

Review: Google's entry into smartphone design has some very cool features

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I always thought Google was missing out on a great opportunity in not having its own phone to take advantage of its Android operating system.

Apple learned early on that controlling entire hardware and software systems was the way to go, but Google seemed content to just work on the software end.

Sure, there were a few forgettable Google-branded Nexus phones, but they were far from the best Android handsets.

Now Google has decided to dive in head-first and design its own phones, the Google Pixel and Pixel XL. HTC is building the phones, but the design is all Google's.

Let's get one thing out of the way first - Google's Pixel looks like an iPhone.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. Apple has sold millions of iPhones, and the design and look are proven hits.

But even though it looks like an iPhone and costs

the same as the iPhone (starting at \$650), there are hardware differences that are worth mentioning.

HARDWARE AND SPECS

I've been using the non-XL Pixel for the last few weeks, so my hands-on thoughts will focus on the smaller version.

The Pixel is built around a 5-inch AMOLED screen made from Corning Gorilla Glass 4 with a resolution of 1920 by 1080 pixels (441 pixels per inch).

It runs a Qualcomm Snapdragon 821 quad-core processor with four gigabytes of RAM and ships with 32 gigabytes or 128 gigabytes of storage. The sleep-wake button is high on the right edge, but the volume rocker button is also on the right. This put all the buttons comfortably under your thumb (if you're right-handed).

The big difference in the Pixel's design is the placement of the fingerprint sensor on the phone's back, which happens to be exactly where my index finger rests when I'm holding the phone.

Putting the fingerprint reader on the back isn't really better or worse than the iPhone's front placement - it's a matter of taste.

Because the Pixel chose the back, I have to pick up the phone to unlock it with my finger. I do find I keep my iPhone lying on my desk, so I am able to just touch my finger to the reader without picking up the phone to check a message or text.

The body is made of aluminum, but the top third of the phone's backside is also glass.

The main camera has a 12-megapixel sensor and an f/2.0 lens. The front camera has an 8-megapixel sensor with an f/2.4 lens.

The camera is top-notch. The Pixel is on par with

Apple's iPhone 7 or Samsung's Galaxy S7 Edge. I can't say enough nice things about the camera on the Pixel.

I also love invoking the camera app by a quick double flip of the phone or double tapping the sleep-wake button.

Google also includes unlimited cloud storage for all photos and videos taken with the Pixel.

The charger is USB-C, which seems to be where the world is headed (except for iPhones). The Pixel's USB-C port uses the faster USB 3.0, which means much faster transfers.

According to Google, 15 minutes of USB-C charging from the included 18-watt power supply will provide seven hours of power.

The Pixel's physical dimensions are 5.6 inches by 2.7 inches by 0.2 inches, and it weighs 5.04 ounces. It's about a quarter of an inch longer than my iPhone 6s.

The 2,770 ampere-hour battery easily lasted a day for my use.

You'll find the usual radios - 802.11ac Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 4.2 along with near field communication.

There are a few features you won't find on the Pixel, including water resistance and stereo speakers (there's just one). There is no slot for adding storage, and the Pixel does not have wireless charging.

ANDROID IN ALL ITS GLORY

You may have used Android phones before, but you really haven't used Android as Google intended.

Different wireless carriers and phone manufacturers put their own software on top of Android, often cluttering up the landscape.

The Pixel runs pure, unadulterated Android 7.1, and it's the only phone to feature Google's new Assistant.

Simply say "OK, Google," and you'll invoke the Google Assistant, which will answer questions, manage tasks, find photos, entertain you and help you stay on schedule.

I think Google's Assistant is much better than Apple's Siri. You can have an actual conversation with Assistant.

I asked the Assistant how to get to a local park, and the directions from my location were displayed on a Google map. Then I asked, "When was it built?" and the Assistant brought up an article about the park and when it was built.

Very cool.

There are some other Android tweaks you'll notice. I had to look up the way you call up the app list on the Pixel. With other Android phones, you'll have an icon to bring up all the apps. On the Pixel, you swipe up from the bottom of the screen to bring up the apps.

The apps are also pretty uniform in their appearance. All the included app icons are round. Third-party apps still can be shaped differently, but I like the round look.

Overall the phone was very snappy and responsive.

CONCLUSIONS

I'm really happy Google has decided to get into the phone game. The company has the most popular operating system, and it's about time it designed its own hardware to take advantage of it.

I'm a longtime iPhone user, so I'm a sucker for the design. I'm still on the fence about the fingerprint sensor placement.

There is a lot to like about the Pixel and Pixel XL. I realize this isn't an in-depth review, but there are plenty of places online to find those.

The Pixel is a hit with me, and it joins the iPhone and Samsung Galaxy 7 phones in the top tier of handsets.

I can't wait to see what Google does with the next version of the Pixel

The Pixel costs \$649 and the XL costs \$769 for the 32gb model. Add \$100 to each to increase the storage to 128gb. They are available from Google, Verizon stores or Best Buy. You might see commercials or websites that say the Pixel is a Verizon exclusive, but that's just for sales. If you buy the Pixel through Google, it's unlocked for use on any carrier.

Google Pixel

Pros: Looks like an iPhone, solid build, pure Android experience, great camera.

Cons: Not water-resistant, no external storage.

Bottom line: Great handsets that really allow Android to shine.

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