Alienware Area-51m review: portable desktop

If you've been looking at the field of gaming laptops for the past couple of years, you've probably noticed that they are getting thinner, lighter, and less conspicuous. Today's gaming laptops are not only capable of playing the latest games at high frame rates, but they can also pull double duty for productivity work just as easily.

Alienware's , which starts at around $1,950 and can be configured well north of $5,000, is not one of those gaming laptops. It is a behemoth that calls back to the time when all gaming laptops were thick, heavy computers that never left the comfort of a sturdy desk.

But while the Area-51m is twice as heavy and almost twice as thick as the latest Razer Blade or thin MSI gaming laptops, it does things that those computers just can't. It's more powerful, thanks to a desktop-class processor and full-power mobile GPU, instead of the lower-power Max Q graphics cards and mobile processors found in those other machines. Unlike most, it has a 17-inch display and a full-size keyboard, with both a number pad and macro keys. But it also has the ability to let you upgrade its primary components when better, faster chips become available. That's just not something you can do with the vast majority of gaming laptops on the market right now — whether they're thin or not.

The Area-51m is technically not the first laptop to offer this kind of upgradability. There have been big clunkers of laptops in the past that let you upgrade the CPU, and there's still an upgradeable GPU standard called MXM. But there's not much movement or competition in the MXM market — an RTX 2080 module alone could cost you upwards of $1500, and the laptops that can make use of them are few and far between.

To avoid having to use MXM, Alienware’s parent company Dell developed its own system for workstations called DGFF (Dell Graphics Form Factor) that allows it to put the latest GPUs on modular boards that can then be swapped out. The Area-51m is the first consumer laptop to make use of this new platform.

Future upgradeability is a nice thing to have, but when you’re spending $2,000 or more on a laptop, you don’t want to have to upgrade any of it anytime soon. The Area-51m’s design may immediately separate from the rest of the gaming laptop pack, but if it’s really going to justify its cost, it needs to be a top performer out of the box.

Fortunately for Alienware, it is.

8 Verge Score

Good Stuff

- Desktop-class performance
- Very effective cooling system
- Upgradable CPU and GPU

Bad Stuff

- Requires two large power adapters
- Portable in only the most literal sense

- Extremely high cost relative to other gaming systems

It’s perhaps best to think of the Area-51m as a “portable desktop,” as opposed to a laptop or truly mobile computer. It’s a massive machine, weighing over 8.5 pounds and measuring 1.7 inches at its thickest point. It has two power adapters, which vary in size depending on the internal configuration, but they add at least another few pounds to the total package. This isn’t the kind of computer you can just unplug and carry away from your desk; moving it from place to place is a production each time.

This isn’t the kind of laptop you’ll use while traveling

It’s also not the kind of computer you’ll be able to use *while* traveling. Sure, you can bring it from one place to another, but you won’t be gaming along the way because that demands two power outlets, and the giant machine is practically unsafe to use on your lap. Even though the Area-51m is far heavier and larger than most modern laptops (gaming or not), it’s a pound lighter than the Alienware 17 it replaces, thanks to its new magnesium alloy chassis.

The Area-51m’s overall design signals a new direction for Alienware, and it will inform other products the company releases in the future. I like it: the matte white (“lunar light” in Alienware’s marketing-speak) model I’ve been using for this review is modern, attractive, and smooth to the touch.

