superguide » best ultraportable laptops

Best ultraportable laptops

Joel Burgess and Dan Gardiner test 15 slim and light laptops and 2-in-1s that are perfect for getting stuff done no matter where you are.

his month, we've tried to assemble a collection of the best gear for working on the go — today's workplaces are more flexible than ever, meaning that we all (generally speaking) have a lot more freedom when it comes to working from home, or the coffee shop, the airport or basically anywhere you can find a flat surface to rest your computing device.

Despite how far smartphones have come in the last eightodd years, as productivity devices, they're still a little too restricted to get serious work done. They're undoubtedly fine for quick tasks like replying to emails and scheduling appointments, but a bigger-screened laptop (or tablet with a keyboard) is still much more efficient.

For this feature, we've rounded up a range of laptops and 2-in-1s to find out which ones deliver on the promise of being go-anywhere productivity machines. There's a growing amount of diversity in this category, but most of the devices we tested were 13-inches or under, with our main goal being that they were 2kg or under - in other words, a weight that won't pull your shoulder off if you choose to lug your device around in a messenger bag. And despite being 'professional' gear, there are some surprisingly affordable options here, with prices starting at just \$1,200.

Read on for our recommendations in this curiously varied category.



\$2,799 WWW.MYTOSHIBA.COM.AU

Toshiba Satellite Radius 12

Can this impressively specced Satellite make it into orbit?

he Radius 12 is the first 2-in-1 laptop/ tablet hybrid to flaunt an UltraHD (AKA 4K), multi-touch display panel; a pretty impressive feat for a device that's just 1.3kg. And to back that up, this hybrid has one of the latest Intel Skylake (AKA 6th-gen) Core i7 processors, plus 8GB of DDR3 RAM and a 512GB SSD. On paper, at least, that makes the

Satellite Radius 12 an amazing little unit that could potentially take on the Surface Pro 4.

Where the Radius suffers a little is in its overall design and visual appeal. Uneven bezel thickness around the screen — it's different along the top, sides and bottom throws the proportions off and makes the screen uncomfortable to look at, and though the keyboard is largely fine in use, the keys have been squashed a little vertically to fit the smaller 12-inch form factor, which could make it difficult to use for large-fingered folk.

But the real limitation is processing power; when you compare the Radius 12 against a Core i5 version of the Surface Pro 4 (an inferior processor to the Radius 12's Core i7) this Toshiba achieves less than twothirds the work and generalusage benchmark scores. Considering this 2-in-1 retails for just shy of 3,000 large ones, it's surprising that it performs in the vicinity of a \$1,200 to \$1,500 laptop.

The Radius 12 might be the first hybrid to pack a 4K screen, but it has seemingly had to sacrifice a lot in order to do so. We're not sure that imbalance is worth it

Verdict A top-heavy unit that seems to sacrifice performance for a 4K

elbourne-based Venom Computers' is known for its premium laptops that use high-quality parts and a variety of little tweaks to deliver an exceptionally reliable and enjoyable computing experience. So when Venom said that the 13 Zero was "the best computer we've ever made", we sat up and took notice. The build quality here is fantastic: a sturdy MacBook like unibody aluminiumcomposite chassis, stable and backlit chiclet keyboard and large matte-finish. Venom has multiple configs of the 13 Zero available, with this \$1,599 unit being the mid-range model, one step up from the \$1,399 basic unit. It's incredibly well-specced for that price. We honestly say it's the best-value Windows ultrabook we've ever tested, with a Core

HOT PRODUC

\$1,599 WWW.MLN.COM.AU

13 7ero

Venom BlackBook

This zero is a genuine hero.

i5-6200U mid-range processor, 8GB of RAM, heaps of storage thanks to a 256GB SSD and 500GB hard drive, and a balanced

13.3-inch 1080p IPS display that's driven by integrated Intel HD 520 graphics. There's two full-sized USB ports, a smaller USB Type-C, a full-sized HDMI out, and microSD port. The charger's compact, too. In short, it has everything you need to get stuff done on the go. It's been genuinely tweaked and tuned for the pro/enthusiast. There's no bloatware. The only software extras are Firefox and Chrome and a full year's subscription to Norton Internet Security. It's a passable 3:16 hours in the tough PCMark 8 Home test, but other similarly specced competitors can manage 5-6 hours. That shortcoming aside, this is an ultrabook we could happily use all day, every day.





