

Review: Windows OS hobbles Nokia's impressive Lumia Icon

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Nokia's new Lumia Icon smartphone offers a lot of compelling features. But they don't make up for the fact that the device runs Windows Phone software, which has proved unpopular with both consumers and developers.

The Icon is Nokia's new flagship phone for Verizon Wireless. It comes

with many of the features you'll find on other high-end smartphones: a high-resolution, 5-inch display; a large, long-lived battery; a fast processor and the ability to transmit data over the high-speed LTE network.

Nokia has tried to distinguish the Icon by giving it a super-sharp camera and a suite of custom applications. Its 20-megapixel camera is one of the highest-resolution cameras you'll find in a smartphone.

As many consumers have learned over the years, more megapixels don't necessarily mean better pictures. But in this case, it does. Compared with my iPhone 5S, which has an 8-megapixel camera, pictures shot on the Icon were generally sharper and had truer colors. The Icon also seemed to do a better job in low ambient light or with a lot of contrast between bright and dark areas.

The camera isn't as fast as the iPhone's; it frequently takes a second or so to focus before shooting a picture. But it offers users many more options to customize their shots. You can manually set or adjust everything from the focus to the shutter speed to the white balance, none of which can be adjusted in the iPhone's native camera app.

Still other neat features on the Icon's camera app include a mode called "smart sequence" that allows users to shoot a burst of 10 photos at four frames a second. After you take the pictures, you can choose the best shot among them, replace a person's face from one shot with their face from an earlier or later one, combine multiple exposures into an action shot, or blur the background of the combined photos to focus on the moving objects within them.

Nokia has supplemented its main camera app with one that allows users to take panoramic photos, and another that allows users to edit pictures after they've taken them.

That app, called Nokia Creative Studio, allows users to preview what their photos will look like if certain filters are applied. What's more fun is that it's easy for users to blur the background of their pictures or have only particular items within them be in color while the rest of the scene is changed to black-and-white.

Another camera app Nokia has made available for the Icon is something called Cinemagraph, which allows users to create pictures that look like stop-motion animations, with people or pets or other objects moving within a still background. I'm not sure how often an app like that would come in handy, but it's fun to play with.

The most compelling non-camera app for the Icon is Here Maps, Nokia's answer to Google Maps. Like that app, Here Maps offers point-to-point directions for drivers and pedestrians. But unlike Google Maps, Here Maps stores its maps on the device, so you don't have to worry about losing your maps if you are out of cellular range.

One cool thing about Here Maps is an augmented reality feature called LiveSight, which overlays icons representing points of interest on top of a live view of your surroundings taken from the camera. Using the phone's compass and GPS antenna, LiveSight can point you to nearby retailers, restaurants or parks. If you tap on any of their icons, you can get phone numbers, street addresses and user reviews. The app also has what looks like a radar display that shows a 360-degree view of all the points of interest in the area.

But for all its fine features, the Icon has some notable shortcomings.

Its design is pedestrian - a plain black slab that offers none of the flash of the gold iPhone or the curved LG G Flex. It's also thicker and heavier than the iPhone 5S and the Galaxy S4, giving it a blocky feel.

But the bigger problem with the Icon is that it runs Windows Phone, which is a distant third behind Android and Apple with less than 4 percent of the worldwide smartphone market.

Many apps simply aren't available because the Windows Phone market is, at best, an afterthought for developers. Apps I use regularly that aren't available on Windows Phone include those from State Farm and American Express, MapMyDogWalk, Google Voice, Google Hangouts and AT&T's U-verse remote. You'll find that many of the most popular iPhone and Android apps aren't in the Windows Phone store.

While I like the Icon and am impressed with Nokia's software, it's hard to recommend it because your app choices are far too limited.

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NOKIA LUMIA ICON SMARTPHONE:

-Likes: Sharp, high-resolution screen; long-lived battery; high-resolution camera; suite of easy-to-use, powerful photography apps; offline maps, augmented reality feature in Here Maps

-Dislikes: Pedestrian, blocky design; relatively heavy and thick; limited number and diversity of available apps

-Specs: 2.2GHz quad-core processor; 5-inch, 1920 x 1080 pixel screen; 1.2-megapixel front and 20-megapixel rear cameras; 32GB storage

-Price: \$200 with two-year Verizon contract

-Web: [nokia](http://nokia.com).com or vzw.com

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