

Review: Roku's Streaming Stick offers loads of content in small package

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Roku's line of digital media players have long been among my favorite ways of getting Internet videos to the TV.

Now the company has added a new device to its lineup that's smaller, cheaper and more versatile. It's not perfect, but Roku's new Streaming Stick is a heck of a good deal.

Roku is best known for offering a line of hockey-puck-sized streaming media adapters. Those are fairly discreet devices, but the new Streaming Stick tops them, because you likely won't ever see it once it's plugged in. It's the size of a stick of gum and plugs directly into an HDMI port, typically found on the back of your television.

Like Roku's previous devices, the Streaming Stick is fairly easy to set up. After inserting it into you TV's HDMI port, you plug it into a power source via an included cable that can be connected to a USB port on your TV or to a power outlet. Once you turn on your TV, you'll need to connect it to your Wi-Fi network; unlike some other Roku models, the Streaming Stick doesn't have an Ethernet port.

Once you have it up and running, the Streaming Stick works much the same as previous Roku devices. Using either the included remote or an app on your smartphone or tablet, you can browse a selection of Internet channels or search across many of them for particular movies, television shows or actors.

Roku's channel selection is one of the biggest advantages of its devices. Users can choose from among some 1,200 different channels, including not only popular providers of Internet content such as Netflix, Amazon, Facebook and Pandora, but also lots of obscure and niche channels and 35 international ones.

In the past year, the company also filled one of the biggest holes in its lineup - YouTube - which you can now download to the Streaming Stick and other Roku players. You still can't easily get movies and TV shows from Apple's iTunes store onto a Roku device, but that's one of its few remaining shortcomings in terms of content. And given that Amazon and Vudu - both of which have Roku channels - offer similar selections of videos, you may not be missing much.

The Streaming Stick is one of only two Roku devices that supports a feature called DIAL, which is short for Discovery and Launch. This feature allows users to find videos on their smartphones or tablets and beam them to their televisions. The video stream gets sent directly to a [digital media](#) player like the Streaming Stick, rather than being relayed through the smartphone or tablet, so it doesn't wear down the battery of the handheld device.

This type of feature is the primary way users interact with Google's similarly sized Chromecast. On the Streaming Stick, owners can use the feature to search for and then beam videos from Netflix and YouTube to their TVs.

At \$50, the Streaming Stick is half the price of Apple TV and only about \$15 more than the Chromecast. But it offers far more channels than either of those gadgets.

But as much as I like the Streaming Stick, I do have some quibbles.

I found it sluggish in loading channels, particularly Netflix and Hulu. Instead of an "instant" experience, you can find yourself staring at the big red Netflix logo for a minute or two waiting for the [channel](#) to come up.

It's also not as easy to get videos or music from your computer to your TV with the Streaming Stick as it is with the Apple TV box. You have several ways to do that on Roku, but you have to install and configure separate applications on the box and on your computer, which can be a difficult and time-consuming process.

Also, the Roku user experience is less polished than Apple's. Unlike Apple TV, which tries to offer a similar interface in each of its applications, each of the channels on the Streaming Stick offers its own separate experience. There's little commonality in the way you navigate or interact with each one, which can be confusing.

Still, there's a lot to like about the Streaming Stick. It offers a huge number of Internet channels at a low price and in a small package.

ROKU STREAMING STICK DIGITAL MEDIA PLAYER:

-Likes: Small and discreet; inexpensive; offers 1,200 Internet channels, including many of the most popular ones, allows users to beam some videos from smartphone apps to TV, easy to set up.

-Dislikes: Somewhat sluggish in loading channels; user experience isn't well polished; can be difficult to get it to play movies or music from your computer.

-Price: \$50

-Web: roku.com

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