11-INCH FROM \$1.349: 13-INCH FROM \$1.549 WWW.APPLE.COM/AU

Apple MacBook Air (11- and 13-inch, Early-2015)

Still the ultraportable benchmark.

'ow going on nearly eight years old, the MacBook Air was revolutionary when it first landed — so much so that its external design that hasn't changed much since its inception. What has changed is that the Air has transitioned from being Apple's premium portable to its entry-level laptop. It's still class-leading when it comes to build-quality, though, with Apple's unibody aluminium design making it super-tough and the keyboard and trackpad are likewise first-rate.

You can spec an Air up moderately high - up to a Core i7 with 8GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD - and they're faster than their 12-inch brethren, but do get outgunned by the Pro line. The main caveat with the Airs, though, is their lowerresolution displays. They're the last remaining MacBooks not to have 'Retina' high-DPI screens. That means you get 1,366 x 768 pixels in the case of the

text-rendering a little jagged and is beginning to look seriously miserly when everything else has 1080p-plus resolutions. Our flagging Aussie dollar has seen the Air creep up in cost of late - two years ago, this was one of the bestvalue ultrabooks around. but it's now simply average (in fact, the likes of Venom's BlackBook 13 Zero makes what Apple's charging look seriously overpriced). There's still a lot to like here, including outstanding battery life (over seven

11-inch and 1,440 x 900 on

functional, but does make

the 13-inch. That's perfectly

hours when we installed Windows and ran PCMark 8 Home) and Apple's excellent service and support. Well-worth considering. Verdict

Still a fantastic laptop, but not quite as compelling from a specs or price perspective as it used to be.

superguide » best ultraportable laptops

\$1,200 WWW.ASUS.COM/AU

ASUS Transformer Book T300 Chi

One of the earlier 2-in-1s, and it's beginning to show its age.

he T300 is a 2-in-1 with a fully detachable screen that comes away easily from its keyboard base. It originally launched early last year, being one of the first devices with an Intel Core M processor. These are much more power-frugal and coolrunning than their Core i counterparts, meaning they can be used in thinner and lighter designs that don't require active coolers. However, because of its

age, the T300's just about reached the end of its life and any units still on sale have Windows 8.1 for their OS. While you can upgrade this one to Windows 10 for free, the question really is, is it worth the effort?

This is the least-expensive unit we tested. It has a nice, high-DPI, 12.5-inch display at 2,560 x 1,440-pixels, as well as 8GB of RÅM. However, it only has a 128GB SSD, of which you get under 94GB of storage, though there's a microSD slot to help pad that out. The Core



\$1,299 WWW.ASUS.COM/AU

ASUS Zenbook UX305FA

e actually reviewed this

model back in

the October

an impressively built

the MacBook Air. In fact,

have come off it since it

11-inch MacBook Air in

chassis with a matching

price, making it an

excellent option.

the \$200-odd dollars that

launched put it under the

An oldy but, thanks to the passing of time, now surprisingly a goody.

