Apple MacBook Pro 13 review

Apple’s latest laptop isn’t as redesigned as the 16-inch MacBook Pro released late last year, but it’s still a good choice for designers with specific requirements.

Apple’s 15- and 16-inch MacBook Pro are as much part of the stereotypical designer’s look as a beard-or-fringe/bangs, check shirt and intimate knowledge of LCD Soundsystem’s discography. So why would you consider the 13-inch model?

Price is an obvious consideration. In our new daily lives, having a small laptop may also have its advantages if you’re going to be working more regularly from the sofa or garden (*above*) – and while squinting all day at a 13-inch screen may not be for everyone’s eyes, the screen size may not matter that much if your setup is to use it with an external monitor at a desk for at least part of the day.

One of the reasons to discount the 13-inch MacBook Pro in the past was a lack of performance – and that’s still the case for the entry-level models. Cheaper configurations of the MBP 13 come with 8th-generation Core chips – as found in the previous model – and should be ignored. The least expensive MBP 13 to consider is the £1,799/US$1,799 version Apple has sent us for review, which has a 10th-generation chip and overall performance that’s quite happy with low-to-moderately taxing design- and art-work in Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign or any of Affinity’s tools.

This model is £/$600 lower than an entry-level 16-inch MacBook Pro – and its nearest competitor is Dell’s latest XPS 13, which has a design that borrows heavily from the MBP.

Our review unit has a Core i5-1038NG7 processor – quad-core, running at 2GHz – 16GB of faster RAM and 1TB of storage. You can upgrade it to a 2.3GHz chip, up to 64GB of RAM and up to 4TB of storage – though going from 2TB to 4TB will cost you

£/$600 that might be better put towards upgrading to a 16-inch MBP, unless you really want a smaller laptop.

We use Cinebench R20 as our main processor benchmark. It's based on rendering a scene in Cinema 4D using the CPU alone, and it's a good way to look at processor-based performance in any intensive app. Here the MacBook Pro was faster than both the its own previous generation and an equivalently priced Dell XPS 13 or Surface Pro 7. Performance was much lower than the base-level 16-inch MBP, which is to be expected.

In Photoshop though, where we don't have benchmarks for the previous MBP 13, Apple's latest Mac performed less well. It was only a little faster than a much more compact Surface Pro. The difference between the 13-inch model and the 16 was even more marked here – the base model MBP 16 is 22% faster in Photoshop – with the lack of a separate graphics chip dragging the 13 down (that MBP 16 was 42% faster for GPU-accelerated filters and transformations).

The Intel Iris Plus graphics also made the MBP 13 a laggard in our Cinema 4D 3D-performance test – taking 12 times as long as the 16-inch MBP in our moderately demanding ProRender test that's GPU-accelerated. We attempted to run our intensive ProRender that takes a 16-inch MBP about two hours to complete, but lost patience after 24 hours with an estimated 7 more to go. A laptop for 3D creatives this is not.

In our test, battery life was moderate – running a video on loop kept the MBP 13 awake for 9 hours and 42 minutes (for reference a 16-inch model was over 12 hours).

The one other benchmark that we did was to test the colour gamut and accuracy of the screen. This is the same 2,560 x 1,600 as the previous model – other 13-inch laptops have full 4K screens, though at this size you're not really going to notice the difference. What you will notice though is that it's less accurate than the pro-level 15/16-inch laptops such

as the MBP 16 and Dell XPS 15 – it has a Delta-E above 2 – and can output 83% of the Adobe RGB colour space to the MBP 16’s 87% and the XPS 15’s 100%.

One new feature of the 13-inch MacBook Pro that everyone will appreciate is the new Magic Keyboard. As debuted on the 16-inch MacBook Pro, this is a massive improvement on what came before. It has deeper keys with a much more haptically satisfying level of travel to them that helps prevent miskeying.

Apple says it’s more reliable – which I can’t give an opinion on as I’ve had no problems with the Magic Keyboard on my 16-inch MacBook Pro or the ’non-magic’ keyboard on the 15-inch model that proceeded it. However, what I can say is that it’s much more comfortable to type on. It’s not quite up there with the best desktop keyboard – , as you asked – but it’s near enough, which is really saying something for a laptop.

The new keyboard also sees a physical Escape key – a demand of developers apparently – and a detached fingerprint scanner/power button to balance the Escape key aesthetically.

The 13-inch MacBook Pro has much stronger competition that its larger sibling – but if your budget is less than two grand and you prefer a Mac to a PC, there’s more performance here than you might expect.

Thanks to for help with the photography.

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