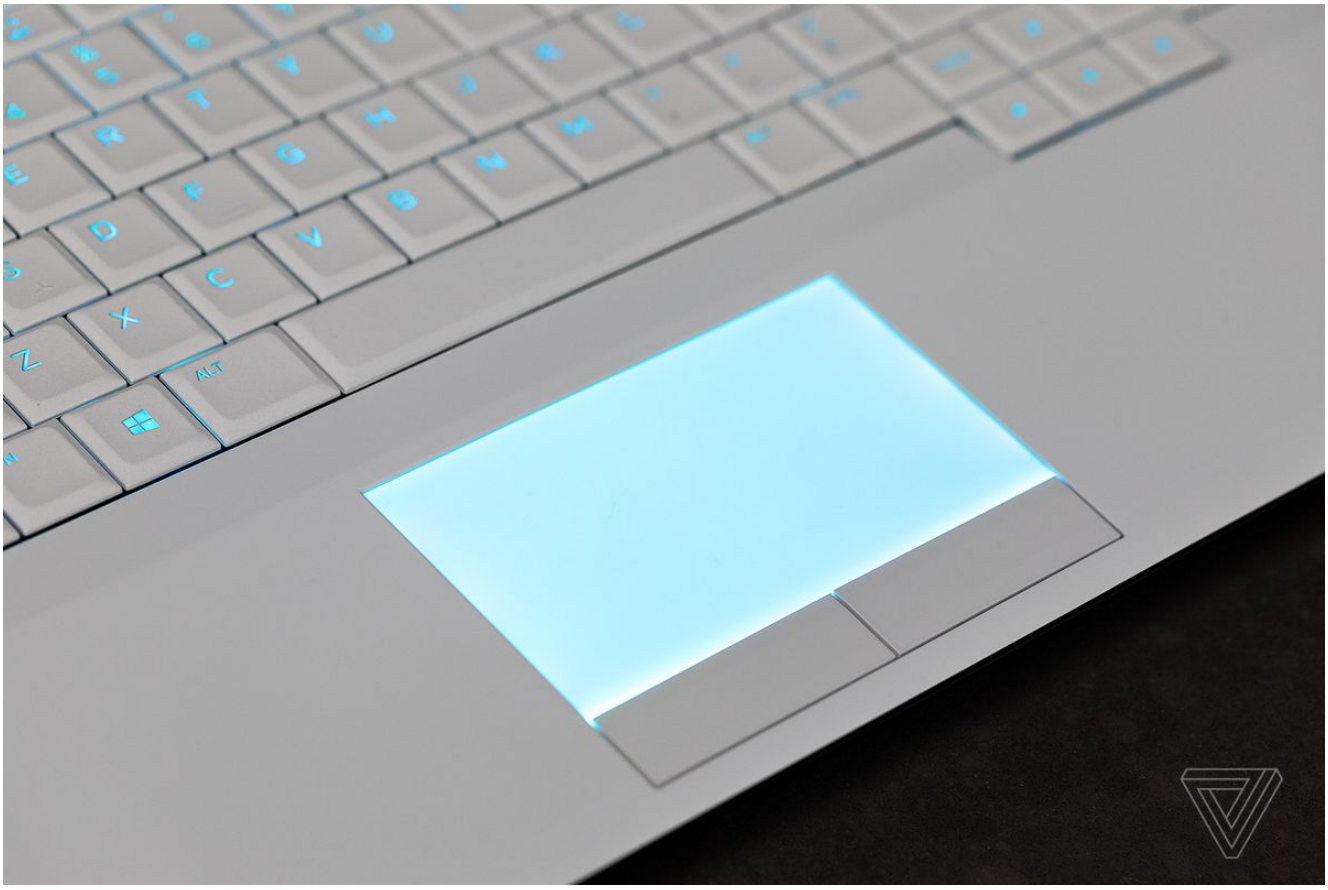
But it’s not subtle: there’s no mistaking this for anything but a gaming laptop, with its multiple alien head logos and various lighting effects. The most prominent design feature is the gigantic rear exhaust, with its hexagonally patterned grates for ventilation, surrounded by a single ring of LED light that makes the whole assembly look a bit like the engine of a sci-fi spaceship. I don’t mind the look, but if you want a sleeper gaming rig, this isn’t it.

In terms of basic specs and layout, the Area-51m has a full-size, non-chiclet keyboard with a number pad, a traditional trackpad with physical buttons (it lights up when you touch it), and a 17-inch display with slim bezels on the sides and top. I’m not the biggest fan of the keyboard or the trackpad — both feel like something that would have been appropriate on a computer a decade ago — but if you’re coming from an older Alienware laptop, you’ll feel right at home.

