Apple Watch series 5 hands-on: Software is king

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- The Apple Watch series 5.
  Samuel Axon
- The dial and other elements are all the same; this watch doesn’t look different from its predecessor, unless you get new customization or materials options.
  Samuel Axon
- Samuel Axon
- Speaking of new (or returning) materials, here’s the Apple Watch series 5 in ceramic.
  Samuel Axon
- Another angle on the ceramic edition.
  Samuel Axon
- And here’s titanium.
  Samuel Axon
- The side in titanium.
  Samuel Axon
- Here’s a Hermes edition Apple Watch series 5.
  Samuel Axon
- The Apple Watch series 5 running watchOS 6, with new watch face options.
  Samuel Axon
- There’s now a compass app.
  Samuel Axon

- You can also add the compass to your watch face.
  Samuel Axon
- The compass offers additional data when you scroll.
  Samuel Axon
- Location data allows third-party apps like this stargazing app to function.
- You can track ambient noise and get notifications if you're risking hearing damage.
  Samuel Axon
- watchOS 6 brings an on-device App Store. (That'll come to older Apple Watches too, of course).
  Samuel Axon

CUPERTINO, Calif.—The Apple Watch is the most popular Watch in the world, at this point—and not just among smartwatches. And while it lags behind competitors in terms of some common features, it also offers plenty that other smartwatches don't. Apple is bringing one of the biggest missing features—an always-on display—to the Apple Watch series 5, which the company unveiled at its HQ during an event earlier today.

We spent a few minutes wearing the Watch and trying out its new customization options and features. You can find the photos above and our impressions below.

The real star of the Apple Watch series 5 show is, of course, watchOS 6, which is a notable update that adds on an on-device app store, numerous new watch face customization and functionality options, new apps, and more. We already covered watchOS 6 when it was revealed at Apple's developer conference in June, so I won't spend too much time on it here. We'll dig deep on it when we review the series 5, though.

I did spend some time trying out the compass app, which is new to watchOS 6 but also unique to this device. It will likely be a hit with hikers and the like, and it provides additional information like latitude, longitude, elevation, and more when you scroll down from the main compass view in the app.

Additionally, you can drop the compass on your Watch face if you see yourself using it a lot; I played with an example of that, and it was pretty neat as it updated live when I turned.

In terms of hardware, this year's update is about customization options as much as anything. As Apple execs noted on stage, there are roughly a thousand possible combinations of customization options, so we weren't able to see them all. But we did see the new ceramic and titanium materials. Apple introduced a ceramic white Watch a couple of years ago, so this is a return and not something totally new. That said, the device does look a little different than the old one. It's *very* white. Fans of the previous ceramic Apple Watch will probably appreciate the same advantages: a different look and feel, and arguably better scratch resistance.

I didn't feel the titanium material made as big an impression; you have to look closely to really distinguish it from stainless steel, apart from slightly different coloring. It is more of a brushed metal vibe, compared to the reflective shininess of the stainless steel.

If you don't pick one of the new materials or customization options, the Watch's design looks identical to that of the series 4 from last year. It's available in the same two sizes, too.

The tentpole feature that dominates the Apple Watch series 5 story, though, is something that we've already seen in *numerous* other wearables: it has an always-on display. Apple is definitely playing catch-up here, but the implementation does seem neat. The Watch's screen brightness lowers when you're not looking at it, but the time and other stuff is still legible. When you tap it or raise it (the same action that turned on the screen to begin with in prior models), the screen brightness raises for easier readability.

Apple says this Watch will get the same battery life as last year’s model, despite the inclusion of this new feature. That’s made possible in part by the fact that the new LTPO panel can vary the refresh rate on the fly, based on what you need it to do at any given moment. It can operate at 1Hz, 60Hz, or anything in between.

In wearing and using the Watch for a few minutes, I didn’t notice any weird behavior on that front. Everything on the display updated as expected.

The Apple Watch series 5 will be available from the Apple Store on September 20, and it’s available to pre-order now, starting at $399.

Listing image by Samuel Axon

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