

# New MacBook Pro

Contributed by Ken Mingis  
Saturday, 04 July 2009  
Last Updated Saturday, 04 July 2009

Apple unveiled the iPhone 3G S, talked up its new iPhone 3.0 operating system as well as its Snow Leopard desktop OS, and unleashed a slew of updated laptops. It even made two of its MacBooks into MacBook Pro models (the only MacBook left is the \$999 white polycarbonate model that was updated a couple of weeks back). It was a blizzard of announcements that had Mac fans in Apple heaven.

Then there was the big news: In a very un-Apple like manner, the company dropped its prices on those laptops, the surest sign yet that, yep, it's a recession.

In the past, Apple's M.O. has been to add features, bump up processor speeds, and boost RAM and hard drives in its new hardware -- usually while holding the line on prices. This time it did all those and cut the bottom line. The top-end 17-in. MacBook Pro dropped from \$2,799 to \$2,499, for instance, and the entry-level 15-in. model went from \$1,999 to \$1,699. The price drops ranged from 6.3% to as much as 28%.

Now, that's a deflationary spiral I can appreciate -- almost as much as I appreciate the new 15-in. MacBook Pro that Apple passed along for review purposes.

The lineup: Lots of 'Pro' options

There was none of the old wait-a-few-weeks-for-delivery delay this time; the updated 15-in. and 17-in. MacBook Pro models, and the newly rechristened 13-in. MacBook Pros, were available for sale right away -- at least from Apple's stores. Third-party resellers were still waiting for them at week's end.

The 15-in. model now comes in three varieties, all of them with 4GB of RAM -- which you can double to 8GB for a hefty \$1,000 -- and hard drives with between 250GB and 500GB of space, or solid-state disk drives of 128GB or 256GB. For \$300 more, the 2.8GHz model can be ordered with a 3.06GHz chip -- the first time Apple has offered a processor beyond 3GHz in a laptop. It's also an option on the 17-in. MacBook Pro.

For those who plan to take their laptop on the road, the 15-in. MacBook Pro weighs in at 5.5 pounds, one pound less than its big brother and a pound more than the newly renamed 13-in. MacBook Pro.

The most obvious change to the MacBook Pro line is the loss of the ExpressCard/34 slot. It's been replaced by an SD card slot to make transferring pictures from digital cameras easier, according to Apple officials. (You can even install Mac OS X on an SD card and use it to boot the computer, according to an Apple Knowledge Base document explaining the SD slot's use. Talk about an OS in your pocket!)

The only Pro model that retains the ExpressCard slot is the 17-incher, and I wouldn't be surprised if the next generation of this model drops the slot as well. Why the change? Apple says its research shows customers are interested in more easily transferring digital pictures from their cameras. The SD slot means no fumbling for cables.

The slot works exactly as you'd expect. Just slide an SD card in -- metal contacts side down -- and an SD card icon pops up on your desktop. When I tested it, iPhoto promptly launched and quickly imported my photos. I then dragged the icon to the trash can to "eject" it, and pulled it out of the slot. There's no spring mechanism; you just slide it in and pull it out. If you don't see an icon show up on the desktop, you may have to try again. Apple recommends inserting it with a smooth sliding motion.

Another minor change -- one you'd have to look for to really notice -- is that the Mini DisplayPort video port is now sandwiched between a FireWire 800 port and two USB ports. All of the ports are on the left side of the case; the SuperDrive for playing and burning CDs and DVDs is on the right. Otherwise, the new MacBook Pro sports the same unibody aluminum-and-black look as before. The glass-coated one-piece trackpad/clicker button is back unchanged, and the laptop feels comfortably solid -- a credit to the unibody design. Built-in batteries across the line

Less obvious is the non-removable lithium-polymer battery, which offers substantially more time on juice than earlier models. The 17-in. MacBook Pro, which comes with the same 2.8GHz processor as the top-end 15-in. model, was the first in the lineup to get the integrated battery back in January. Apple says it can power the 17-in. model for eight hours, and I easily got about 6.5 hours of use without trying very hard when reviewing that particular laptop earlier this year.

