Google finally announces the Pixel 4a for $349

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- The Pixel 4a. It’s finally here!
- The front and back.
- The back is all plastic, with one camera and an in-screen fingerprint reader.
- The front display with a hole-punch camera.
- The side power button. It’s green!
- The camera is a single lens setup.

Remember the Pixel 4a? After months of delays, Google’s midrange smartphone is finally coming to market. Google made the phone official with only a quiet blog post, instead of the hyped-up online launch most other phones have been getting in the COVID-19 era.

The main thing we didn’t know from the *seven months* of leaks was the price, which Google confirmed today is $350. It really seems like Google is doing the bare minimum for a launch here—there is no XL model, and the phone only comes in one color. The Pixel 4a is up for pre-order right now, with a ship date of August 20.

For your $350, you get a 5.81-inch, 2340×1080 60Hz OLED display, a Snapdragon 730G SoC, 6GB of RAM, 128GB of UFS 2.1 storage, a 3140mAh battery, a single 12MP camera on the back and an 8MP camera on the front. There’s a USB-C port and, surprisingly, a headphone jack.

The Snapdragon 730G is not a chip we see a lot of in the US market, but it’s not that far off from the Snapdragon 765G. The 730G is an 8nm chip with two Cortex A76 cores clocked up to 2.2GHz and six Cortex A55 cores at 1.8GHz. As far as the CPU goes, that’s close to the 7nm Snapdragon 765G, which has the same layout but with one of the A76 cores clocked 200Mhz higher. The GPUs aren’t hugely different, either—both are on the Adreno 600 architecture. After looking at some benchmarks, a good expectation would be for the 765G to be somewhere in the 10 percent improvement range in terms of CPU, GPU, and power usage.

The design looks great for a midrange smartphone, with slim bezels and a hole-punch camera, giving you a flagshippy feel that you won’t get from, say, an iPhone SE. The $350 Pixel 4a looks so much better than the $800 Pixel 4 that it’s kind of strange. The Pixel 4a makes big design gains over the Pixel 4 by scrapping Google’s janky air gesture system, which necessitated a bigger top bezel. The 4a also has a bigger battery (3140mAh versus 2800mAh) in the same size body and even somehow manages to include a headphone jack. Like the Pixel 3a, the phone has a plastic back with a rear capacitive fingerprint reader. The display cover is Gorilla Glass 3.

As always, the main selling point of the Pixel line is the camera, which seems to be the same package Google has offered for years. This is one of the best smartphone cameras you can buy, no matter how much more you spend. The other selling point is Google’s Android support, which means you’ll get day-one OS updates for three years. That’s that best update package Android has to offer, but it pales in comparison to the five years of updates that Apple offers with iPhones.

The crowded midrange market

Like the Pixel 3a last year, the Pixel 4a was expected to launch at Google I/O in May. The coronavirus pandemic meant

that Google’s yearly show was canceled, and the Pixel 4a just floated around for months in launch purgatory. In the fast-moving tech news cycle, it feels like the Pixel 4a has been with us forever—an accurate render leaked seven months ago, and full hands-on articles with prototype devices were happening five months ago. The phone still doesn’t ship for another three weeks.

After the three-month delay, the Pixel 4a will be launching into a suddenly crowded midrange market. The original launch date was in the shadow of the 2020 iPhone SE launch, which really up-ended the midrange market by offering a top-of-the-line SoC in a $400 to $550 (depending on the country) smartphone. Launching the Pixel 4a in May at least gave it a shot at being the best midrange Android phone for a few months. The delay means the Pixel 4a is launching after the arrival of OnePlus’ midrange smartphone, the OnePlus Nord. While Android and Qualcomm don’t have an answer to Apple’s high-end SoC for midrange money, OnePlus is at least hitting back by bringing a 90Hz display downmarket, giving it a strong argument in the midrange wars.

The OnePlus Nord is a fantastic device, and with a $450 price tag (or an incredible $335 in India), 90Hz display, a modern design, and a fast-enough Snapdragon 765G SoC, it’s the best bang for your buck in the Android space, and the Pixel 4a isn’t going to change that. The 4a is $100 cheaper in some markets, but you’re losing a lot. The good news for Google is that the OnePlus Nord is only for sale in Europe and India. The official distribution for the Pixel 4a is “Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India (coming soon), Ireland, Italy, Japan, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, United Kingdom, United States.”

Let’s also take a moment to Osborne

the Pixel 4a…?

The strangest part of Google’s blog post is that the last few paragraphs are dedicated to undermining the Pixel 4a by announcing, “This fall, we’ll have two more devices to talk about: the Pixel 4a (5G), starting at $499, and Pixel 5, both with 5G.”

Google didn’t provide any more information other than that. So is the message here, “Hey, we’re going to launch some new phones soon, so maybe hold off on this one”? The “Osborne effect” is a well-known marketing phenomenon where discussing future products hurts sales of current products, so Google’s announcement seems strange. Releasing phones every six months means that a three-month delay is a huge deal, and maybe this is Google admitting that the Pixel 4a mostly missed its launch window.

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