Apple MacBook Air A1304

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Lower prices make the new versions of Apple's ultrathin ultraportable more appealing.

The MacBook Air is a product that lives on the margins. It's the slowest laptop--indeed, the slowest computer--in the Mac line. It omits many features that are standard on other Mac laptops, such as multiple USB ports, FireWire ports, an ethernet port, and an optical drive. And the latest top-of-the-line MacBook Air is actually slower than its predecessor in many of our tests. In short, the MacBook Air is an odd duck.

It's also Apple's thinnest, lightest laptop. And I still love it.

Let me explain. I love the MacBook Air because it's a full pound and a half lighter than the next-lightest Apple laptop. In a world of netbooks that compromise on screen and keyboard size in order to get small, the MacBook Air has an excellent 13-inch widescreen display and a full-size, backlit keyboard.

The MacBook Air is designed for people who appreciate the fact that this Mac laptop weighs 3 pounds and measures 0.76 inches at its thickest point, and are willing to sacrifice all sorts of other features for that lightness. Which leads to the real question: Do the new MacBook Air models sacrifice too many features to make them worth the trade-off in price and size?

The two new MacBook Air models introduced by Apple this month are a $1499 version with a 1.86GHz processor and 120GB 4200-rpm hard drive, and a $1799 version with a 2.13GHz Core 2 Duo processor and a 128GB solid-state drive.

Let's ponder, for a moment, how far the MacBook Air line has come in terms of price. When the MacBook Air premiered, the top-of-the-line model--featuring a 1.8GHz processor and a 64GB solid-state drive--cost $3098. The low end of the line was a $1799 model with a 1.6GHz processor and an 80GB hard drive.

So in 18 months, the top-of-the-line Air has dropped $1299 (you could buy a whole second MacBook for that) while adding 330MHz of processor power and doubling the storage space. The base configuration, meanwhile, has dropped in price by $400 while also gaining a modest processor boost and double the hard-drive space. In other words, the MacBook Air is far more affordable than it was when it was introduced.

This is not to say that it's a great deal in terms of price/performance. You're still paying for that superlight chassis. For the same price as today's entry-level 1.8GHz MacBook Air ($1499), you can buy a 13-inch MacBook Pro with a 2.53GHz processor, double the RAM of the MacBook Air, more than twice the hard-drive space, more USB and FireWire ports, an optical drive, and an SD card reader. The MacBook Pro is also thicker and weighs a pound and a half more.

On the outside, these new MacBook Airs look just like the original MacBook Air models introduced in January 2008. And as always, the Air's physical connectivity options remain quite limited, with just a single USB 2.0 port, a headphone jack, and a Mini DisplayPort. You get no FireWire connectivity, and everything else you connect to the system has to go wireless (via Bluetooth or Wi-Fi) or be filtered through that single USB port.

Apple includes a 10/100 USB-to-ethernet adapter in the box now, which is generous, but the fact remains that if you're trying to download a file over ethernet while backing up to a USB hard drive, you will tax that single USB port to the limit. (You'll also need to invest in a serious USB hub.) What's worse, the $99 MacBook Air SuperDrive must be attached to the MacBook Air directly and doesn't offer any passthrough ports of its own, making it impossible to boot

from a DVD and then restore from a Time Machine backup stored on an external hard drive. Well, impossible's too strong a word: I was able to pull off the trick by using Apple's $900 LED Cinema Display, which will also power the SuperDrive, as the world's most expensive USB hub.

But in an earlier update to the MacBook Air line in late 2008, Apple seriously upgraded the Air's internals. The first-generation Airs used Intel's slow onboard video circuitry and couldn't cope with warm temperatures at all, but those new models added nVidia GeForce 9400M graphics circuitry, improved bus and memory speeds, and generally coped with heat much better. These latest models also incorporate those improvements, which dramatically improve the MacBook Air experience.

Despite the improved graphics and the faster processors, these two MacBook Air models are still the two slowest Macs currently shipping. Even the $999 2.13GHz MacBook managed a Speedmark score of 198 in Macworld tests, while the 1.86GHz MacBook Air scored 156.

What's weird about the new high-end MacBook Air model is that although it costs dramatically less than its immediate predecessor, it's also slower than that model, rather than being faster as we've come to expect with updates. The late-2008 1.86GHz MacBook Air was faster than the new top-of-the-line, 2.13GHz model in 11 of our 18 tests, and as a result, the old system's final Speedmark score was slightly higher. The new low-end 1.86GHz model did a better job versus its predecessor, besting it on most tests and improving on its Speedmark score. Now bear in mind that we still haven't had a chance to fully run the PC WorldBench 6 test suite on these units just yet. Same goes for testing battery life. Once we have those results, we'll update this review and give it a proper score.

We also saw several cases in which the lower-end systems, with slower processors but with physical hard drives rather than solid-state drives, bested their high-end equivalents. Some of these results simply come down to the fact that solid-state drives are faster than physical hard drives at some tasks and slower at others. But on tasks we tend to consider particularly processor-intensive, such as compressing video or rendering 3D objects, the low-end systems also outperformed the higher-end systems. We're not quite sure why this is happening, though it's possible that the Air's thermal-protection systems are aggressively ratcheting down the speed of the faster, hotter processors when they're asked to perform those tasks, slowing their performance.

When I was working on this review, I had to temporarily surrender my previous-generation 1.86GHz MacBook Air so it could be retested by Macworld Lab as a reference system. For five days I used a new 13-inch MacBook Pro, replete with ports and features that the Air lacks. And while I appreciated having dedicated ethernet and hooking up my backup drive via FireWire 800, the truth is, the whole time I longed to return to the Air.

If those feelings make no sense to you, if the Air always struck you as being overpriced and underpowered, these aren't the laptops you're looking for, because the MacBook Air story is the same as it ever was: It's hobbled by having only a single USB port. Its processor is slow, and it's locked into 2GB of RAM. It has no FireWire, no optical drive (without an expensive add-on with nonexistent connectivity or compatibility), and the only way to connect to an ethernet network is via an included USB adapter.

But if the specs that matter most to you are light weight and small size, the MacBook Air is the system for you. These new models aren't much faster than their predecessors (according to Macworld's findings)--in fact, the high-end system is slower than the previous model--but they're cheaper. Unfortunately, we can't give a final score just yet--we're still waiting on PC

WorldBench 6 test results--but if the MacBook Air always appealed to you, except for the price tag, it's time to reconsider the Air.

Washington Post, Washington, June 26, 2009, Technology, online.