

## Gift Guide: Strong slate of iPad challengers

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In this Thursday, Nov. 28, 2013 file photo, Sebastian Valenzuela, left, and his older brother Alberto compare prices for iPad tablets at a Best Buy late in the evening on Thanksgiving Day, in Dunwoody, Ga. iPads are still among the best tablets, but Apple has strong, cheaper challengers this holiday season. (AP Photo/David Tulis, File)

Once upon a time, people who craved a tablet computer bought an iPad.

But Apple faces its strongest slate of challengers this holiday season, with several tablets besting the trend-setting iPad on price and features.

There are still plenty of reasons to get an iPad—either the full-size iPad Air starting at \$499 or the iPad Mini at \$399. Versions of both are available for \$100 less, but you get a slower device with a lower-resolution screen. The Air is lighter and thinner than previous full-size models, and it feels nice in your hands.

Whichever one you get for your loved one, the iPad offers this:

— An unmatched selection of high-quality apps, many of them adapted for the tablet's larger screen. Many apps for Android tablets are simply phone apps blown up, while the Windows app store has a smaller selection.

— A screen with a 4:3 aspect ratio. That's the standard size for photos and older television shows, and it displays more content when Web surfing with the tablet held horizontally. That said, the wider aspect ratio found on Android and Windows tablets are better for widescreen video.

— Great syncing with other Apple devices, if the recipient of your gift has any. When setting up an Apple TV streaming device, for instance, you can simply place your iPad near it and bypass screens of prompts. Directions on the Mac's new Maps app can be sent to the iPad with two clicks. You can read and reply to iPhone texts from the iPad or a Mac.

But for a top-notch experience, you'll pay a top-notch price. That's where Android tablets come in.

You can get Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Fire HDX 8.9 for \$120 less than the iPad Air, at \$379. It's even lighter, by about 17 percent, though I couldn't feel much of a difference holding the two side by side. The Kindle's screen has a higher resolution, but the display measures just 8.9 inches (22.6 centimeters) diagonally compared with the Air's 9.7 inches (24.6 centimeters).

For a smaller tablet, you can get a 7-inch (17.5-centimeter) Kindle Fire HDX or a 7-inch Google Nexus 7 for \$229, or \$170 less than the latest iPad Mini.

With the Mini, though, you get a larger screen, at 7.9 inches (20 centimeters). LG Electronics' G Pad 8.3 offers an 8.3-inch (21-centimeter) screen for \$350, or about \$50 less than the Mini. Sync the G Pad with an Android phone to see who's calling on your tablet, though you still need the phone to answer it. You can read and reply to texts from the tablet, as long as they don't have photos or video attached. You're limited to one reply and can't initiate a text from the tablet, however. That's where iPads do better.

As for the Kindle, there's one important limitation. The Kindle runs a modified version of Android, and only a subset of Android apps works on it.

On the flip side, Amazon is alone in offering live tech support 24 hours a day, seven hours a week. Hit the "Mayday" button on an HDX, and a representative will appear in a video box within seconds. The representatives can only hear you and see what's on your screen. They can help guide you by placing orange markers on your screen or taking control of your device completely. This feature makes the Kindle excellent for your tech-challenged loved ones. Just train them to call Mayday—rather than you—every time the device's volume needs adjusting.

Owners of Samsung phones might prefer a companion tablet, such as the \$550 Galaxy Note 10.1. Sporting a stylus and several note-taking features, the Note is good for those who handwrite a lot of notes. But beware: The tablet's text-recognition software makes plenty of mistakes.

Avid readers, meanwhile, might be drawn to an Arc tablet from e-book

specialist Kobo. Prices range from \$150 to \$400 depending on screen size and quality. The home screen has quick access to books and recommendations. A reading mode blocks distractions such as notifications and sounds, while adjusting screen brightness. You can even turn Wi-Fi off completely in reading mode to avoid temptations to check email and Facebook.

Some Android tablets also address one of the iPad's major shortcomings: It's not meant for sharing. The Nexus, the G Pad and the Arc tablets are among those that let you create multiple profiles. The Nexus also lets you restrict what kids can do under their profiles, though that feature is rudimentary.

Beyond Android, you have plenty of Windows tablets to choose from, all with multi-user capabilities. The app selection is limited compared with iPads and most Android tablets. But Windows tablets are the only ones to offer a full version of Microsoft's Office software. It's free with tablets running a lightweight version of Windows 8.1 called RT. With iPads and Android tablets, you're limited to Web versions of Office.

Microsoft sells a 10.6-inch (27-centimeter) RT tablet, the Surface 2, for \$449. For \$130 more, you can get a keyboard cover with keys that move. A more powerful version, the Surface Pro 2, starts at \$899. It runs a regular version of Windows 8.1, meaning it can run older Windows programs, not just ones designed for RT. Microsoft markets these as laptop replacements, and the cover has been redesigned such that it works better for typing on your lap.

A newcomer to [tablets](#) is Nokia, traditionally a phone maker. Nokia's first-ever tablet, the Lumia 2520, has a brightly colored plastic back that helps it stand out in a crowd.

It costs \$499, the same as the iPad's starting price. But it comes with

access to 4G LTE cellular networks, something that costs \$130 more for iPads and \$100 for the Kindle. That's something really useful for those away from Wi-Fi a lot. Data charges aren't included. Price reductions are available with service contracts or bundled with Nokia smartphones.

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