The keyboard and trackpad feel dated

The keyboard has customizable macro keys and full RGB lighting options, and since most people will instantly plug a gaming

mouse into the side of the Area-51m, the trackpad's small size and so-so tracking performance aren't that much of an issue. My biggest complaint is the annoyingly squeaky N key on my review unit, but I have a feeling that is limited to my sample. Still, it's not something I'd want to put up with on a multi-thousand-dollar computer.



Alienware offers four different display options with the Area-51m, but they all share the same size and resolution: 17 inches and 1080p. The display on my higher-end review unit is a 144Hz panel with Nvidia's G-Sync tech plus built-in Tobii eye tracking, and it's great for gaming. It's fast, there's little to no ghosting, and its anti-glare finish helps cut down reflections. It's not the brightest screen, especially compared to something like a MacBook Pro, but it's about average for gaming laptops, and it's not like you'll be using this thing outside anyway.

I do wish there were higher-resolution options since the Area-51m's hardware is definitely capable of pushing more pixels, but Alienware tells me that there just aren't 17-inch,

high-resolution, high-refresh panels with slim bezels available yet. When those components are available, it will make them an option at the time of purchase on the Area-51m, it says. (The display is not something you'll be able to upgrade after the fact.)

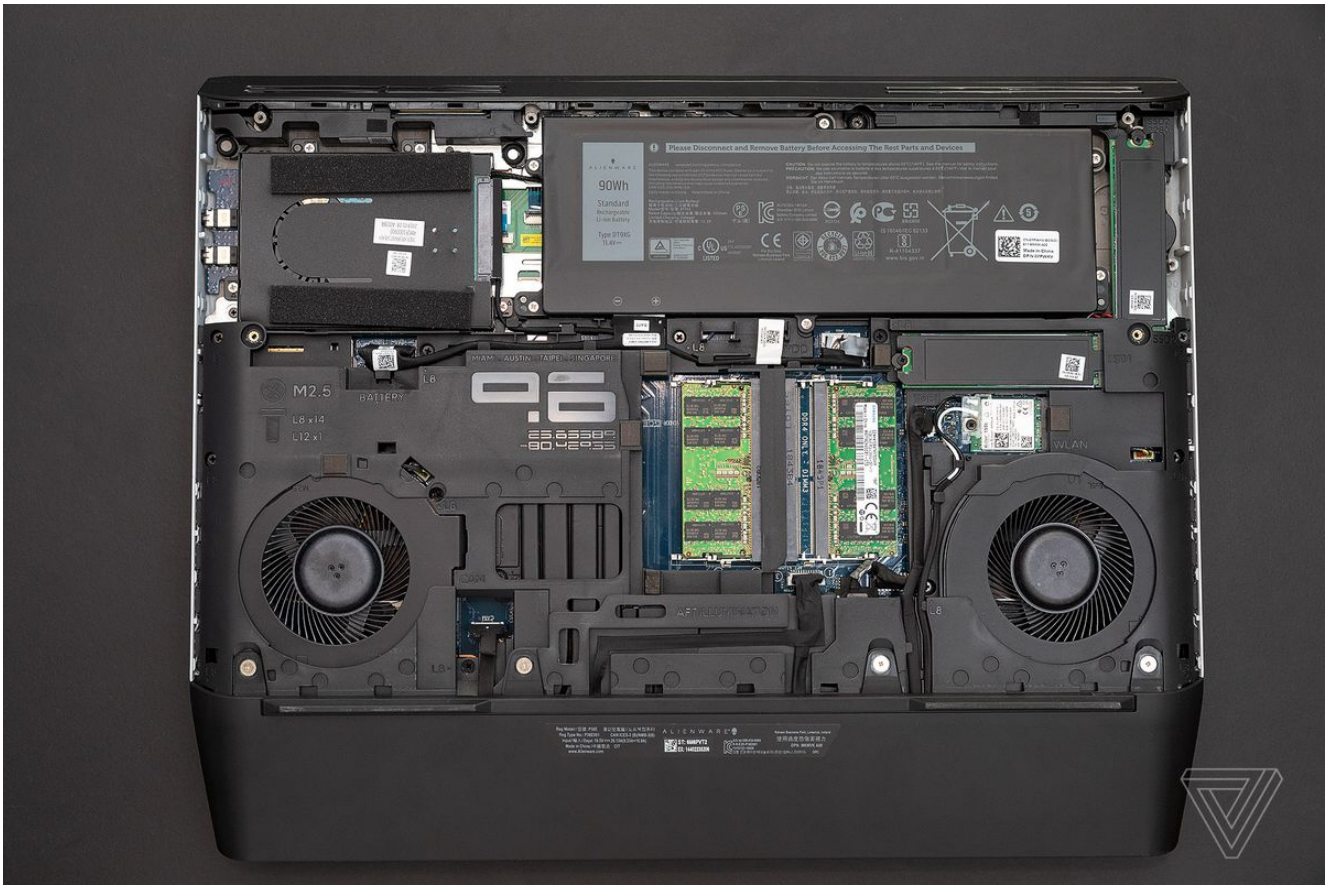
The Area-51m has a good number of ports, but it has room for even more