M-5Y71 CPU is adequate, but will struggle with more demanding work. The aluminium back. (The But there are some shortcomings - a battery of just 3:19 hours, the lack of a full-sized USB port, and no Type-Cs. Instead, there's a Micro-B type socket and a dongle adapter that gives

tablet's also relatively tough, physically, with an unibody 2015 issue of APC, and although its age might take keyboard has an aluminium some of the shine off it. the top and a plastic underside.) time on the shelf has actually matured some of this device's features and

has even helped softened the price a little. What's still clear is just how compact this ultra-portable is, with 12.3mm thick and a you a full-sized USB port. It's 1.2kg total weight, the a functional solution, but not UX305 looks and feels like a very slick one. Windows counterpart to

We wish the screen had more height, though. It's 16:9, but the 3:2 aspect ratio is ultimately much better for productivity. In fact, we'd spend the extra and opt for the entry-level Surface Pro 4 instead.

Verdict

battery life.

matte screen-trim and keyboard-surround, there's a A lower price can't quite make up lot to appreciate in the for the lack of storage and average design. The chiclet keyboard is definitely a step up from average, although the

trackpad does occasionally suffer from a bit of drag. The 13.3-inch 1080p IPS display has nice, rich colours, though unfortunately, the matte anti-glare coating does add a bit of sparkle to images.

If you're considering this one, it's worth noting that some retailers are still offering it with Windows 8.1, although there are units with Windows 10 on offer. The UX305 is a welldesigned device that offers a lot of processing grunt for the price, but it's underpowered compared to the MacBook Air, which sports full intel Core i chips. whereas the UX305 has a lower-end Core M CPU. But while it's still some way off being a genuine Macbook Air killer, for the price, this is a pretty good deal.

Wrapped in a shiny black/ purple brushed-aluminium Verdict The price is right on this budget-but-basic all-rounder ultrabook.

FROM \$1,799 WWW.DELL.COM.AU

100

Dell XPS 13 (Late-2015) Dell's premium ultrabook is small but rather smashing.

anc

HOT PRODUCT

when used for video-chat.

And unless you have a

compelling need for a

you have to squint to see

pixels on the non-touch,

the latter'll save you \$500.

that it isn't nearly as good

want the most portable

there's little to complain

about here, with first-rate

and stunning battery life.

An incredibly compact and well-built 13-inch ultrabook; gets

Verdict

almost everything right.

value as the Venom

ell's XPS 13 is the most-compact 13-inch laptop we've tested; a very neat little package with a mixed aluminium-andcarbon-fibre chassis and a display with super-narrow bezels - they're 5mm on the top and sides, meaning the screen basically fills the lid casing. It's been updated with Intel's 6th-gen Core i parts. In Australia, you've got the

choice of either a 1080p non-touch model (with matte finish screen) or a 3,200 x 1,800-pixel model with a glossy touchscreen. The keyboard and

trackpad are both superb and make using the XPS 13 a real joy. It'll go the distance, too, with the Core i5 model lasting 6:39 hours in the challenging PCMark 8 Home battery test - that's the best result in this feature, by quite a wide margin. Also neat is the fact that the unit's completely silent. However, the placement of

the webcam (down the bottom right of the display) FROM \$1,199 | HP.COM/AU

apc

RECOMMENDS

HP Spectre x2-A005TU Not quite spectacular, but offers some fantastic specs for the price.

is odd, and means you're shot he general theme to from an unflattering angle HP's Spectre line is 'sleek, thin and stylish'. This new model is very much a 2-in-1 touchscreen, you don't need cast in the Surface Pro that 3,200 x 1,800 display at mould, at 8mm thick and 840g with kickstand and a this 13.3-inch screen size chassis carved out of a single piece of aluminium, plus a 12-inch IPS 1,920 x 1080p model and opting for 1,280-pixel display (at the Starting at \$1,799 with a same productivity-friendly 128GB SSD and 4GB of RAM, 3:2 aspect ratio as the the XPS 13's main problem is Surface Pro).

