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Nokia N96 mobile phone - First Look

Can the N96 improve on the popular N95?

by Stuart Miles published on 15 February 2008

Nokia has updated its flagship Nseries handset, the N95 with the N96, but is it mere tweaks and fixes or something that you should look to upgrade to? Pocket-lint managed to get a hands on with the new phone at this year's Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain.

While at first glance the phone's specs looks very similar, it's not until you get up close you realise that the N96 is a considerably more refined product.

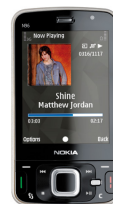
The handset we played with looked as if it was finished rather than something that wasn't due out for another 6 months suggesting that Nokia is keen to make sure there isn't the same software and build quality questions that dogged the N95 when it launched in February 2007.

Just like its predecessor the N96 sports HSDPA connectivity, a 5-megapixel camera, GPS, the Symbian S60 operating system and that dual slider screen that hides the keypad and dedicated music controls.

The new phone sports slightly bigger dimensions all round with a larger screen, up by 0.2-inches to 2.8 over the previous 2.6-inches on the N95. The overall design now features more curved edges and so gives the impression that it's actually smaller.

Around the back you'll find the 5 megapixel camera that now features a "kickstand" around the lens that allows you to perch it on a desk for hands-free viewing.

Additionally the N96 also features a 3.5mm headphone connector, as before, and built-in 3D stereo speakers so you can share music on the go.



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Inside and there aren't too many changes either, certainly not for UK customers, and while the new model features the ability to receive DVB-H broadcasts to access Live TV on the go, it will be of little use to readers in the UK as currently nobody is broadcasting to that standard.

What will be of use however is the increase of internal memory up from 8GB to 16GB and keeps the Nokia on a competing level with Apple's newly updated 16GB iPhone.

Hoping to allow users to make maximum use of the new memory, the N96 has a strong emphasis on video and supports common formats including MPEG4, Windows Media Video and Flash, while transferring and accessing videos is fast with a USB 2.0 connection and WLAN and HSDPA support.

The storage capacity of the Nokia N96 can be further expanded with an optional microSD card, meaning if you were to add the recently announced 12GB microSD card from SanDisk and you'll have a phone with almost as much memory as a standard iPod.

In our brief play the video quality looked very good with the screen big enough to deliver a good picture. It's not going to replace your TV or laptop, but for watching short films or music videos it will do nicely. It certainly beats Motorola's movie-focused Z8 handset.

Utilising that kickstand and large screen, the display can be orientated in landscape making it ideal for watching video and or surfing the Web.

Unlike the iPhone, as we've already mentioned the N96 comes with HSDPA connectivity as well as Wi-Fi. Surfing at the show booth was fast on both, although we have to say unsurprisingly mobile phone reception was exceptional on the show floor - it was a mobile phone conference after all.

At a glance

What is it?

Everything-focused mobile phone

Good

16GB of internal memory, AGPS, kickstand, video capabilities

Bad

Heavier than N95, large

Verdict

The N96 is an evolution and refinement of the Nokia N95 rather than a whole new model, but seeing as the original phone was very good to start with this isn't a bad thing

Price

Your score

~/10

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As with the 8GB version of the N95, the N96 offers Nokia Maps and Nokia has said you will get the country of purchase's maps included in the box as well as being able to download other maps around the world. It's a great feature of the N96 allowing you to land in a foreign city and still get directions.

Assisted-GPS helps get a signal quicker using the network operators transmitter cells to triangulate your location rather than having to rely totally on satellites and this also helps if you are indoors, however we weren't able to test this on the phone in this First Look.

VERDICT

The N96 is an evolution and refinement of the Nokia N95 rather than a whole new model, but seeing as the original phone was very good to start with (it was voted Best Mobile Phone at the 2008 Pocket-lint Awards) this isn't a bad thing.

The larger screen, refined design and additional memory bring the phone back up to flagship level, something which over the last year the N95 had started to lose.

Should you be looking to buy then when it comes out later this year?

If you are a Nokia fan then this is Nokia doing what they do best.

As for N95 users, there is little change to be found, but what change there is, will be worthwhile.

The Nokia N96 is expected to begin shipping in the third-quarter of 2008 with an estimated sales price of approximately 550 euros, pre-tax.