

Review: Water Resistance Stands Out in Sony Phone

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New York (AP) — Think of a leading phone maker. Apple and Samsung might come to mind — maybe even HTC, maker of the well-received One. But you're probably not thinking Sony, a company better known for its TVs, cameras and video game machines.

With the new Xperia Z, Sony shows it can play in the smartphone big leagues.

The Xperia Z, unveiled Wednesday in the U.S., helps Sony catch up with offerings from Samsung and HTC, but one feature stands out: Its water-resistant shell means you can submerge the phone. That's great if you're a lifeguard, or if you're prone to dropping your phone in toilets or spilling coffee near it. You can also take underwater video and use the phone during rainstorms.

Sony Corp. also enhances the Android operating system made by Google Inc., without cluttering the phone, as Samsung Electronics Co. and HTC Corp. do with their Android customizations. There's still some junk from Sony and its partner, T-Mobile, but not a lot.

I particularly like the idea behind a battery-saving feature called Stamina. It's supposed to block apps from checking for updates when your screen is off. Calls and texts will still come through, and you can add exceptions such as email and Facebook. In practice, I got a few email updates when I wasn't supposed to, but the blocking seems to work most of the time, especially after I reset the phone to its factory settings. There's also a separate feature for dimming the screen and turning off some functions automatically when the battery drops to a certain level.

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The Xperia Z got attention when it was announced in January at the International CES gadget show in Las Vegas. It has been sold overseas, but hasn't been available in the U.S. until now. It's one of the first major phones that No. 4 carrier T-Mobile is getting exclusively in the United States. T-Mobile US Inc. will start selling it next week, though you can get it right away from a Sony retail store.

The phone comes with a screen that measures 5 inches diagonally and has a resolution of 443 pixels per inch — both comparable to Samsung's Galaxy S4. The Xperia's screen is larger than the HTC One's 4.7 inches, though the One's resolution density is higher at 468 pixels per inch — not that the eye can discern much of a difference.

The Xperia has a 1.5 gigahertz quad-core processor, which is slightly slower than the S4 and the One, but the phone still feels zippy.

While the S4 has a plastic back and the One sports an aluminum finish, the Xperia has glass on both the front and the back. Plastic connects the two panes. Sony went for symmetry in designing the phone and avoided the curved backs found in the S4 and the One. The result is a phone that feels boxy and large in my hands. And having two glass panes means twice the surface capable of cracking.

The phone also has lots of plastic seals to keep water out of the ports for recharging your phone or connecting headphones. It takes a few extra seconds to get to the ports when you need them, but that beats having a dead phone after napping on a beach at high tide.

And the phone does indeed work underwater. Sony says you can submerge it at least 3 feet deep for 30 minutes, though it's possible the phone will work if it's deeper or immersed for longer. You won't be able to use any of the on-screen touch controls while the phone is submerged, however. But functions already running will continue running.

In a demo, Sony showed me video taken in a swimming pool. The recording started before entering the pool, then continued underwater. I don't have a pool and was ready to test it in the toilet — until wisdom prevailed. Instead, I dunked the phone in a water-filled food container for a half-hour with the movie "Ice Age" playing. The video continued running normally.

The touch controls came back as soon as I took the phone out. I didn't even need to dry it first. That's quite impressive. The sound from the speakers, though, appeared muffled at first, but returned to normal once the phone dried out.

The phone also ships with a Walkman music app. For younger readers, Walkmans are iPods that play cassettes or CDs. Sony's Walkman cassette players were once ubiquitous, until MP3 digital files killed them. The brand lives on through the app.

It feels redundant given that Android phones already come with an app called Play Music. The Walkman app doesn't let you buy music. Rather, it's for music you already own and load onto the phone. You can buy music through Google's Play

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store on the phone, but those songs appear on Play Music, not Walkman. To add to the confusion, Sony has a separate app called Music Unlimited for its \$10-a-month music-streaming service.

The same goes for video. Sony offers two separate apps called Video Unlimited and Movies, while Google has Play Movies & TV. On the plus side, a movie you rent or buy on the phone will play on Sony's PlayStation, though it won't continue where you left off.

Sony's stores for music and video aren't installed until you ask for it, so they won't eat up your phone's storage until then. But they clutter up the phone with icons, including one directing you to the installation. T-Mobile also clutters another home-screen page with four icons for its services and a MobileLife box offering news I don't need.

Fortunately, the clutter is minimal compared with other leading Android phones, and one Walkman feature is useful — the ability to listen to songs from the lock screen.

You can take photos from the lock screen, too, simply by sliding the camera icon to the left.

Speaking of the camera, the Xperia brings a lot of features from Sony's stand-alone Cyber-shot cameras. I'm not a believer in loading camera phones with features that are better suited for stand-alone cameras, but many people don't carry their regular cameras anymore.

Those people might find a need for the self-timer feature, which I don't find very practical on a phone unless I have something to lean the phone against before running into the shot. A stand-alone camera can at least rest on a flat surface. There's also something called the smile shutter, which automatically snaps the shot once it detects the subject smiling. But it also snaps shots when I inadvertently point the phone at a magazine cover with smiling faces.

The nice thing is you can create shortcuts for just the features you need and hide away the others, so you won't inadvertently activate them.

The camera does lack an underwater mode, which Samsung offers in the S4 Active, a just-released water-resistant variant of its flagship phone. In that mode, you use the volume buttons rather than the touch screen to take photos. Without that, you're limited to starting video before you jump in a pool with Sony's phone. You can't snap shots underwater. Hey, maybe that 10-second self-timer delay is useful after all.

Although Sony's camera doesn't have Active's underwater mode, its 13 megapixels is higher than the Active's 8 megapixels. (The standard S4 also has 13 megapixels.) Sony's new offering is impressive for a company that hasn't been known for its phones. The Xperia plays catch-up in many respects, but it's out front in making water resistance a standard feature — something more phone makers should adopt

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as phones become companions to our active lives.

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About the Xperia X:

Sony's new phone is coming to the U.S. in July. In the U.S., T-Mobile is offering it exclusively, in black or purple. The up-front cost is \$100, with \$20 monthly payments over two years for a total cost of \$580. Online orders begin July 16. They will be available in T-Mobile stores the next day.

If you can't wait, you can buy it from a Sony retail store or its website starting Wednesday by paying the entire \$580 up front, or for \$600 over two years.

T-Mobile service plans are cheaper than the competition, in part because you pay for the phone separately. Its rivals typically charge \$100 or \$200 for a phone up front and make up for the rest through monthly service fees.

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