But it is a smidgen more affordable, offering up a creditable Core m5/128GB BlackBook we've reviewed on page 50. But for those that SSD model for just \$1,199 the entry-level Surface Pro Windows 13-incher around, 4 will cost you \$150 more for and are willing to pay for it, less memory (4GB vs 8GB), a slower Core m3 processor and it doesn't include the build quality, a stylish design keyboard cover. And the x2 actually does a

respectable job of being a 'Surface lite' – yes, it's a little fiddlier to switch between modes (you need to slide a switch to extend the kickstand), but its fattish, AAA-powered stylus, which can be safely slotted onto the keyboard cover when

handwriting and drawing. There are some key differences between this and the Pro 4: there's no standard USB ports, just two smaller USB 3.1 Type-Cs. You get a dongle that'll convert Type-C to the legacy USB, but that's one more thing you have to carry. And the quality in some areas is lower than the Surface line. The keyboard doesn't feel as high-quality as the Surface Pro's - it's a bit rattly and plasticky - and there was a yellowish/purple tinge to the display of our test unit, something that was particularly noticeable with skin tones in video. Still, considering the price, those shortcomings are easy to overlook.

not in use, works great for

Verdict

If you're after a very functional 2-in-1 without the Microsoft premium, this one's a bargain

superguide » best ultraportable laptops



\$1,990 | LENOVO.COM/AU

Lenovo Yoga 900 An appealing ultrabook that'll bend over backwards for vou.

espite having a name that suggests a completely different lineage, the Yoga 900 is actually the 2015 successor to the Yoga 3 Pro. a similar 2-in-1 hybrid that was made popular by a successful slimline design and a clever swivelling hinge. In many ways, the Yoga 900 walks in the shoes of its earlier sibling, but Lenovo has built on this design by adding better battery life, a superior CPU and an upgraded hinge design.

Upgrading the CPU from one of Intel's Core M chips to a full Core i5 (or optionally. an i7) chip has given the Yoga 900 predictably higher processing power over the earlier model. But this device's amazing 3.200 x 1,800 13-inch screen helps suck up the brunt of that extra processing power coordinating nearly three times as many pixels as a 1080p screen will do that. And when you compare the Yoga 900 to similarly specced devices with a 1080p



FROM \$1,349 WWW.MICROSOFTSTORE.COM

Microsoft Surface Pro 4 Fourth time's the charm.

now universally excellent.

That Type Cover's keyboard,

in particular, has improved

markedly – it's nice and

platform for its big comfy

(which was previously too

small) has been upsized to

make it much more usable.

The built-in handwriting

none. It works almost

recognition is still second-to-

universally across the OS. so

keys, and the trackpad

rigid, forming a stable

screen and a slightly thicker 💶 t's taken four chassis (allowing for more iterations for cooling) you can see the Microsoft to get its sacrifice in benchmark 2-in-1 tablet design to scores the 900 makes when really live up to its initial it comes to general homepromise, that of being a and work-related tasks "tablet that can replace In many ways, the Lenovo your laptop". It's now light is similar to the Core i5 enough, powerful enough, versions of the Surface Pro 4; and its accessories have they have similar processors reached a polished-enough that crank out similar point that it can genuinely performance, have equally match that boast. impressive screens, cost a The build guality across

similar amount and each can be used as either a tablet or a laptop. The only real difference is that the Surface is predominantly a tablet and has less onboard storage, while the slightly heavier, fixed-keyboard Yoga 900 is likely to appeal to those looking for a more traditional laptop-like hybrid.

Verdict Trading processing power for a better display isn't always a bad thing.

you can type with the onscreen keyboard or with the Surface Pen. Microsoft's offering the Pro 4 in more

configurations, too, starting with a basic Core m3 unit at a relativelv affordable \$1.349 - you'll need to pay another \$200 to add the keyboard. Some problems do still exist on the Pro 4 - the kickstand design works great provided you've got a table (or at the very least a cushion) to place it on, but it's much trickier to balance the device on your lap if you're, say, commuting on a bus or the core 12.2-inch tablet, its train, or just sitting on a stylus (Surface Pen) and the keyboard cover is likewise

park bench. Battery life is also just passable at a bit under four hours. This is a premium device with a premium price tag. But if you can genuinely use those features and you believe you should "spend your money where you spend your time", this is the best 2-in-1 on the market.

