

New Acer Ultrabook is no MacBook Air, but it's not bad

November 11 2011, By Troy Wolverton



I'm a big fan of Apple's MacBook Air computer. Revamped by Apple last year, the notebook is a thin, ultralight, speedy computer. Instead of a high-powered processor, a traditional hard drive and a DVD slot, the gadget uses a low-power chip and flash storage - the same medium that's used to store songs and apps in a smartphone.

Pushed by Intel, other computer makers have been trying to copy Apple's success. Intel has come up with a concept it calls the ultrabook, which is something like a [MacBook](#) Air without Apple's [Mac OS X](#) running on it.

One of the first ultrabooks on the market is Acer's Aspire S3. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the S3 looks a lot like the MacBook Air. It has the same 13.3-inch screen as the larger of Apple's two basic Air models. It has about the same dimensions and weight as that model. And it has a metallic colored case that bears more than a passing resemblance to the all-aluminum Air.

The S3 does have some significant differences, though, some good and some not so much. On the positive side, it's considerably less expensive. The base S3 costs \$900, which is about \$100 less than the entry-level Apple machine. And for that, you get a 13-inch screen instead of an 11-inch one and twice as much memory.

One reason that Acer is able to offer the S3 at a lower price is that unlike the Air, it doesn't rely solely on a pricey flash drive for storage. Instead, it includes a small flash drive as a boot disc and a much larger hard drive on which you can store your programs, documents, videos, songs and the like.

The advantage of this approach is that it allows you to have a machine that starts up and resumes operation quickly while still having plenty of [storage space](#) at a moderate price. On the flip side, hard drives tend to use more power than flash drives, and they tend to be more prone to failure.

Acer is coming out with a version of the S3 that uses just a flash drive, but it will be priced more in the neighborhood of Apple's high-end MacBook Air.

I generally liked the S3. Just as with the Air, I love how lightweight it is. And in my testing, it was about as responsive as the Air. I was able to get it up and running from a cold boot in little more than a minute, including the time it takes to log in, and able to shut it down in less than 20 seconds.

If it's in a simple sleep mode - meaning its case was closed for less than a few hours - you can get it up and running within a few seconds.

In this regard, the S3 was easily one of the fastest Windows machines I've used. Given all the time in my life that's been wasted waiting for a Windows machine to start up or shut down, that's a big plus in my book.

But there were a number of things I didn't like about the S3. One was that the fan kicked on even when I didn't seem to be stressing the device.

One of the things I loved about the [MacBook Air](#) was just how quiet it is. I've almost never heard its fan running, except when I'm trying to get it to run a high-end game that it wasn't designed to play.

But the S3's fan was far more noticeable. One time it turned on when all I had open was a Web browser and I was using less than 40 percent of its processing power. Another time, it turned on while doing a simple update to the operating system.

I also saw less battery life than expected with the S3. Acer says users should get up to six hours of use on the computer with normal use. But I got something closer to three or four hours instead. Worse yet, one time the computer ran out of power completely and shut down without notifying me that the battery was getting low.

A nitpick: I just didn't like the S3's trackpad. Like Apple, Acer has eschewed individual buttons on the trackpad for one big, clickable

surface. To left click, you depress the left side of the trackpad; to right click, you depress the right side.

It would seem easy enough, except with Acer's trackpad, I found myself repeatedly right-clicking when I wanted to left click. It was as if the dividing line between the two was set too far to the left; unfortunately, I couldn't find any way to adjust it.

Still, for Windows users and fans, the S3 is a good option. It's lightweight, well-designed and, for what it offers, relatively inexpensive. It's not powerful enough to be your primary computer, but for use on the couch or to travel with, it's not bad.

ACER ASPIRE S3 NOTEBOOK COMPUTER:

-Likes: Lightweight, speedy startup and shutdown times, relatively inexpensive

-Dislikes: Noisy fan runs frequently, battery doesn't last as long as expected, trackpad difficult to use

-Specs: 1.6 GHz Intel Core i5 dual-core processor; 13.3-inch screen; 4 gigabytes of DRAM; 20-gigabyte [flash drive](#) (for bootup); 320-gigabyte [hard drive](#)

-Price: \$900

-Web: [acer.com](#)

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