

Smart phones

Tests of the iPhone vs. new multimedia models

If you've long owned one of the smartest of the smart phones, chances are you bought it to do work, such as checking office e-mail. Now a new breed of smart phones, including Apple's hit iPhone, is designed more for play. Slimmer and lighter than workaholic phones, they devote their smarts to multimedia: music, photography, Web browsing, and other diversions.

We compared the iPhone, \$400, with two of its closest rivals: the LG Prada, \$550, and the Nokia N95, \$750. All three "fun" smart phones have sizeable, bright color screens, which makes them excellent for viewing photos, videos, and Web sites. On the iPhone and LG Prada, a touch screen turns into a virtual keypad and other controls.

As for drawbacks, none is great for phoning. While all were fine in sensitivity, they scored only fair for listening quality and good for talk quality. That's about average for cell phones that use GSM networks, as these do, but below the performance of the best smart phones we've tested.

The Nokia and Prada have other fairly serious drawbacks, too, but the trade-offs might be worth it if you value their multimedia distinctions. We have quibbles about the iPhone, but it remains the best of the "fun" smart phones we've tested so far, and by far the most capacious for storing multimedia content.

For an iPhone minus the phone, there's now the iPod Touch. This multimedia player looks similar to the iPhone and has many of its capabilities though it lacks a phone, a camera, and text messaging and e-mail applications. A Touch with 8 gigabytes, the capacity of the iPhone, is \$300; the 16GB model is \$400.

iPhone \$400 (with two-year AT&T contract)

The leading choice: capable at all key tasks, which you control seamlessly via a peerless touch screen.

Highs Large (3½-inch) high-resolution touch screen, easy to read even in daylight. Photos and Web pages enlarge with a spread of your fingers. You can view voice mail in a list and listen to messages selectively. Best MP3 player we've seen on a phone, and the only phone in this group with wireless music downloads. High storage capacity (8GB). Ample talk time: 8¼ hours. Has Wi-Fi for fast Web access, and video playback.

Lows Must use AT&T, not among our top-rated providers. "Virtual" buttons lack tactile feedback. Heaviest of this group. No voice activation, voice memo, single-key redial of last number, or standard headset connector and adapter. Camera lacks a flash.



Nokia N95 \$750 (unlocked; no carrier commitment required)

Uniquely capable as both a cell phone and a digital camera, though other functions are problematic.

Highs Very capable 5-megapixel camera looks and operates like a digital camera; supports PictBridge and has software for posting images to the Flickr Web site. Takes full-motion (30 frames per second), stabilized, "DVD-like" video. Photos and video can be piped to a TV screen. Supports Bluetooth stereo headsets and data. Has Wi-Fi for Web access and syncing to PC, and uses a high-speed data network. Has GPS navigation capability, voice activation, and an FM radio.

Lows No QWERTY keyboard; you key text with multiple presses of dial pad, aided by predictive software. Thickest model of this group. The smallest screen (2.6 inches) of the group and the only one without touch functions. Limited internal memory; accepts microSD cards up to 2GB (2GB cards cost \$30 to \$50).

LG Prada KE850 \$550 (unlocked; no carrier commitment required)

Tiny and cool, it lives up to its brand name in style, but performance is disappointing.

Highs The smallest and lightest of this group. Large (3-inch) touch screen is not as good as the iPhone's but allows easy access to most functions and is fairly easy to read. Supports Bluetooth stereo headsets and data. Has 2-megapixel camera with autofocus, flash, and video recording, and FM radio. Very easy to add e-mailed contact data to address book.

Lows Works on only one of two U.S. GSM bands; could affect coverage. "Virtual" buttons lack tactile feedback. No QWERTY keyboard; you key text with multiple presses of dial pad, aided by predictive software. Lacks Wi-Fi and voice activation. Can't search MP3s by album, artist, etc. E-mail is difficult to set up, limited to 300 KB per message. Limited internal memory; accepts microSD cards up to 2GB (2GB cards cost \$30 to \$50).

