Review: Google Laptop Impressive, but Not for All

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SIEM REAP, Cambodia (AP) — Google's first high-end laptop, the Chromebook Pixel, is an impressive machine. It feels light and comfortable in my hands and on my lap. Its high-resolution display makes photos look sharp and video come to life. From a hardware standpoint, it's everything I'd want a laptop to be.

But the Pixel isn't very practical — at least not yet — for most people. It works well when you have a steady Internet connection, but can't do much once you lose that connection. And because it uses Google's own operating system, it doesn't run enough software yet to replace your other machines.

I brought the Pixel along for a nearly three-week trip to Thailand and Cambodia, where I knew I wouldn't have the type of round-the-clock access I'm used to in the U.S. I was surprised by how much I could do, but quickly got frustrated when I couldn't do more.

Such frustration doesn't come cheap. Prices for the Pixel start at $1,299, just $200 less than a MacBook with a comparable screen and the ability to do much more offline. A higher-end Pixel with cellular access costs $150 more than the basic model and is scheduled to start shipping Monday.

For those unfamiliar with Google's entry into the laptop market — I guess that's many of you — the Pixel and other Chromebooks run a Google operating system called Chrome OS. Based on the Chrome Web browser available for Windows and Mac computers, Chrome OS underscores Google's vision of letting the Internet do all the heavy lifting instead of your computer.

As a result, you can power up and start working on the Chromebook right away. Boot time is minimal because there's not a lot of software to load. Those functions are pulled from the Internet as needed.

That also means updates come regularly and don't need any installation on your part.

There's not a lot of storage on the machine either. The idea is to keep as much as you can online, through a storage service such as Google Drive or Dropbox.

Think of the Chromebook as a gateway to the Internet. You can download apps from Google and others to run on the Chromebook, but many of those apps do little more than access a website on your Chrome browser when you're online.

Previous Chromebooks haven't been too powerful. They have tended to be low-cost machines ideal for casual users who mostly need computers for Internet tasks such as email and Facebook.

Google is changing the dynamics with the Pixel. It's targeting power users who are willing to pay more money for the best features.

For $1,299, you get a well-built machine sporting a touch-sensitive display that measures nearly 13 inches diagonally. The screen's resolution is among the best out there. At 239 pixels per inch, it tops the 227 pixels per inch on the 13-inch MacBook Pro, though your eyes might not be able to discern that small difference.

The basic Pixel model comes with 32 gigabytes of storage and has a slot for external storage, such as a camera's SD card. Each machine also comes with a three-year subscription for 1 terabyte of online storage through Google Drive. It's normally $50 a month.

Google also offers a $1,449 model that has double the internal storage, at 64 GB, and 100 megabytes a month of LTE cellular data access through Verizon Wireless for two years. That's suitable for occasional use, but if you'll be away from Wi-Fi a lot, you'll need a data plan. Prices start at $10 a day.

The LTE model isn't set to ship until Monday, but Google lent me one to try out. I was impressed with the LTE offering, as the cellular access would help cover some of the gaps I'd have outside my home and office. But it's of no use abroad.

Nor is LTE of use on airplanes. Both models offer 12 free sessions with Gogo's Wi-Fi service on airplanes, but those are good only for flights that offer that capability. Those tend to be domestic flights in the U.S.

So I found myself trying to use Chromebook without a steady Internet connection.

Before I left, I configured the Chromebook browser to enable offline access to Google Docs, the company's set of online tools such as word processing and spreadsheets. With offline access, you're able to access and edit documents. Changes get synced with the online versions the next time you connect to the Internet.

I was able to do a fair amount of writing offline, but every now and then, my

document would disappear, replaced by Google's "Aw, Snap" error message sporting a sad face icon. That would be cute if hours of work weren't at stake.

Although I was usually able to recover the file and never lost more than a paragraph of writing, I got nervous with every crash. Google Docs lets you save copies on your computer as text files or in Microsoft's Word format. But that function works only when you are online, even for changes you are making offline.

Even without the crashes, I wasn't getting tools such as spell-checking while offline. That's not an issue when using Word or Apple's Pages on other machines.

Beyond text documents, the Chromebook is able to view photos, PDFs and other files, just like any other computer. It can also read files in Microsoft's Word and Excel formats, though you must convert them to Google Docs to make changes.

And obviously, it can browse the Web. I successfully paid credit card bills, bought magazines and watched Hulu video on the Pixel. I was able to read an e-book on Amazon's Web-based Kindle app, too.

But there are limits, particular when sites require plug-ins that aren't available for the Chromebook.

And while I was able to write this story on a Chromebook, our publishing system isn't compatible with it.

Chromebooks are ideal for those who have steady Internet access and do most of their computing on Web browsers. But those people may be fine with one of the other, much cheaper Chromebooks. One is the $249 Samsung Chromebook, which I have tried and like for simple tasks when Internet access isn't an issue.

If you need a machine as powerful as the Pixel, you might also need an operating system that can do more, especially when offline.

Google executive Caesar Sengupta admits that Chromebook owners might still have to turn to a Windows or Mac computer now and then. In many ways, it reminds me of the early days of the Mac, when most software was written only for Windows.

That makes the Pixel expensive for a machine that can't serve as your sole computer. At $1,299, I'd rather spend another $200 for a MacBook with a high-resolution display and four times the storage, at 128 gigabytes. You don't get a touch screen with the MacBook, but frankly, I didn't use the Pixel's touch controls even once during my Asia trip.

On the other hand, Sengupta told me that selling Pixels isn't Google's main goal with the machine. Rather, the company made it to showcase Google's vision for the future of computing. In that case, Google has succeeded in producing a machine that is a pleasure to use — as long as you're online.

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About the Chromebook Pixel:

The device represents Google's entry into the high-end laptop market. It runs Google's Chrome OS operating system, which largely assumes you'll have round-the-clock Internet access. You can still work with the device offline, but functionality is limited.

The basic model costs $1,299 and comes with 32 gigabytes of storage. For $1,449, you get 64 gigabytes and LTE connectivity through Verizon Wireless. Both models come with a terabyte of online storage through Google Drive for three years, a $1,800 value at $50 per month. Not everyone will need as much storage, and Google Drive offers free and cheaper plans.

The pricier Pixel model also offers 100 megabytes a month of LTE cellular data access through Verizon Wireless for two years.

If you need more, you can buy a day pass with unlimited data for $10. Or you can buy 1 gigabyte of data for $20, 3 GB for $35 or 5 GB for $50. Those are good for a month. If you're a Verizon customer with a plan for sharing data allotments over multiple devices, you can add the Pixel for just $10 a month.

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