

Review: Better cameras, less glare in iPad Air 2

October 22 2014, by Anick Jesdanun



In this Oct. 16, 2014 file photo, the iPad Air 2 is displayed for journalists at Apple headquarters in Cupertino, Calif. Apple unveiled the thinner iPad with a faster processor and a better camera as it tries to drive excitement for tablets amid slowing demand. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

If I've seen you taking photos with a tablet computer, I've probably made fun of you (though maybe not to your face, depending on how big you are). I'm old school: I much prefer looking through the viewfinder of my full-bodied, single-lens reflex camera, even though it has a large LCD

screen.

But as I tested out Apple's new iPad Air 2, I see why people like to shoot pictures with a tablet. Images look great on the large screen, and there's less guesswork about whether or not small details, such as lettering on a sign, will be in focus.

And what you see—and get—with the iPad Air 2 is a better camera. The rear one now matches the iPhone's 8 megapixels, up from 5 megapixels, and incorporates features such as slow-motion video. Packed with a faster processor, the 9.7-inch tablet is also 18 percent thinner and 7 percent lighter than the previous model, at about a quarter of an inch and just under a pound.

Apple is also updating its 7.9-inch iPad Mini, though the cameras, processor and dimensions haven't changed.

The tablets go on sale this week, starting at \$499 for the iPad Air 2 and \$399 for the iPad Mini 3. Both now have fingerprint ID technology to expedite online purchases through Apple Pay. Gold joins silver and grey as color choices, and pricier models have twice as much storage as before.

IMPROVED CAMERA

The iPad Air 2 takes sharper images. I can tell even before snapping the shot because I see all that detail on the screen. I'm able to read the small name tag on a baby bottle. Lettering on a van across the street looks clearer.

Last month's iOS 8 software update brought panorama and time-lapse

features to the iPad. With the iPad Air 2, you can snap 10 shots per second in a burst mode—great for restless kids, as you can choose the best shots later. You also get slow-motion video, though only at 120 frames per second. The new iPhone 6 and 6 Plus offer 240 frames per second as well, so motion looks even slower.

The new Air's front camera gets a burst mode, too, and the front sensor is better than before at capturing light for indoor and night selfies.



In this Oct. 16, 2014, file photo, the iPad Air 2, left, and iPad Mini 3 are displayed for journalists at Apple headquarters in Cupertino, Calif. Apple unveiled the thinner iPad with a faster processor and a better camera as it tries to drive excitement for tablets amid slowing demand. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Unfortunately, the iPad still doesn't have a flash. Although I prefer

taking shots with natural light anyway, a lot of people like the flash. My advice is to light subjects with the iPhone's flashlight.

BETTER VIEWING AND SOUND

An anti-reflective coating reduces glare on the iPad Air 2. It's a first for Apple and possibly a first for any consumer mobile device. I was dubious until I watched video with light shining in through my window. The coating didn't eliminate glare completely, but made video viewable. The glare was too distracting on last year's Air.

The coating also promises to improve contrast. However, I had to look hard to notice differences in some dull-color scenes in Showtime's "Homeland." In many cases, the quality of the video stream makes a bigger difference.

To me, the iPad Air 2 also has better speakers. With the volume cranked all the way up, sound is louder on the new model. Apple says there shouldn't be a difference, though I'm not complaining. (My neighbors might, though.)

OTHER CHANGES

I'm glad to see the fingerprint ID sensor for unlocking both new tablets. Passcodes seem so last century, not to mention inconvenient.



In this Oct. 16, 2014, file photo, the thinness of the new iPad Air 2 is demonstrated at Apple headquarters in Cupertino, Calif. Apple unveiled the thinner iPad with a faster processor and a better camera as it tries to drive excitement for tablets amid slowing demand. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

That fingerprint can now be used to authorize Apple Pay purchases in apps. Unlike the new iPhones, the iPad doesn't have a wireless chip needed for in-store transactions. Then again, I'd probably mock anyone who tried to wave a giant device over a cashier's payment terminal. But I can see myself choosing a tablet over a phone for online shopping, and the fingerprint with Apple Pay will work nicely for that.

For the iPad Air 2 only, there's a faster Wi-Fi technology called 802.11ac, though you need new home-networking equipment to take advantage of it. The Air also gets a barometer sensor to track elevation in fitness apps.

THE BARGAIN

Last year's iPad Air was a huge improvement over the 2012 iPad, so this year's update seems small by comparison. The improvements might not be enough for existing iPad Air owners to upgrade, but there's enough there for those who have older models or are getting their first tablets.

The update in the iPad Mini is less pronounced. That makes it less tempting to save \$100 by going for the Mini. For the same price as an iPad Mini 3, you can get last year's full-size iPad with similar technical specifications. Bargain hunters should consider previous versions of the Mini, including the original model for \$249, the cheapest iPad yet.

If you can afford it, though, spend more for added storage. For \$599, you get an iPad Air 2 with 64 gigabytes, compared with 16 GB in the \$499 base model. For \$699, you get 128 GB. You'll be surprised how quickly your iPad fills up with photos and video—especially now that I won't mock you.

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