Verdict



anc RECOM 33357777777777777 FROM \$2,299; \$4,199 AS TESTED | WWW.MICROSOFTSTORE.COM

111

Microsoft Surface Book Reinventing the Surface.

he Surface Book is a device built for those who want the Surface family's distinctive features combined with a slightly bigger display, a bit better processing grunt and a more traditional laptop form-factor. Despite the laptop

appearance, the Surface Book is still decidedly a 2-in-1, however - the 13.5-inch, 3,000 x 2,000-pixel screen undocks from the keyboard to become a slim (although large) standalone Windows tablet. It can be flipped around 180° and re-docked to the keyboard, too, giving you extra battery life, but this does make it a supremely heavy tablet. (Undocked, the slate supposedly lasts for around three hours, whereas with the extra cells in the base, it will take you over 10 hours. We got exactly half those, respectively, in our tough mixed-usage battery test.) That keyboard also incorporates a discreet GPU from Nvidia that's aimed at

accelerating media-creation tasks, like manipulating images in Photoshop or speeding up video-encoding. The more-stable design and accordion hinge mean that this is a Surface you can actually use on your lap in laptop mode. However, the Book ends up being a bit fiddly in some other regards - if you want to undock it, vou'll need to first exit any GPU-accelerated apps, then hold down a button on the keyboard until the screen locks disengage.

The premium magnesiumallow chassis and specialised design-oriented Surface features mean a price bump too — so if you don't need them, there are much better-value 2-in-1s or laptops out there.

Verdict

Well-made for it's targeted audience, but might not be worth the additional cost for everyone else.

\$2,399 AU.MSI.COM

HOT PRODUCT

MSI GS40 Phantom A menacing but mini gaming laptop.

SI's new GS40 Phantom is another from the Taiwanese company that seems hell-bent on breaking the stereotype of portable gaming laptops, delivering a reasonably compact 14-inch gaming device in a shell that amounts to a perfectly carryable 1.6kg. Despite being only 2.3cm thick and feeling like something you'd actually use as an on-the-go laptop, this semi-discreet unit hasn't thrown out the muscle that's expected from a decent gaming PC. In fact, the 6th-gen Intel Core i7 CPU. 8GB of DDR4 RAM and an Nvidia GeForce GTX 970M GPU work well together,

pushing out respectable scores around or above 60fps averages on big-name titles like Bioshock Infinite, GRID 2, Tomb Raider and Metro: Last Light with Ultra-level graphics settings.

While Intel and Nvidia's more power-frugal and cool-running CPUs and GPU have definitely contributed

to MSI's effort in shrinking this device to the size it is, the GS40 also gives you the impression that anything that wasn't absolutely necessary has been ripped out and discarded. The thin plastic casing has an overly generous amount of flex pushing too hard on the escape key or lifting the laptop from a corner (never a good idea) will actually cause the chassis to warp and come in contact with an internal fan. We'd be lying if we weren't a little concerned about the potential longevity of this device if treated with anything but the utmost care. That said, for what's inside, it's quite reasonably priced, and is lightweight and powerful enough that it's hard not to be a little wooed by it.

Ma TIN GAMING

Verdict

A compact, well-priced workhorse that'll perform — as long as it doesn't actually disappear into the ether.



111 20C RECOMMENDS

FROM \$1,999 WWW.APPLE.COM/AU

Apple MacBook (12-inch, Mid-2015) A full-featured laptop in under a kilo.

his 12-inch Apple laptop sits between its Air and Pro siblings in terms of both price and features. Apple's main goal with the device has been to get a full-featured laptop into as small a body and light a weight as possible (it's just 920g), and it's mostly a resounding success.

