

Apple's iPad makes its international debut

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Apple's iPad made its international debut on Friday, with buyers storming shops – including Japanese fans dressed up as iPads in Tokyo's Ginza shopping district – to be among the first outside the US to snap up the long-awaited tablet PC.

The device, which has a 9.7-inch colour touchscreen for surfing the web, watching movies, playing games and reading e-books, goes on sale in Japan, Australia, Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, the UK and Canada on Friday.

In London, the first iPad buyers were cheered into the Apple store on Regent Street by ranks of blue-shirted Apple employees at 9am.

There was a heavy security presence, as Apple erected cordons outside its London flagship shop, where a "couple of hundred" people were queuing, according to one doorman.

Buyers lined up around the block, some waiting for hours to get in, seemingly unaware that a computer shop a few minutes' walk away had plenty of iPads in stock and just a trickle of customers.

Apple employees handed out tickets to those in the queue, which they needed to be let into the upper storey of the store one at a time.

Apple has sold a million iPads in the US since its April 3 debut.

The company had to delay the international roll-out of the device by a month, saying it was overwhelmed by demand.

Orders placed with suppliers show the company hopes to sell as many as 10m units annually.

However, the shine could be taken off Friday's international launch because of concerns among some book publishers about Apple's iBook store.

Several publishers are holding off signing Europe-wide contracts with Apple's e-book service, owing to commercial misgivings and fears that its minimum pricing conditions could fall foul of UK law.

Customers at London's Apple store on Regent Street seemed pleased with their new purchases. Jason, a student in London, bought the 3G version of the tablet computer. "I'll probably use it to take notes in lectures. It's not as backbreaking to carry around as my Macbook. I was here at 1am, number 31 in the queue. By 5am the queue was around the block."

Bill, from Manchester, already had his iPad delivered, but came to the Apple store to buy a case for it. "I needed something that would travel with me and was easy to use," he said

"I'm sick of trying to make [3G network] dongles work. It's intuitive to use and fantastic."

Meanwhile, in Madrid, interest appeared more muted, with about 20 fans camping out or rising early to be among the first into the Apple store inside central Madrid's four-storey FNAC outlet.

Assistants there and at El Corte Inglés, Spain's largest department store chain, reported steady buyer interest throughout the morning, until stocks of some iPad types had run out.

In Rome, TV news coverage also showed a substantial early-morning queue at the city's Apple outlets. A few hours later, the shops were much quieter with customers who had pre-ordered their iPads turning up to collect their purchases.

Earlier on Friday, at Apple's flagship store in Tokyo, about 1,200 people had formed a line that stretched some 800 metres before the doors opened.

"I wanted to touch it as soon as possible. I felt real excitement when it was finally in my hands," said Takechiyo Yamanaka, 19, who camped out in front of the Ginza store from Wednesday evening to be the first in line.

By mid-afternoon, the queue outside the store was still about 100-strong.

Apple staff reassured those waiting that they still had stock, but said they expected to run out before the end of the day. Inside the store, Apple's other devices were forgotten as new iPad owners started testing them on the spot.

Japan's videogame companies marked the launch with a stream of iPad games, such as Chocobo Panic from Square Enix, and a taiko drumming game from Namco Bandai that uses the iPad's touchscreen as a drum kit.

Early signs in Australia were also encouraging for Apple. Hundreds queued outside Apple's seven stores in the country on Friday to buy the iPad, although there was no official comment on the strength of first-day sales.

Victoria's state government on Friday began distributing 500 iPads to students for a trial that will test the device's benefits as an education tool.

"This trial will allow us to understand the impact of iPads on student learning and communication and on the way teachers plan and deliver curriculum in the classroom," John Brumby, Victoria's premier, said.

International enthusiasm about the iPad will help strengthen Apple's market profile. On Wednesday, the company overtook Microsoft as the world's biggest technology company based on market value, the latest milestone in the resurgence of the maker of the iPhone.

Apple will not have to wait long before rivals to the iPad are launched. On Tuesday, Dell unveiled its Streak tablet computer, which can double as a mobile phone and will have a front-facing camera for videoconferencing. Sony said on Thursday it would launch an e-reader in Japan by the end of the year.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, May 28th 2010, Technology, online.