



ULTRAPORTABLE LAPTOP

FROM \$1,899 (\$2,389 AS TESTED) | WWW.VENOMCOMPUTERS.COM.AU

VENOM BLACKBOOK 14 ZERO

A compact all-rounder that's still up for a bit of gaming.

Lets be frank for a minute: in the rows and rows of laptops that adorn many of Australia's major electronics retailers, it can be pretty hard to stand out. It's therefore good to see a machine from an Aussie mob – Melbourne-based Venom Computers – taking a fair crack at it.

The 14-inch BlackBook 14 Zero has the kind of well-thought out set-up that'll please both enthusiasts and executives alike. Our \$2,389 test unit packed a 240GB SSD (for OS, game and app storage) alongside a bigger 1TB traditional hard drive (for less performance-reliant needs – read: music and movies), a top-drawer quad-core Intel Core i7-4750HQ CPU, 16GB of DDR3 memory and a 14-inch matte-finish 1080p display, with Windows 8.1 Pro as the OS. That all combines to make for a laptop that's exceedingly fast and fluid to use – it'll put many a desktop to shame when it comes to

responsiveness – but it's perhaps in the GPU where the Zero is most interesting. This is the first laptop we've tested that includes Intel's Iris Pro 5200 graphics processor, the chip-giant's fastest GPU to date and one that's mostly capable of running the latest games.

How capable, specifically? To answer honestly, we'd have to say "reasonably". We ran a range of recent release games on the Zero and found that, at native 1080p resolution with Normal/Medium graphics details, it was a bit of a wash. Two of our four test games didn't hit 30fps – making them basically unplayable – and the other two didn't leave a lot of headroom, only managing 34 and 44fps respectively. Drop the resolution down to 720p (1,280 x 720-pixels) and it's a different story. Here, every one of our test games – even *Metro: Last Light* – chugged along at above 30fps with Medium details, with *Tomb Raider* hitting a quite-reasonable 64fps. So, the Zero is

capable of letting you play the latest games, albeit with some slight compromises required.

It's also a great machine more generally. Physically, there's a reassuring solidity to almost every aspect of it. From the well-sized, -spaced and sturdy keyboard keys to the smooth and stable action of the screen's hinge and even the premium feel of the plastic used in the Zero's chassis. Under the hood, there's an Intel-designed convective cooling system that actively draws in cool air while exhausting the hotter stuff – and it's pretty effective and reasonably quiet. You will notice when it kicks into gear, but you won't have to raise your voice to talk over it. It all combines for a laptop that looks, feels and performs first-rate.

Venom also went to great pains to stress to APC that it only uses A-grade components in its BlackBooks, highlighting motherboards and

displays in particular. In essence, Venom's paying more at the production end of things to ensure its machines are well-made; that's still a win for Venom, which won't have to fix dodgy machines.

While the Zero isn't quite going to take on the likes of a Razer Blade for style or gaming speed, at around \$1,000 less it's a laptop that's within reach of many more of us. In short, if you want a slim, light and powerful laptop that's still up for a bit of modern gaming, then the Zero is an easy one to recommend.

■ Dan Gardiner

Verdict

Features ★★★★★
Performance ★★★★★
Value ★★★★★

A compact, well-made and powerful little machine with just enough gaming grunt to scrape by.