The Area-51m has the standard set of ports you'd expect on a gaming laptop in 2019: three USB-A 3.1 ports, a Thunderbolt 3 Type-C port, HDMI, Mini DisplayPort, 2.5-gigabit Ethernet, a headset jack, a microphone jack, and Alienware's proprietary graphics amplifier port for an external GPU. That's probably enough ports for the average gamer, but I'd have liked to have seen even more, including an SD card slot. There's a lot of empty space on the Area-51m's chassis that could be used for more I/O, and multiple Thunderbolt 3 ports or an SD card slot would have made the computer much more attractive to the content creators that would use its horsepower for video editing and other tasks.

Inside the hulking chassis is a Z390 chipset, with a desktop processor, up to 64GB (four sticks) of RAM, two M.2 SSD slots, a 2.5-inch drive bay, and Dell's DGFF modular graphics card. You can get the Area-51m with a Core-i7 8700 processor and Nvidia RTX 2060 GPU to start, but I think most people interested in this machine will opt for the higher-end (and more expensive) configurations. The model I've been testing has the Core-i9 9900K processor, RTX 2080 GPU, 32GB of DD4 2400MHz RAM, two 512GB M.2 SSDs (in a RAID 0 setup for a total of 1TB of fast storage), and an additional 1TB hybrid drive for more storage. Alongside the Tobii eye-tracking and 144Hz G-Sync display, this configuration costs about $4,500.

It is possible to buy the lower-end configurations and then upgrade down the road — after all, this is a desktop processor and modular graphics card — but that really only makes sense for upgrading to new generations of CPUs and GPUs, not ones from the same generation. Stepping up from the 8700 processor to the 9900K is a $450 option when you buy the Area-51m; doing it after the fact will cost about $525 at today's processor prices.

The battery inside the Area-51m is a large, 90 watt-hour unit, but that doesn't translate into great battery life. In my tests, I was able to get about 90 minutes to two hours of use between charges for productivity work and closer to 30 minutes while gaming. That means you'll want to carry around both of the Area-51m's power adapters when you bring the computer places, as you'll need both of them for full-power gaming. It is possible to rely on just the smaller, 180W charger for productivity work, but if you're already lugging the Area-51m around, you might as well fully commit.



All of those specs and power mean little if the components can’t stay cool enough to run optimally, which is the biggest challenge with gaming laptops. Fortunately, the cooling system Alienware developed for the Area-51m is excellent, and it’s able to keep both the CPU and GPU at temps well below their throttling points. It’s not silent – the fan system is very loud, especially when at full speed – but it’s effective, and it lets the Area-51m hit performance numbers that are much closer to what a desktop provides than a laptop.