The 75 watt-hour battery that's in the 15-in. version is the same one used in the new 13-in. MacBook Pro I'll be reviewing soon. According to Apple, it will last up to seven hours. I've never been able to duplicate Apple's battery numbers, but I was able to use this MacBook Pro for just over five hours without plugging it in, mostly while surfing the Web wirelessly,

text editing and watching the occasional video.

That's the most I've ever gotten on the 15-in. MacBook Pro, and I didn't even turn down the screen brightness as much as Apple does when testing. Others, too, are seeing seriously better time on battery.

It's disconcerting to spend a few hours working and then notice that the battery indicator is still showing the battery half full. That's doubly true if you've used Windows machines that can run through a battery in less than two hours. It's akin to speeding down the highway and glancing at a speedometer that indicates you're doing just 20 miles an hour.

{mosgoogle}

Given that the battery is no longer removable, you won't be bringing extra batteries on cross-country flights. But Apple says the MacBook Pro will play full-screen DVDs at maximum screen brightness -- with the volume turned up to the max -- for 3.5 hours. It may not get you clear across the country, but if you turn down the brightness and lower the volume, you could still squeeze in two movies.

If you're concerned about not being able to replace the battery -- and one of my Mac guru buddies rushed to buy the last-generation laptop for just that reason -- Apple claims the built-in battery will last for about 1,000 charge cycles and shouldn't need replacing for five years. Hard drive options abound

Other than the RAM, about the only thing that can be replaced now is the hard drive. It's user accessible only after removing 10 very tiny screws on the underside of the chassis and lifting off the bottom. That's a little more work than on previous models, where the battery and hard drive could be reached by unlatching part of the bottom case. The screws aren't tightened so much that removing them is as difficult as it has been on some earlier models. (I removed the bottom to photograph what's inside.)

As noted earlier, Apple offers a variety of hard drives across the MacBook Pro line, including my favorite option: an SSD. I've talked up SSDs ever since I got one in a second-generation MacBook Air last year, and I continue to be bullish on them. I even stuck a third-party OCZ 128GB SSD in my MacBook -- two, if you count the first one that failed. You're definitely paying more per gigabyte than with a traditional drive, but if you can afford it, the tradeoff in overall ruggedness, system response and power use -- SSDs have no moving parts and generally need less power -- is worth it.

A 256GB SSD, for instance, adds either \$650 or \$800 to the bottomline, depending on which specific model you're buying. The 128GB SSD is a more reasonable \$200 if you're buying one of the pricier MacBook Pros, \$350 if you want it in one of the less expensive ones. In return for spending more on the latest in storage technology, you get less room for data. For that reason alone, most buyers will opt for the tried-and-true hard drives with spinning platters.

The 500GB, 5,400-rpm hard drive that came in this particular model surprised me. It's quiet, obviously roomy -- half a terabyte on the go gives you plenty of room to grow -- and was fast enough that I was convinced it was a 7,200-rpm model. I had to check the System Profiler to make sure. The same drive costs \$50 more if you want the extra zip of 7,200-rpm -- or \$50 less if you're willing to settle for that same speed in a smaller 320GB hard drive. Hint: Pay the \$50 and get the faster 500GB drive if you want to squeeze out the most speed at the least cost.

As usual when I'm working with a new laptop, I ran the Xbench benchmarking test on this one. For comparison's sake, I ran Xbench on the last-generation MacBook -- now MacBook Pro -- with a 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo chip and the OCZ Apex, a 128GB SSD drive. That machine posted an Xbench score of 141; this one, with a notably faster 2.8GHz processor and traditional hard drive, turned in a score of 155. Someday I'm hoping to snag a MacBook Pro with the optional 3.06GHz processor and an SSD and see how that combo performs.

