Apple 15-inch MacBook Pro 2019 review

Here we review Apple's latest powerful, sleek laptop for designers and artists using Photoshop, Cinema 4D and more.

The new MacBook Pro is all about performance. From the outside, it's near-identical to the previous model (and the one before that) – not that that's a bad thing aesthetically, but functionally there are the same merits and flaws as before.

For the 15-inch MacBook Pro, the performance boost comes from Intel's 9th-generation Core i7 and i9 chips – the i9 being a designation introduced for the previous generation for the most powerful chips.

The Core i7 and i9 chips used in the 15-inch MacBook Pro have six or eight cores, whereas the previous generation topped out at six cores. This makes them capable of up to 40% higher performance in truly multi-threaded apps – which includes most of the professional-level creative tools used by *Digital Arts* readers, especially when rendering motion and animation projects. When you're not using all the cores, Intel's Turbo Boost technology allows you to push the clock speed higher – from 2.4GHz to 5GHz in the case of our i9-based review unit.

So whether you're rendering using all the cores in Cinema 4D, creating intricate vector graphics in the still largely single-threaded Illustrator or piling on the layers in Photoshop, you'll see massive performance gains.

One of these is the new MacBook Pro, one is the previous generation. Can you tell which is which?
Apple is the first company to release a laptop with Intel's 9th-gen Core i9 chips – beating Dell, HP and Lenovo. It won't be long before those competitors release rivals, but it's nice

to see Apple at the head of the pack again.

The latest MacBook Pro supports the same maximum amount of RAM – up to 32GB of RAM – and there's the same max 4TB NVMe SSD storage. The graphics options are the Radeon Pro 560X with 4GB of GDDR5, or Radeon Pro Vega 16 or Radeon Pro Vega 20 (both which have 4GB of HBM2 higher-bandwidth memory) – the last generation MacBook Pro 15 didn't offer Vega graphics from the start, but gained them as options in a minor refresh last autumn.

Price

Our review unit has that Radeon Vega 20 chip, a 2.4GHz Core i9 chip, 32GB of RAM and a 4TB drive. This will set you back a wince-inducing £6,074/£6,549 – though this is approximately the same as the highest-spec previous model – though if you drop the storage down to a more affordable 1TB, it comes in at £3,914/$4,149.

We'll have to see how this compares to PC rivals, though based on what we saw from the previous generation, they'll be considerably cheaper.

Benchmarks

We tested the MacBook Pro 2019 against the highest-spec mid-2018, plus our previous best laptop for designers and artists, the Dell XPS 15. To see how it measures up against desktops, we also tested it against Apple’s own recently upgraded iMac and Mac mini.

- The 2018 MacBook Pro had an Intel Core i9 2.9GHz 8-core chip, 32GB RAM, a 2TB NVMe, AMD Radeon Pro 560X graphics with 4GB RAM, and a 15.4-inch, 2,880 x 1,800 resolution screen.
- The 2018 Dell XPS 15 had an Intel Core i9 2.9GHz 8-core chip, 32GB RAM, a 1TB NVMe, Nvidia GeForce GTX1050Ti

graphics with4GB RAM, and a 15.6-inch, 3,840 x 2,160, touchscreen.

- The 2019 iMac had an Intel Core i9-9900K 3.6GHz 8-core 9th-gen, 16GB RAM, a 512GB SSD. AMD Radeon Pro Vega 48 graphics with 8GB HBM, and a 27-inch, 5,120 x 2,880 screen.
- The 2019 Mac Mini had an Intel Core i7 3.2GHz, 6-core 8th-gen chip, 32GB RAM, a 1TB SSD and Intel UHD Graphics 630 – connected to a 27-inch, 5,120 x 2,880 screen.

Photoshop benchmark

Puget's Photoshop test is a great indicator of performance in general creative applications. Here the MacBook Pro showed it can really deliver against the competition – but even in Photoshop, if raw performance matters, a desktop is still your best bet.

Processor benchmark

Cinebench R20 – based on the latest version of Cinema 4D – is the new gold-standard benchmark for testing how powerful a processor. Fully multi-threaded, you can see the benefits of the new MacBook Pro's 8-core chip – but again how the latest desktop Core processors are almost 30 percent faster than their mobile equivalents.

Real-time graphics benchmark

Cinebench no longer has a real-time graphics benchmark, so we've created our own using the full version of Cinema 4D and the ProRender rendering engine. This gives you an idea not only of real-time 3D graphics performance but of any task that uses the graphics chip such as effects processing and encoding in Premiere, Final Cut, Resolve or After Effects.

Here you can see how much having a graphics chip matters – the Mac mini doesn't have one – but also that the MacBook Pro is

the most powerful laptop around.

A reliable keyboard?