It perhaps doesn't have the visual elegance of other MacBooks. The keyboard and display both come right to the edges of the chassis, making full use of almost all the available physical space. To us, that makes its overall appearance seem a little odd and imbalanced, but the proof really is in how it performs, and in that regard, it's hard to fault. Though the keyboard keys differ from other MacBooks - they're bigger and meet each other edge-to-edge they still feel and function great under the fingertip. The screen is a Retina IPS number at 2,304 x 1,440 pixels, rendering images

and text incredibly sharp

and clear. That monstrous trackpad works a treat, giving you easy access to OS X's library of useful shortcuts and gestures. There are some caveats with the design. You don't get any standard USB ports, only a single USB 3.1 Type-C. You'll basically need to opt for wireless peripherals. The Core M CPUs used can also struggle a bit if you load them up with too many apps or do image or video work. Then there's the price.

There's no 'basic' model and those shrunken parts are expensive; prices start at \$1,999 for the 256GB SSD/8GB RAM model. Still, this is a fantastically portable little device, and if you're after a super-compact unit for doing the basics, there's lots to like here.

Verdict

Amazingly portable, but that Core m3 CPU can struggle with heavy multitasking and multimedia jobs.



13-INCH FROM \$1,999; 15-INCH FROM \$3,099 WWW.APPLE.COM/AU

Apple MacBook Pro (13- and 15-inch)

This 'Book's old enough to belong in a library, but it's a true classic.

despite us hankering for a newer model with Intel's Skylake (AKA 6th-gen) chips, these early- and mid-2015 releases (13- and 15-inch, respectively) are actually still performing at the top of their game.

The 13-inch and the 15-inch models are quite different beasts. The 15-inch has a top-of-the-line 4th-gen quad-core Core i7 chip that is now a couple of years old, alongside a Radon R9 M370X GPU in addition to the CPU's integrated Intel Iris Pro Graphics 5200. It's considerably pricier too, starting at \$3,099 for a 256GB SSD model. The 13-inch, on the other hand, uses a more recent dual-core 5th-gen Intel Core i5 chip, and has just the onboard Intel Iris Graphics 6100 and starts at a more affordable

\$1,999 for a 128GB model. But despite using older chips, the Pros still outpace some of the latest Skylake devices like the Yoga 900,

which scored around 5% less

than the 13-inch Pro's single-core and multi-core scores in the GeekBench 3 aggregated tests. Apart from the 13-inch

model getting Apple's Retina display, one of the main design differences between the latest Pro models and earlier iterations is the addition of the Force Touch trackpad. As much as we'd love to love this new technology, the lack of useful tie-ins and the decision to ditch a couple of established trackpad gestures actually make the trackpad feel like a sidestep rather than a progressive feature. But when that's the only thing you have to complain about, it shows that this is still the device to beat in the premium ultrabook category.

Verdict

A old workhorse, but one that has no trouble keeping ahead of the youngsters.



LABS



General Performance



Gaming Performance



16000 2000



Storage Performance

VENOM BLACKBOOK

454.2 ASUS ZENBOOK 472.6 1154 DELL XPS 13 (LATE-2015 437.9 HP SPECTRE X2 457.6 LENOVO YOGA 900 MICROSOFT SURFACE BOOK (DOCKED/TABLE 766.1 MICROSOFT SURFACE PRO 4 684.3 MSI GS40 (SSD/HD) 493.9/ TOSHIBA SATELLITE RADIUS 12 480.5

9387

28.58

VENOM BLACKBOOK



3.55 6.66 DELL XPS 13 (LATE-2015) HP SPECTRE X2 4.86 6.2 ENOVO YOGA 900

5.08

General Performance



Storage Performance



Vital ASUS TRANSFOR BOOK T300 CHI ASUS ZENBOOK 61% 80°C DELL XPS 13 (LATE-2015 59°C HP SPECTRE X2 69% LENOVO YOGA 900 MICROSOFT SURFACE BOOK (DOCKED/TABLET) DNF



www.apcmag.com 51