

iPod TouchReview: iPod Touch 8GB

I've been a long-time proponent and user of PalmOS PDA's, but lately I have become very by Palm's lack of innovation in their offerings. And innovation is something Palm was regularly known for. For example, consider the Palm V, arguably one of Palm's most innovative designs with its sleek form and powerful (for 1999) capabilities. This was an example of a innovation driving the market.

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The PDA trend eventually shifted to "convergence" devices like the Smartphone. But despite their popularity, many of us prefer to have separate devices. Over time, Palm's PDA offerings have really amount to permutations of the same old thing. Now don't get me wrong, I love Palm PDA's. It's just that nothing really new has come out to cause me to want to upgrade or consider a device from another company. So another company appears to be picking up the ball and running with it.

The Apple iPod Touch
Enter the Apple iPod Touchâ?¦.

Read on for my review of Apple's iPod Touchâ?¦

After poking around on the Internet and reading articles and commentary on Apple's iPhone and iPod Touch devices, I decided to give the iPod Touch a closer look. The iPod Touch is basically an iPhone without the phone, camera, or Bluetooth. What's left is a solid, elegant WiFi-enabled media player that also happens to run other applications. I've never actually owned a portable MP3/media player, so I was entering uncharted territory. The closest I came was the several PalmOS multimedia PDAs that could play MP3 files and videos, but they were primarily PDA's, and media playback often seemed like an afterthought.

Now, before I go too far with this, I need to clarify one thing. While I do understand that Apple markets the iPod Touch primarily as a multimedia player, it really is (or has the potential to be) so much more. The iPod Touch is a powerful, pocket-sized, OS X-based (derived from BSD UNIX), WiFi-enabled, touchscreen computer that is very well-suited to run and manage so much more than just music and video playback. Having significant experience with many PDA's over the years, I feel that the iPod Touch has the potential to become the PDA that could significantly refine the concept of what is a current PDA. It is this kind of

innovation that very well could launch Apple far ahead of Palm. It could very well be the "Palm V for the 21's Century", if you will.

Hardware
The iPod Touch is very sleek and very small. It measures just 4.3" x 2.4" x .31" (110mm x 61.8mm x 8mm) and weighs in at 4.2 ounces (120g). Yet, it has a very substantial, comfortable feel, though not too heavy. It is solid and does not bend or creak when flexed. The front of the case surrounding the screen appears to be plastic, and the back of the case is metalâ??mirrored chrome. The chrome back, like on other iPod models, is very prone to scratching, so you'll want to quickly grab some sort of case to protect it. Overall, it is very solid and very sturdy.

Compare this to the Palm V, and you'll see how advanced it is:

iPod Touch Palm V

The touchscreen is really nice-looking and solid. Unlike most PDA designs where the touch sensors are on top of the screen, the iPod Touch's sensors are under a screen of solid glass. This means that the touchscreen is very sturdy and not as easily scratched as are plastic-based touchscreens. Obviously, glass can still scratch and wear, so simple a screen protector is all that is really needed for decent protection.

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With the addition of a simple sleeve or cover and a screen protector, there is no reason why the iPod Touch can't be "front-pocketable". If the pocket you put it in has keys, coins, or other metal objects, you may want a more durable case. In any case, it's so small that you are more likely to have it with you. Also, a word of caution: I personally never "back-pocket" any PDA simply because I don't want to risk damage.

WiFi
Apple's inclusion of WiFi is very well done. The Settings screen that controls connectivity is very intuitive, and also serves as a basic "stumbler" application showing you all avaiilable WiFi Access Points within range, bith open and locked. The settings are quite customizable, and once set to your liking, connectivity is a snap. I have used a couple WiFi-enabled PDA's and the iPod Touch is by far the fastest and easiest to use, and so far, the most reliable. Its integration is seamless.

If I could change one thing about Apple's WiFi implementation, it's that they did not provide any simple way to toggle WiFi on or off. Leaving it on will drain your battery, so being able to toggle it on or off is essential. Yes, you can do it through the Settings screen, but why don't they include a Home page icon that will do it simply and wuickly, similar to excellent the WiFiSwitch application for Jailbroken devices?

And as long as I'm complaining, the my only real complaint with Apple's hardware choices is the lack of an external speaker. The included transducer simply doesn't cut it. Other than some very basic system sounds like some clicks and very soft-sounding alarms, you need earbuds or headphones to hear any real sound. I realize that other iPods don't have external speakers, but this is quite limiting, in my opinion, given the advanced capabilities and potential of this device. How many times have you wanted to play a quick audio or video clip for someone, but don't because you either don't have or don't want to hassle with

earbuds? Having an external speaker would really make this so much easier.

User Interface
The iPod Touch's User Interface is very responsive and very well-suited to fingertip navigation. For example, scrolling is not done by the typical tapping or dragging of a scrollbar. Instead, you just use an up or down "flick" gesture on the screen, and the content scrollsâ??it's very intuitive. And then there's the "Multitouch" gestures that make interaction fun and easy. Doing a "pinch" motion with two fingers on the screen will zoom in where applicable, and doing a "spread" (or "reverse pinch") will zoom you out. In many cases, "double-tapping" will do a quick zoom in, and "double-tapping" again will quickly zoom you back out.

Another nice feature is an automatic "Landscape" mode that rotates when you tilt the device. There is an accelerometer built-in that detects when you tilt the iPod Touch, so when you turn it on its side, if the application supports it, the screen will rotate in that direction to a landscape format. This is excellent for functions as Cover-Flow and Web browsing.

