

Acer Aspire S5

A Serious MacBook Air Challenger

Reviewed by Yardena Arar

If you're looking for an Ultrabook with the superslim good looks of a MacBook Air, enough computing oomph to handle multimedia and general business tasks, plus a good-enough battery life, take a long hard look at the Acer Aspire S5. Especially the superslim good looks part.

The S5 is less than three quarters of an inch at its thickest and weighs 2.6 pounds—impressively light for a notebook with a 13.3-inch display. In almost every way, the S5 fulfills the promise of the Ultrabook as articulated by Intel: It's extremely portable, very fast, and endowed with decent battery life.

That's thanks in no small part to an innovative motorized panel that Acer calls the MagicFlip, which rolls down to conceal ports on the rear bottom edge. This both protects them when not in use and slims down the S5's profile so it's both thinner and lighter than the current 13.3-inch MacBook Air. But the motor makes a somewhat grating noise, and sometimes it seemed to roll up of its own volition. Also, I worry that the motor, activated by a button on the top right of the platen, adds one more part that could break.

Configured with one of Intel's fastest current ultraportable CPUs, the Core i7-3517U running at 1.9GHz (with a maximum turbo speed of 3GHz), 4GB of RAM, integrated HD 4000 graphics, a 256GB solid-state drive, and the 64-bit edition of Windows 7 Home Premium, the Aspire S5 is on the pricey side at \$1399 (as of July 18, 2012), but not spectacularly so for its components (especially the SSD).

That solid-state drive, combined with the Core i7 Ivy Bridge Ultrabook CPU, helped the S5 to its highly respectable overall performance score of 82, on a par with other top performers on our Ultrabook chart, including the Dell XPS 13. That overall score includes the S5's stratospheric 195 on our WorldBench 7 test suite, thanks mostly to its spectacular startup and hard-drive file operation scores, which typically rise dramatically with SSDs. Other scores that contribute to WorldBench were also generally above average, although not

enormously so.

It's worth noting that the S5 did very well in our gaming tests, even though it has no discrete graphics. Hard-core gamers can, of course, do better, but general users who want to sneak in the occasional Dirt 3 session shouldn't be put off. The Aspire S5's 5.5-hour battery life is about average for its class and screen size: It won't get you across the Atlantic or the Pacific, but should be sufficient for most transcontinental flights.

The S5's good looks don't stop with its black brushed aluminum exterior. Most of the chassis is fashioned from a magnesium-aluminum alloy that feels smooth and surprisingly solid on the inside, given how thin the notebook is. However, the bottom does get a bit warm after prolonged use.

The keyboard is nothing special. Keys are a tad mushy and very slippery, and they have no backlighting. But Acer uses a conventional layout so at least they're located where you expect them to be. The clickable Elan touchpad is roomy, smooth, and precise, but if, like me, you prefer a conventional mouse, Acer has been kind enough to include a Bluetooth mouse. That's definitely unusual in laptop land.

The port lineup departs a bit from the usual Ultrabook offering, most notably with the inclusion of a Thunderbolt port—a relatively new and small I/O port, found in current Macs and MacBook Pros, that provides high-speed powered connectivity for a wide range of peripherals and displays. The Thunderbolt port on the S5 is the furthest to the right in the area covered by MagicFlip; the others, from left, are an HDMI and two USB 3.0 ports. The MagicFlip panel also conceals a fan vent.

The curved edges house a couple of buttons, too. The power on/off button is located toward the back corner of the left edge, right behind an SD/MMC card

reader; on the right edge, the headset jack sits behind a paper-clip-size reset hole, something you don't usually see on notebooks. Speaking of unusual features (once again), Acer throws in an HDMI-to-VGA cable, too, so you can hook up the S5 to a conventional monitor.

The Aspire S5 proved pleasingly capable with multimedia. YouTube videos looked smooth on the 1366-by-768 LED-backlit display, which had a great horizontal field of vision and a decent vertical one as well. Even more impressive was the Dolby Home Theater enhanced audio system, which produced music and voice that far more robust than you get on most notebooks.

Skype video calls using the embedded, 1.3-megapixel webcam also looked smooth and sounded good. The webcam did a good job of adjusting to a low-light situation.

Acer also deserves kudos for giving the Aspire S5 dual-band Wi-Fi support: Access to the 5GHz band as well as the original (and increasingly crowded) 2.4GHz band helps compensate for the lack of an ethernet port, an annoying omission that's become increasingly common in Ultrabooks.

Aside from the small quibbles mentioned above, and the obvious limited storage of the SSD, the most irritating thing about this

generally first-rate laptop is its software bundle, which is unfortunately heavy on bloatware and marketing ware. I'm as much in favor of antivirus protection as the next guy, but those pop-up McAfee free-trial windows (which you can shut down only by uninstalling the app) are really starting to make me see red. And Acer's Clear.fi image-sharing software lets you easily share photos and videos with other devices on your network—as long as they too support Clear.fi—what are the odds?

Still, you can uninstall undesired software, and there's so much to like about this sexy, skinny Ultrabook that it's hard to hold a grudge. Acer has done right by Intel's Ultrabook vision. ■

