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Sony VAIO VGN-N31M/W laptop

Can Sony crack the entry-level market?

by Stephen Patrick published on 5 November 2007

We're great fans of Sony's ultraportable and high-end notebooks but we've never been too taken with the company's entry-level machines.

The main problem is they tend not to live up to the build quality or innovation of the more expensive machines. However, the VAIO VGN-N31M/W may be about to change all that. With a street price of £699 (inc. VAT) this is about right for a mainstream machine capable of handling a wide range of tasks.

The look of the notebook is impressive. The white plastic case with silver keyboard is certainly striking and the feel of it when closed is solid and robust. Most of this rigidity is in the lid, which neatly protects the screen. Open the lid up though and you'll find the body of the machine isn't quite so solid.

The screen is well protected and being a 15.4-inch Super-TFT panel, which Sony refers to as X-black, it's great for movies as well as viewing multiple documents. While such panels have a truer range of colours than standard TFT screens, making them ideal for watching DVDs and viewing digital photos, we found this machine had a very narrow brightness range. While this isn't a problem when sat at your desk, you won't get the best view from it when out and about.

Weighing in at 3kg, there is a degree of portability to be had and with a battery life of close to 4 hours, we found we could use it for long periods on the move. That said, we found the overall usability of this machine was better suited to life on a desk.

The VAIO runs Windows Vista Home Premium and comes with a mid-range specification to suit its price. Powered by an Intel Core 2 Duo T5300 chip, which runs at 1.73GHz and backed with



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1024MB of memory, we found Windows loaded reasonably quickly and smoothly. It's worth pointing out that while this is a dual-core chip it's a budget version, running at a slower clock speed than more expensive versions so you won't be able to run high-end tasks on it. However, email and surfing the web are more than easily handled.

The main specification is rounded out with a 120GB hard drive, which is more than enough space. You'll find wireless LAN 802.11g installed, as well as two USB 2.0 ports. With a nod to the future, you'll find 34mm ExpressCard slot. There is the standard Memory Stick but Sony has also started including Secure Digital card readers, which means you can add a wider array of peripherals.

VERDICT

The Sony VAIO VGN-N31M/W is a reasonable machine to use in an office environment. Out on the road we found it far less user friendly and how and where you use your notebook should be taken in to account before opting for the N Series.

It offers reasonable value for money but while we were impressed with the style of this notebook, we felt there were better alternatives available for the price.

At a glance

What is it?

Entry-level notebook

Good

Nice design, good price, decent battery

Bad

Average specification, poor screen

Verdict

This machine is great to look at and handles reasonably well but its screen disappointed us

Price £699

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10