Loud fans are not really unusual for a gaming laptop, and if you’re in the market for the Area-51m, you probably expect it. There are powerful speakers up front that can overpower the fan noise, but most people will just want to use a headset while gaming so they don’t have to hear the fans at all. You just might not be able to get away with using the Area-51m in a quiet office or library without getting some dirty looks.

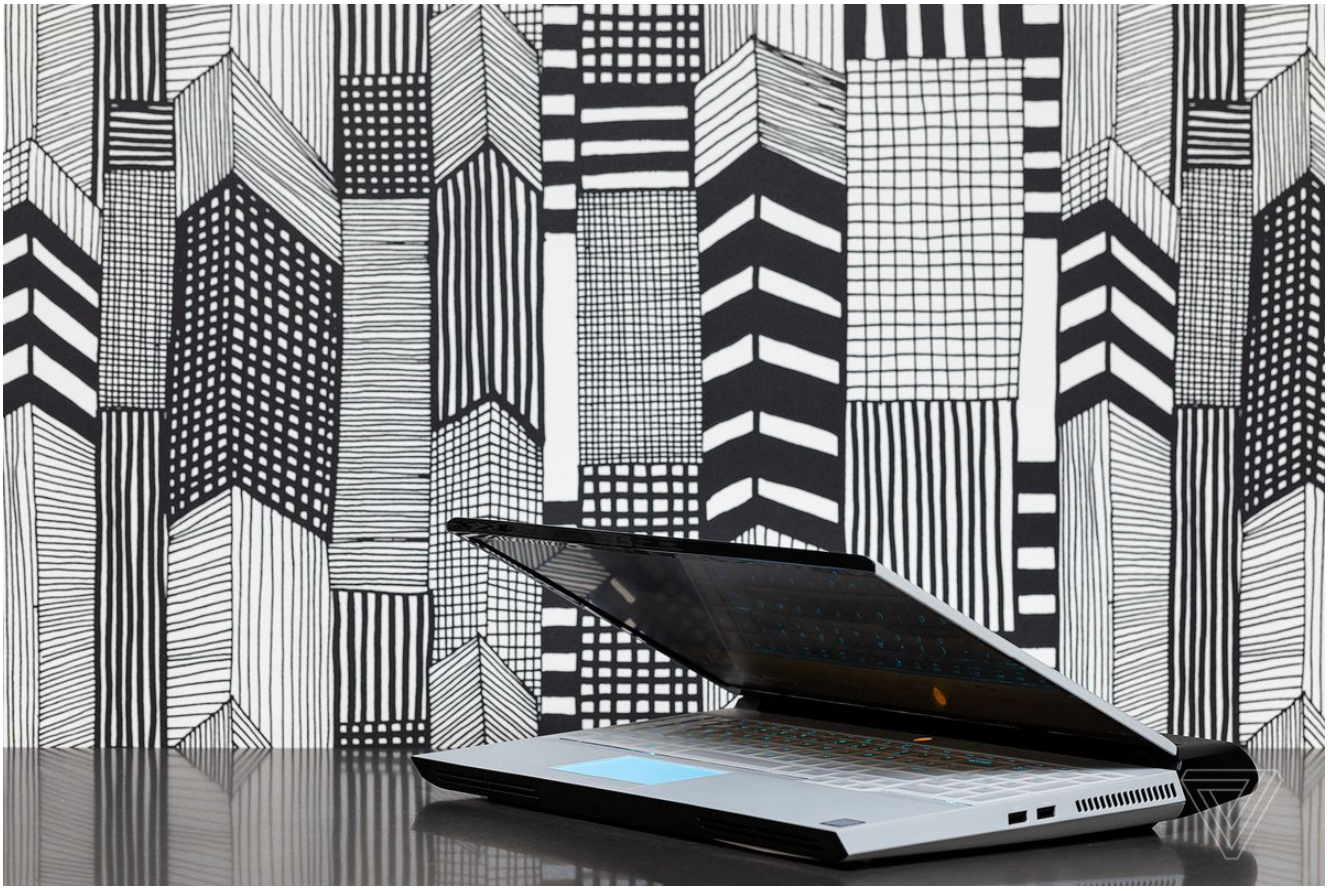
Playing games is what the Area-51m was designed to do, and it does that job excellently. It is able to play virtually any modern AAA game I throw at it with the graphical settings maxed out and still maintain high frame rates. Even games like *Battlefield V* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, which have a lot of eye candy and special ray-tracing lighting effects, could be played with virtually every setting turned on and maxed out and the Area-51m still maintains frame rates between 60 and 80 frames per second. That's not quite the full 144Hz that this screen can push, but it's still high enough for a great experience in those games.

