Apple iPad mini review

Like a pocket Moleskine, 2019's iPad mini isn't ideally sized for drawing – but it might be your perfect travelling companion.

Sometimes smaller is better. While most of us at any given moment would prefer to sketch, draw or paint on a surface large enough to both make long bold strokes and add fine detail, there's a reason why many of us carry pocket-sized Moleskines at all times – ready to sketch things we see or just to fill the spare moments between stations that others fill with Instagram and Netflix.

This is where the iPad mini could fit into your life. While the 7.9-inch screen feels more restrictive than the 10.5-inch iPad Air, and especially the 12.9-inch iPad Pro I'm writing this review on, I'm much more likely to take the mini with me. It's not as truly pocket-sized as a Moleskine, but it (and its accompanying Pencil) will fit into a jacket pocket or handbag – whereas bigger iPads require at least a satchel.

Of course, I'm writing from a position of luxury here. Few people will have a choice of iPads to take with them – but I can see why you might choose a mini over a larger iPad. If you do most of your professional drawing in your studio using a Cintiq or other large drawing screen, and are looking for a convenient sketchbook for your daily travels, the iPad mini could be the right choice.

To see how good the iPad mini is when travelling light, I took it on a trip to a quiet part of Tenerife, where it was shared between myself and my illustration-student stepdaughter Leylah (who also kindly agreed to appear in the photos here).

The small size made it easy to use in tight spaces, such as on the flight without inadvertently elbowing fellow travellers in the ribs – also true for trains when not on holiday. On

planes, trains and automobiles – and elsewhere – it proved large enough that watching films and TV shows didn’t feel uncomfortably small like a phone, but also not so large that you’re conscious that everyone can see what you’re watching. It’s also large enough that two people can watch a show comfortably.

The iPad mini also felt effortless to throw in a tote bag with the Pencil and a towel and head to the pool or a 20 minute walk through cacti-strewn volcanic rock to a beach.

Some of the innovations of the iPad Pro that you don’t get on the 9.7-inch it’s-just-called-iPad-ok have made their way to the iPad mini, which is one of the reasons why the mini costs more than its larger cousin. Both the iPad and the iPad mini have a 2,048 x 1,536-resolution screen that the mini’s size makes seem more detailed – but the mini has a wider colour gamut and Apple’s True Tone display tech that changes the colour temperature of the screen to match colour casts from the lighting around you. It also has an anti-reflective coating that proved very useful in the Canarian sun, though less so back in rainy London.

The mini also has an A12 chip – the same as the iPad Air, with which it shares many features – to the iPad's A10. The additional performance will prove useful if you like to add lots of layers to your work in Procreate – less so if you're simply sketching.

The higher-performing chip draws on the battery more, but we still managed to be actively drawing for four-to-five hours each day without running the battery down completely.

Features introduced by Apple in the latest iPad Pros that haven't made it to the iPad mini include the 2nd-generation Pencil and Face ID. The former is a shame – not so much because of the 2nd-gen stylus' tap-able 'button or because you charge it by turning the iPad into a lollipop – but because

it’s smaller than the first-gen. Using the 1st-gen Pencil on the iPad mini feels a bit like using a crayon on a Moleskine at first and can look a bit ridiculous to anyone watching you – but you soon get used to it, pinching in to add detail before pulling out to work on a full composition (Leylah), layout or wireframe (me) where on a larger drawing surface you would stay at the same magnification.

I’d count the lack of Face ID as a bonus. Yes, it means that the iPad mini has a thick bezel that otherwise could possibly mean that it could be smaller or have a larger screen if somehow Apple could use the same design as the Pro – though likely this would hike up the price too. However, one definite benefit of the fingerprint-based Touchpad is that you can unlock the iPad mini when it’s flat on your desk ready to draw

without having to lift it up and show it your face (or loom over it creepily).

Apple doesn’t make a Smart Keyboard for the iPad mini, and typing on screen is a much worse experience – to the point where I can’t imagine even writing a whole email on it, let alone something the length of this review. Instead, Apple offers non-keyboard covers including this rather striking orange one.

There are three ways you can configure your iPad mini. Storage options are 64GB and 256GB, and there are Wi-Fi and Wi-Fi + Cellular versions – plus a choice of back and front colours: silver and while, ‘space grey’ and black, and gold and white. While I tested the £669/US$679 256GB Wi-Fi + Cellular version,

I’d recommend the £399/$399 64GB Wi-Fi version. Unless you’re also filling your iPad with a lot of RAW photos or video, 64GB is more than enough – and paying £120/$120 plus a separate phone contract doesn’t make a lot of sense for a device that’s your companion, not your main computer (and tethering off your phone isn’t exactly hard to do).

The iPad mini isn’t for everyone. For most artists and designers, the larger drawing surface of the iPad Air or one of the iPad Pros would be a better choice – with the decision between these based mainly on your budget. But if you’re the kind of person who’d actively choose a smaller page to be lighter on your feet, the iPad mini is the tablet for you.

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