduces a voice assistant, but she's best described as Siri's forgotten stepchild. The Galaxy couldn't find an Indian restaurant just a block from me, and she gave me the name of a doctor when I asked for Thai restaurants. The Galaxy also lacks Siri's attitude and sense of humor.

Me: "What is the best smartphone?" Siri: "Wait, there are other phones?"

The Galaxy replied with the grammatically incorrect and boring, "Opinion vary but I think Samsung Galaxy is the best of them all."

Here's where the Galaxy prevails:

— As with other Android devices, the Galaxy syncs well with Google services. By signing into a Google account, names, emails and phone numbers from my Gmail contacts are automatically transferred to the phone. The same happens with calendar entries. Apple uses a separate contact and calendar system, not the one I already use through Google.

— You can remove the plastic back cover to switch the battery or insert a microSD card for additional storage of up to 64 gigabytes. The iPhone's battery can be replaced only by a technician, and there's no slot for more storage.

— Both devices have two cameras, including an 8 megapixel one in the back. The Galaxy's front-facing camera does more than take pictures: When you're reading something, the camera will see your eyes glued on the screen, so your phone won't switch to power-saving mode. The iPhone's screen will start to dim if you don't touch it periodically.

— If you're texting a friend and find it easier to discuss something by phone, the Galaxy will automatically call that person when you put the phone by your ear.

— When watching video stored on your device, there's a "pop out" feature that lets you watch in a smaller window while doing other things such as email and Facebook on the phone.

— The Galaxy's near-field communications technology offers a preview of the future. One day, it could be common like Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. With it, I'm able to share photos and video simply by tapping the backs of two Galaxy phones together. I'm also able to make purchases at a handful of stores by tapping the phone to the merchant's NFC reader, as long as I have credit cards set up through the Google Wallet app.

Alas, Google Wallet isn't so useful until more merchants accept it, and the app is only available on the Sprint model of the Galaxy.

Basic sharing features, which let you swap small files, work with some other late-model Android phones. If you tap two Galaxy phones together, you can quickly transfer really big files, such as videos and photos.



This June 19, 2012 photo shows the front and back of Samsung's new Galaxy S III phone, in New York. The Galaxy S III, which looks and feels like an oversized iPhone, is available next week. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

All Galaxy models except T-Mobile's will be able to use so-called fourth-generation, or 4G, networks. T-Mobile doesn't have a 4G network, but its 3G network is almost as fast as a 4G network (and indeed, it calls its network "4G").

Current iPhones don't work with 4G technology, though the AT&T version says it does because it uses an upgraded 3G network, much like T-Mobile's. The iPhone coming this fall is likely to support "real" 4G, using a technology called LTE.

The next iPhone will also have an Apple-designed mapping service with turn-by-turn directions spoken aloud. It's one of the rare instances where the iPhone will play catch-up to Android, which has had Google's voice navigation app built-in since 2009.



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If you're an iPhone owner looking for a new phone, I'd wait a few months and make a comparison then.

If you're an Android user looking to switch to an iPhone, the Galaxy offers enough reason to stick with Android. You'll miss out on the cachet of owning an iPhone or the joys of chatting with Siri, but you'll get a solid device with the latest technologies.

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