

Review: Standout phone features, but do you need?

December 8 2014, byAnick Jesdanun



In this Sept. 3, 2014, file photo, the curved display of a Samsung Galaxy Note Edge is pictured during an 'Unpacked event' at the IFA, one of the world's largest trade fairs for consumer electronics and electrical home appliances in Berlin, Germany. The 5.6-inch Note Edge is a variant of the Galaxy Note 4, the latest iteration of Samsung's large-screen stalwart. The Edge's main display curves around the right edge of the phone to create a side display for notifications and one-tap access to apps, headlines and tasks. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, File)

There's an Android phone for everyone. Need to swim with it? Get a

waterproof model. Travel a lot? Get one with longer battery life.

The novel features in these phones aren't going to be necessities for everyone. But if you're in need of that particular feature, you're going to love it.

Prices listed are without contract requirements. With two-year contracts, carriers typically offer substantial discounts on phones, but charge higher monthly service fees.

SAMSUNG GALAXY NOTE EDGE (\$840 to \$946, depending on carrier)

The 5.6-inch Note Edge is a variant of the Galaxy Note 4, the latest iteration of Samsung's large-screen stalwart. The Edge's main display curves around the right edge of the phone to create a side display for notifications and one-tap access to apps, headlines and tasks.

That side screen is useful in a few ways. When using the camera horizontally, the shutter and other controls are up top, just like a regular camera. When listening to music, playback controls are instantly available. At night, the weather, current time and wake-up time are displayed on the side, so you can easily check as the phone lays on a nightstand.

The Edge needs more apps to take advantage of that side screen. There are about a dozen, but few of which I care to have. And the side text is sometimes upside down when the phone rests face up. It's a first-generation feature, and it'll take time for Samsung and app developers to figure out what works best.



In this Sept. 3, 2014, file photo, a person looks at the Sony Xperia Z3 smartphone and smart watch at the consumer electronics trade fair IFA in Berlin. Like previous Xperia models, the 5.2-inch Xperia Z3 is waterproof. You can take it to the pool or the beach without worry, as long as you remember to close the covers for the charging port and other slots. (AP Photo/Steffi Loos, File)

Like the Note 4, the Edge has an excellent camera, a vibrant display and a stylus for doodling and handwriting. It has a fingerprint sensor and a heart-rate monitor, both still rare in smartphones. But you're paying about \$100 more for the Edge, mostly for that side screen.

The Edge is also slightly wider, and its battery doesn't last as long—a few hours less of streaming video in my tests. Get the Edge over the Note 4 only if you can think of a need for that side screen.

SONY XPERIA Z3 (available from T-Mobile for \$630, Z3v variant from Verizon for \$600)

Like previous Xperia models, the 5.2-inch Xperia Z3 is waterproof. You can take it to the pool or the beach without worry, as long as you remember to close the covers for the charging port and other slots. The headphone port can remain open so you can listen to your tunes.

The volume key turns into a shutter button to shoot photos underwater. The touch screen itself isn't responsive when wet. And you have to start the video before you jump in. Sony says the phone is safe up to 5 feet underwater for up to 30 minutes.

The Xperia phones aren't the only water-friendly phones available. Kyocera has a line that's built not just to repel water but to withstand all kinds of abuse. Samsung's Galaxy S5 is water resistant, which means it will withstand accidental dunking but isn't meant for serious underwater use. The Note phones, however, don't have any water protection.

Owners of Sony's PlayStation 4 can use the Z3's display rather than a TV to watch shows on the porch or in another room. In addition, the Z3's camera has one of the most light-sensitive sensors in a smartphone, although many low-light shots looked washed out and out of focus in my tests.

MOTOROLA DROID TURBO (available from Verizon for \$600)

Most of us take it for granted that smartphones need to be recharged every night. But it's not practical for everyone, especially while traveling, and heavy users might not even get through the day.

The 5.2-inch Droid Turbo promises a full two days of mixed usage, thanks to its 3,900-milliampere-hour battery. Even larger phones—which can fit larger batteries—don't have as much capacity. The Note 4 has 3,220 and the Note Edge has 3,000, for instance.

Those numbers translated to 12.5 hours of streaming video on the Turbo. That said, I was able to get similar amounts with the Note 4 and the Z3, which has a 3,100 mAh battery. Neither is as bulky as the Turbo.

With the quick-charge adapter that comes with the Turbo, I got from zero to 50 percent in about 45 minutes and a full charge in less than two hours. It took about six or seven hours with a regular charger. The Note phones have similar capabilities, but most of the others do not.

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