Away from the new chips, there are few additional new features. The main new feature is an improved keyboard mechanism, which follows from a redesign in the previous generation following user complaints about dust getting inside and stopping keys from working.

I can’t comment on any change in its reliability, but the keyboard is reasonably pleasant to type on – better than some but not as good as that found on the Dell’s 15-inch XPS or Precision models.

What’s not new but nifty

If you’re upgrading from older than the previous generation – or a PC laptop – there are a few more features you’ll find that are now.

The most obvious of these – if you turn it on – is the True Tone display. Borrowed from Apple’s iPads and iPhones, this changes the colour temperature of your display to match your environment.

For most designers, this sounds like a clear and direct path to messing with the colours in your work that you’ve considered so carefully. And you’d be right – but there are a few circumstances where you’d turn it on.

With more of us working away from our studios, we are more likely to find ourselves in environments with distinct colour casts to the lighting – and here True Tone can be very useful, perhaps for roughly choosing colours that we’ll refine when we get back to our desks.

At the launch of the previous MacBook Pro, photographer Daniel Beltra said that True Tone proved invaluable when selecting a few photos to progress with from hundreds taken on a location shoot, while sitting inside a red tent. This is a situation few of us are likely to find ourselves in – but in a more minor way, True Tone is effective at taking the edge off the yellows lights of the coffee shop I’m in right now.

This is not a coffeeshop, but our own photostudio.
True Tone is an internal process, rather than something inherent in the MBP’s screen itself. It’s a very good screen – but it has a lower resolution than the truly excellent 4K displays offered as options by Dell’s XPS and Precision ranges, HP’s ZBook Studio or Razer’s rainbow-coloured Blade. These offer 60% more pixels than the MBP’s screen.

The screen is also less capable of replicating the Adobe RGB colour space used internally but its Creative Cloud applications than its rivals, managing 91% – while others such as the Dell XPS 15 or Precision 5540 can deliver the full 100%. Apple has instead chosen to focus the MBP’s output on matching the DCI P3 colour space for digital cinema – which I’m sure makes for a great movie watching experience but is

less useful for those with an Adobe workflow.

We test all screens using a DataColor Spyder5 sensor and software.
Lastly, there’s no touchscreen option. Apple has said that it doesn’t think touchscreens are a good idea for laptops, being uncomfortable to use due to the strain of raising your arm a lot to stroke the screen – and leaving smeary fingerprints on your display. However, this doesn’t seem to apply to the iPad Pro and keyboard combo that it also sells.

In theory, Apple’s correct – if you had to hold up your arm to touch the screen for extended periods, you’d end up in pain. But that’s not how you a touchscreen laptop – you use the touchscreen for broad gestures and selection, and the trackpad for more precise control. As someone who’s used to using a

Dell Precision laptop, the usefulness of a touchscreen over a trackpad in tight spaces is immediately apparent in the cramped seating of the Thameslink train I’m on right now.

Touch Bar

Instead of a touchscreen, on the MacBook Pro you have the Touch Bar. The True Tone effect has also been applied to the Touch Bar, which is a nice touch but worth no more words than that.

The main problem with the Touch Bar is that developers seem to have stopped adding support for it. You can use it with Photoshop, Illustrator, Sketch and Premiere Pro – plus Apple’s own Final Cut and Motion of course – but these apps gained

support for it in 2017. There’s not a single major creative app that’s gained support for it in 2018 – so it’s still missing in InDesign, After Effects, Cinema 4D and more.

I’d speculate that when Apple didn’t release a Touch Bar-enabled keyboard for the iMac or iMac Pro, Adobe and others decided that developing Touch Bar support for a single – albeit very popular – laptop wasn’t worth the effort.

The one part of the Touch Bar that has proved very useful is the fingerprint sensor, which makes unlocking the MacBook Pro much faster than typing your password. There’s no quick log-in through face-detection as found on Windows 10’s Windows Hello or the iPhone XS though.

Design challenges

As before, there’s much to like about the MacBook Pro’s industrial design – and much to get annoyed about. It looks lovely and sleek, and is still the laptop to buy if you want one that screams “I’m a designer/artist/creative director”.

However, the lack of port options still frustrates. There’s an upside to the four Thunderbolt 3 ports (plus headphones – Apple hasn’t ditched that yet thankfully) – you can plug the power lead in to either side. But I’ve already left my Satechi USB-C adapter at my desk when I needed it in the meeting I’m in enough times to be really frustrating, whether I’m just in one of our own meeting rooms at the other end of the *Digital Arts* offices or on the other side of London.

Worse, as with the iPhone’s missing headphone port, we’ve

started to see other manufacturers begin to copy Apple (yes, I’m looking at you Dell). Stop it now. Everyone.

Pet port peeves aside, the MacBook Pro is the most powerful laptop currently available. It won’t be long until challengers appear to take it on, but for now this is king.

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