

# Review: Samsung Alpha big on design, short on tech

September 24 2014, by Anick Jesdanun

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This product image provided by Samsung shows the Samsung Alpha Phone. The Alpha will be available in the U.S. starting Friday, Sept. 26, 2014, through AT&T. (AP Photo/Samsung)

Apple filled a gaping hole in its product lineup with new iPhones boasting larger screens like Samsung's flagship Galaxy smartphones. Now, Samsung is coming out with a smaller phone that looks and feels more like an iPhone.

The new iPhones measure 4.7 inches and 5.5 inches diagonally, up from 4 inches before. Still, that's smaller than the 5.1 inches on the Galaxy S5 and the 5.7 inches on the Galaxy Note 3 and 4 phones.

But even Samsung is stepping back from its recent practice of releasing ever-bigger phones. The new Galaxy Alpha matches the 4.7 inches on the iPhone 6 and has a metal frame like the new iPhones, reflecting Samsung's attempt to mirror Apple's emphasis on design.

Unfortunately, the Alpha falls short in a few ways, including the resolution of its display. Other shortcomings will become apparent as I go through the various features.

The Alpha will be available in the U.S. starting Friday through AT&T. It will cost \$200 with a two-year service contract, or \$613 without one. The \$613 price, which can be paid in installments, is less than the \$650 starting price for the Galaxy S5 and the iPhone 6. You also get double the storage with the Alpha, but it's still a high price to pay for technology that isn't top of the line.

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#### — THE BUILD:

The Alpha's metal frame represents a departure from previous Samsung Galaxy phones, which primarily consisted of polycarbonate plastics.

However, the Alpha still has a plastic back, albeit one that feels smoother and nicer than what's on the S5. You can swap in a spare battery, but can't add a memory card.

What struck me most was how the Alpha feels much like last year's iPhone 5s. The sides are smooth and straight, and the edges are at right angles, like the box for a deck of cards. The corners, though, are curved.

By contrast, the new iPhones feature curved edges, so they feel thinner, lighter and less boxy. But the Alpha is actually smaller, thinner and lighter than the iPhone 6—by a tad. Compared with both, the S5 feels giant.

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#### — THE SCREEN:

Size isn't all that matters. The screens on the iPhone 6 and the S5 are both sharper than the Alpha's. The Alpha's screen is decent for reading text and viewing images, but it's about the same resolution as what Samsung built into the Galaxy S III phone back in 2012.

Like other Samsung phones, the Alpha uses a screen technology called AMOLED, for active-matrix organic light-emitting diodes. This is designed to produce richer colors than iPhones, but sometimes the technology goes overboard. For instance, some people complain that AMOLED technology distorts color, so human skin looks too orange, for instance. There was a hint of that when viewing photos and video, but not enough to bother me.

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#### — THE CAMERA:

The Alpha's camera is 12 megapixels, less than the 16 megapixels on the S5. Although the Alpha's megapixel count is still higher than the iPhone's 8 megapixels, Apple has squeezed many other technological touches into iPhones to deliver consistently good images.

I took dozens of photos with all three phones and found the megapixel count mattered only in a handful. In good light, street signs and posters on a store window across the street came out slightly better on both Samsung phones.

However, the iPhone 6 was typically better at getting the focus right, particularly for low-light and close-up shots. The iPhone 6 quickly captures text on a bottle of contact lens solution, while it took a few tries with the Samsung phones to get the focusing right.

On some evening shots of the New York skyline, I could make out the rectangular windows of apartment buildings when using the iPhone, thanks to anti-shake stabilization technology. With both Samsung phones, the lights from the windows were bleeding into one another.

In my test shots, the iPhone 6 also had better white balance to offset the yellowish coloring of indoor lighting. That said, the Alpha produced the richest colors in a few of my shots.

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#### — THE REMAINING HARDWARE:

Like the S5, the Alpha has a heart-rate monitor for fitness apps and a fingerprint sensor to unlock the phone. But the Alpha lacks the S5's waterproof coverings. The new iPhones have only the fingerprint sensor. The Alpha and the iPhone 6 have comparable battery life in my tests.

The Alpha's storage stands out. It offers 32 gigabytes for about the same price as a 16-gigabyte phone from most rivals. With the new iPhones, Apple has doubled the storage in the pricier models, but the base models are still at 16 gigabytes. Most phones cost \$100 more for a 32-gigabyte version.

Even with the added storage, the Alpha just seems too expensive for what you get. Given that memory costs have been coming down, more storage ought to be as routine as faster processors in each generation of phones.

The Alpha's design is impressive, but the rest of the phone is only adequate. HTC and Apple, for instance, have both been able to produce stunning designs while squeezing in the latest technologies.

Apple has made design central to its iPhones since its first model in 2007. Samsung seems to embracing the importance of design with the Alpha. Along the same lines, the upcoming Galaxy Note 4 phone will have a similar metal frame as Samsung attempts to ratchet up its rivalry with Apple. With better hardware, that phone will have a better chance than the Alpha at challenging the new iPhones.

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