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iPod Touch Landscape

Text input is done with an on-screen keyboardâ??there is no handwriting recognition here. Surprisingly, the implementation works very well with the fingertip. You won't get the speed of thumb-typing on say, a Treo or a Blackberry, but it's quit usable. My fingers occasionally tap the wrong letter, but correcting is easy. The only real shortcoming of text input is the absence of any Cut and Paste functions, though it is rumored tha
t a forthcoming firmware upgrade will add this.

Software
The
iPod Touch was originally marketed as an innovative media player, but it does include several other applications like a Calendar, Contacts, and Web browser that bring it closer to the PDA world. Here is a brief description of the included applications:

Music
The heart and soul of all iPods is its ability to play music. The iPod Touch really shines with a slick, intuitive interface. Just sync your music files through iTunes, and you can browse by artist, album, song, genra, and more.

There is also an alternate view called "Cover Flow" that takes advantage of the iPod Touch's landscape mode. While in the music app, tilt the device 90Â° in either direction, and you see a fanned-out cover-art display of all of your albums. Doing a "flick" gesture left or right scrolls through the animated display, so you can quickly navigate to any alnum. And tapping on a cover "flips" it over revealing the songs on that album. Tapping any of the songs begins playback.

My only complaint with Cover Flow is that it appears to sort the albums by the name of the first artist listed on the album, not album name. For single-artist albums, this is a non-issue, but it can be confusing when dealing with compilation albums. I wish there was a Settings option to define how Cover Flow sorts the

albums.

On not-so-know feature allows you to control music playback and volume from within any application or even when the device is locked. Just press thr Home button twice in seccussion, and a small music control pad will pop up. Given that the iPod Touch does not have any external volume controls, this is an excellent and convenient solution.

Videos
Like several other iPod models, the iPod Touch will play videos. From short clips to full-length movies, they look and sound great. Videos can be purchased through iTunes or converted using either iTUns or several third-party applications. Browsing the videos is straight forward, and playback offers full control. In my opinion, compared to the Palm OS PDA's I have used to play back video, the iPod Touch leads the pack.

Photos
The Photos application launches displaying scrollable list of "categories" derived from the directories the photos are stored in. Tapping a category brings up a scrollable list of thumbnails. tapping a thumbnail will display the photo full-screen. Like several other applications, rotating the iPod Touch will put it into Landscape mode whci may make some photos easier to see. You can use the "flick" gesture to scroll, the "pinch" gesture to zoom in or out, and double-tapping will zoom in and out. When zoomed, you can pan around. You can also view the photos as a slideshow.

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From within the Photos application, you can select one of the pictures to be used as your Lock-screen background. It's a great application store and show off your pictures. Images must be synced through iTunes.

Calendar
The Calendar app is a modest appointment calendar that will sync with iCal or Outlook. It does not include ToDo's or Notes, but as an appointment manager, it works well. I do wish, however, that it would sync wirelessly with Google Calendar.

Contacts
The Contacts application is fairly complete offering lots of fields for your needs. It syncs with iCan and Outlook. I don't use it that mutch, but the UI is very slick and friendly.

Safari
The Safari Web browser is simply amazing. I have used Web browsers on several Palm OS PDA's, and there is simply no comparison. Safari beats them all hands-down in all counts. Pages render quickly and accurately in Safari, and best of all, they aren't proxy-hobbled or stripped pagesâ??they are the real pages. There is no Flash support, but it is rumored that a forthcoming firmware update will add this feature.

iPod Touch - Safari

Of course, on the small sreen of the iPod Touch, many pages are simply unreadable, but this is quickly and easily resolved by the using the iPod Touch's advanced User Interface. First, you can tilt the device into Landscape mode giving you a wider, more readable display. This is all you need to do in many cases.

You can also double-tap on any part of a page, and it will zoom that section to fit the screen. Double-tapping again will zoom you back out. The "pinch" gestures will zoom you in and out as well. A "Flick" gesture up or down will scroll in the desired direction, and if you are zoomed in, tapping and holding then dragging will pan the screen. And to select a link, just tap on it. Internal links load in the same page, while external links take advantage of Safari's Multi-Page view. Safari can maintain several open pages, conceptually similar to Firefox and IE7's Tabs, except pages are chosen through a thumbnail-like viewer. It's a very fresh and intuitive way to navigate Web pages.

Obviously, getting the Web pages requires WiFi connectivity, but the pages are still viewable while offlineâ??almost. Safari's page cache seems to be dependent upon available memory, so if you have more than a few pages open, or have one or two large pages open, if you navigate to another application and return to Safari, the pages may be lost. Unfortunately, what or how much is stored is not predictable, so you cannot rely on having pages always available offline. I would like to see Apple provide an enhancement to Safari that would provide for viewing of saved pages while offline.

Also, Safari displays Adobe .PDF file in an excellent rotatable, zoomable viewer, but you must get the file online, as Safari prevents viewing any local files (file:///â?¦) Of course, there is currently no "official" way to store .PDF files locally, so this may not be an issue.

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YouTube
I haven't used this app much, but it provides you with direct access to YouTube videos. The interface is solid, quick, and you have full control over playback. You can browse various video lists or search for specific videos. YouTube fans should enjoy this.

iTunes WiFi Music Store
This slick little application lets you connect directly to your iTunes account while connected via WiFi. You can browse and search for songs and albums, you can listen to previews, and you can purchase and download the song or album immediately with the purchase being charged to yout iTunes account. You cannot access PodCasts or Videos through the app, but for music lovers, this should give you what you want.

So, there you ahve the basics of what the iPod Touch is all about. If you would like an even more detailed hardware and software review, jump over to over at The Gageteer's site: http://the-gadgeteer.com/review/apple_ipod_touch for their excellent review.

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