Competitive shooting games, like *Apex Legends*, *Overwatch*, *CS:GO*, and everyone's favorite, *Fortnite*, can be played with all of their graphical features enabled at 120 to 144 frames per second. Players that prefer high frame rates over eye candy can configure these games with lower settings and run them at hundreds of frames per second, which is well more than the native refresh rate of the display. If stock settings aren't providing enough power, Alienware's Command Center

offers overclocking options for both the CPU and GPU to squeeze even more performance out of them.

The high-end Area-51m configurations have plenty of headroom for competitive gaming

All of that performance headroom highlights the Area-51m's bottleneck: the display's resolution. I have no doubt that the Area-51m could easily push a 1440p panel or maybe even a 4K display in lots of games, but for the time being, you're limited to 1080p. If you're after the fastest frame rates you can get, you probably prefer a high-refresh rate screen, but if you are more into visual presentation and eye-candy, more resolution is appreciated, especially for non-gaming applications. For now, if you want to game or work at a higher resolution on the Area-51m, you'll just have to use an external display.



As it stands, the Area-51m is the most powerful gaming laptop you can buy, and its upgradeable features mean it could remain powerful for years to come. When we opened up the Area-51m ourselves, we found that – while it isn't exactly easy –

swapping out the CPU and GPU isn’t much different than doing so on an average desktop gaming PC. But there’s an asterisk next to all of this: we don’t know for sure that the next generation of Intel processors or Nvidia or AMD GPUs will actually fit in this computer or how much those modular graphics cards will cost. Dell has said that if it’s possible to physically and electrically fit the chips onto its swappable graphics boards, it will offer upgrade options, but Dell admits it doesn’t necessarily know what Nvidia’s next plans are.

That uncertainty makes it tough to swallow the Area-51m’s price because we really don’t know if this experiment will last. For the cost of a well-configured Area-51m, you could buy a desktop computer and monitor with similar power and still have enough money left over to buy a more mainstream thin-and-light gaming laptop for when you want to game on the go.

The reality of Alienware’s upgradability plans remains to be seen

The Area-51m is an unrealistic option for most gamers. The kind of gamer who is going to demand this level of performance in a portable machine and put up with all of the compromises and costs necessary to get it is likely a competitive e-sports player or a virtual reality game developer who needs an easier way to transport their desktop to the next trade show.

That said, what Alienware has done with the Area-51m is really impressive. Not only does it hit performance marks unmatched by other portable machines, but it doesn’t have any glaring issues or show-stopping usability problems that bring it down, other than the obvious compromises with its size and weight. Even just being able to cool these desktop components efficiently enough for them to perform this well in a portable machine is a genuine feat. If you are the type of gamer who wants the ultimate power in a portable machine and are willing to pay any cost to get it, the Area-51m is for you.

For the rest of us, I’m hopeful that Dell’s plans for upgradability pan out because I’m very curious to see where the Area-51m’s ideas on performance and portability go in the future.

Vox Media has affiliate partnerships. These do not influence editorial content, though Vox Media may earn commissions for products purchased via affiliate links. For more information, see our ethics policy.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/4/18294631/alienware-area-51m-review-gaming-laptop-specs-price-features