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Apple iPod nano (5th Gen)

So just how good is this video camera?

by Dan Sung published on 14 September 2009

With no Beatles, no camera in the touch and no axing of the classic, the biggest announcement of Apple's 09.09.09 press conference was the 5th generation iPod nano, and even that was nearly overshadowed by the return of Steve Jobs. Very little has changed for the second smallest of the pods on the outside. The dimensions of the oval cross-section, almost flat rectangular device are identical to the previous generation with the only real differences a slightly larger 2.2-inch screen (up 0.2" on the 4th gen) and more mini control wheel. It's also gained just 6g more in weight to bring the nano up to a still teeny-tiny 36g. Even the colour range is identical aside a tweak in the green and a change to a polished aluminium finish which, as it happens, is very becoming indeed. Let's cut to the chase though. We can talk FM radios and pedometers in a bit, but it's the video camera we all want to know about. The first thing to note is that it's in a really bad position - on the back, at the bottom and essentially right where you normally hold it. You cannot grip it like you would any other pocket camcorder and mobile phone unless you just want a stream of dark footage of your index finger. You can get around that by holding it the other way up but then that means you can only grip the edges because you don't want to cover up the screen and spoil your view. Thankfully, the accelerometer allows you to record either in landscape or portrait position - do note that you can't switch once you've started filming though - but there's still a bit of a dance of the fingers to make sure you're blocking neither the lens nor your view of the action. The trouble is that there was simply no room for Apple to put the camera behind the screen. The thing's just too damn thick, so all the engineers could do was tuck it away in the corner. You get used to it eventually but you'll still get fingers in the shot every now and then. The lens itself is very well protected and, in fact, you're not going to have many issues with scratching up any part of the device from the



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lovely clear screen to the finish itself - except, perhaps, for the matte Apple logo on the back. The tiny dot next to the lens is the mono microphone which actually tested a lot better than most pocket camcorders. It picked up very quiet sounds indeed. Very useful for stealth vids and the dictaphone function. The quality of the footage is pretty good too - not stunning but perfectly decent. The resolution is only at 640 x 480 VGA level which automatically drops it down below just about any modern pocket camcorder and mobile phone. That would have been ok 2 years ago, but you just can't say it's really good enough for YouTube with the site's HD options. On the other hand, the colour palate is remarkably good compared to the Flip Mino HD which was used in our tests as a typical pocket camcorder competitor. The colours were very much washed out with the Flip compared to a very impressive vibrancy you could capture with the nano. Sadly, the advantage was lost in low light conditions where the iPod nano really seemed to break down completely. The Apple camcorder could barely pick up the colours at all and there was horrible pixelation where the internal gubbins was doing its best to approximate an image. It's was a similar story at the macro level. In very good light, the nano performed well but even at just normal indoor lighting levels you can see pixelation of the close up subjects making for a very unreal looking image. In fairness, the Flip doesn't do so wonderfully itself, but at least the picture's good as soon as the focus kicks in. On the plus side, the iPod nano manages a decent 30fps frame rate allowing for fairly smooth shots with reasonably fast action for a camera of its size - possibly made slightly more forgiving by its lower resolution. There also seems to be a wide-angle to the lens as well, which is preferable on these on-the-fly party type devices. After all you don't want to have to stand 5 metres from your mates to get them all in and end up recording the conversations of other people off-camera rather than what your friends are talking about. The 15 effects filters also add a bit of fun to the

At a glance

What is it?

5th Generation Apple iPod nano

Good

Every bit as good as the last plus an FM radio and a bigger screen

Bad

Camera resolution is dated, performance in low light is poor, it won't take stills and it's all too easy to cover up by accident

Verdict

If you could buy the 4th gen at a discount it would be worth it but it's still a very good MP3 player no matter the imaging

Price 135 (16GB)

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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proceedings. There's mock-thermal imaging, Cyborg mode, grainy film, motion blur and x-ray (negative) all of which you can see in our test footage here as well as some of the other conditions we put both the nano and the Flip through. Other effects also include twist, light tunnel and other usual suspects that Mac users will be familiar with. You can't change them once the camera is rolling but you can overlay them live to choose which one is going to look best. Lastly, and most criminally of all, is that, as announced, it is indeed not possible to take stills shots with the new nano. There's a bag full of explanations why Apple didn't feel it was necessary but, at the end of the day, an AF system alone would probably have just been far too much for the little nano to take on board. So, you'll have to settle for taking stills from your video editing software. You do have video editing software, right? Oh. The files are recorded as H.264 and, surprisingly enough, the video camera function doesn't seem to eat into the 24 hours audio/5 hours video battery life too badly. The FM radio is probably the next most significant addition to the 5th generation and, joy of joys, it's actually very good indeed - excellent, you might even say. The reception is clear and steady, once you've stuck in your headphones as the antenna; the song tagging would work fine if it supported the service in the UK and the presets feature is obvious with a typically Apple user-friendly and attractive interface. The best part of all is that you can pause the radio for up to 15 minutes while you take a call that you just can't ignore. All good stuff. A pedometer has been added to the nano with much of the Nike+ functionality from the touch and iPhone. It skips the odd step at the beginning and end of your walk/jog and any little hops you might make but otherwise the accuracy is as good as you need and the calorie counter is as depressingly obvious as ever. Apple has also thrown in the VoiceOver feature from the shuffle which means that your PMP can tell you what it's playing without having to actually look at the screen. This is all very well in theory but seeing as the iPod nano only comes with the basic Apple

earphones with no remote, it rather makes the whole thing pointless until you choose to splash out on the next ones up. The Genius playlists feature is doing just fine and, of course, since the addition of iTunes 9, there's also the Genius Mixes. It's much harder to find out what the songs on these mixes are than on iTunes itself and even the 3rd generation iPod touch, but as long as you entrust your ears to the nano, the feature still works fine. The only other major problem with this device is that now that the control wheel has shrunk even further, it makes the thing even more fiddly to use. It's not quite critical but it does take a little extra care which, like the positioning of the video camera, is a most non-Apple piece of design. Worse still, is that on the particular model we tested, the centre select button was quite intermittent. You'll notice on one or two of the short clips above the difficulties we had pressing it to stop recording.

VERDICT

To judge the 5th generation iPod nano as an MP3 player alone would be easy enough. It's still an excellent little machine. It's strong, beautifully crafted and just a real pleasure to own. The sound quality is as good as we've come to expect from the iPod family and the screen, although too much to watch an entire film on, is fantastic given its size. Unfortunately, apart from the FM transmitter, you could have said much the same about the 4th generation model and, as it happens, we did. Since Apple added a video camera, clearly positioning it as a competitor to a pocket camcorder, then we have to judge it on those lines too. The new functionality is very reasonable given the small frame on the device but it's not a patch on a dedicated video recorder. It offers something better than most phones but isn't even top dog there. At the end of the day, you still have to take a camcorder out with you and a stills device as well. Nice bit of fun but it just doesn't solve any problems. The tricky part is that, regardless, iPod nano is still more of a pleasure than the rest of its class and, until there's a camcorder that plays music as well as this unit can, then does it really matter how impressive the camera is or isn't in this case?