For most people, the 260MHz difference between the stock 2.8GHz chip and the optional 3.06GHz processor isn't worth much more than bragging rights -- not that I'm against bragging rights. Both processors are Intel Core 2 Duos with 6MB of shared Level 2 cache memory, and both are up to any data crunching, video manipulation or digital photo work you have in mind. If you're eyeing the faster processor, I'd -- no surprise -- get the optional 128GB SSD. You'll discern the speed boost more. If you want more detail on how the six MacBook Pros stack up, Macworld has done a good job of putting them through their paces. Updated LED screens

The new MacBook Pros all have updated LED screens, offering a 60% wider color gamut. That means they're more vivid, according to Apple. Usually, claims of brighter, more richer-looking screens depend on the eye of the beholder, but in this case, I saw a discernible difference between this generation and the last. You need to put the two side by side to really appreciate the change.

Videographers and photographers who use their Macs will no doubt appreciate the new screens, as will movie buffs who watch DVDs on their laptops. It's too bad a Blu-ray optical drive isn't part of the package (Apple doesn't offer one even as an option). The result would be stunning -- especially on the 1920-by-1200-pixel 17-in. model.

That brings me to a quibble: I do wish Apple would offer a highernative resolution in the 15-in. line, at least as an option. At 1440 by900 pixels, the standard resolution is the same as it has been foryears. For me, the perfect resolution for this machine would be 1680 by1050 pixels. The jump in resolution from the 15-in. to the 17-in.models is too large.

That said, the 15-in. screen is razor sharp and bright enough toperform surgery by -- an excellent trait when working outdoors indirect sunlight.

Apple continues to use two graphics cards in its higher-end Pro models.This one has the Nvidia 9600M GT and the Nvidia 9400M. The 9400 is anintegrated GPU that helps extend the battery life; it uses 256MB ofshared video RAM. The 9600M GT is the workhorse, offering either 256MBor 512MB of discrete video RAM that gamers and videographers will wantto use.

You toggle between the two using the Energy Saver system preferencepane. If you're using the battery and don't need the extra video RAM,choose the 9400M. If you're plugged in and want to dive into Doom 3 orimmerse yourself in Unreal Tournament, go for the 9600M GT. If youdecide to switch between the two, you have to log out for the change totake effect.

Note that the entry-level 15-in. model, the one that sells for\$1,699, has only the integrated Nvidia card. If you're planning to useyour laptop for serious gaming or for apps that need the most out ofthe graphics chip, you should opt for the \$1,999 model, which has the9400M and the 9600M GT with 256MB of discrete video RAM.

It's important to note that the GPU is expected to play a largeroles in overall system performance once Apple releases its nextoperating system, Mac OS X 10.6 'Snow Leopard,' in September. For usersof the current Leopard OS, the upgrade price will be a recession-friendly \$29-- or \$9.95 for anyone buying a new Mac between now and Snow Leopard'srelease. Snow Leopard will allow developers to tap into the GPU'shorsepower, offloading some of the functions now performed by the CPU.That should offer a boost in system response and applicationperformance, meaning Apple's laptops are primed to take advantage ofthe OS when it comes out.Final thoughts

Maybe it's because I've been staring at 13-in. screens for thebetter part of a year now -- starting with a MacBook Air and moving onto a late-model MacBook. For whatever reason, the 15-in. MacBook Proseems larger than it is. This is a good thing. (More than one personasked me whether this was the new 17-in. model when first seeing it.)

Given that the overall design of the MacBook Pro is unchanged, theupdates to the model line are evolutionary. It's the price cuts that,for Apple, border on the revolutionary. Ask Apple officials about thatand they talk about wanting to "bring more value" to the laptopsequation. That, Apple has done.

At a time when the economy is soft, companies are squirreling awayevery IT dollar they can, and consumers are leery of big, newpurchases, they need every justification possible before plunking moneydown for a new computer. Hundreds of dollars in price cuts, solidconstruction and innovative features, combined with a new OS that'll bejust \$29 in three months, might just do the trick.