Google Pixel 4a review—The simple, basic, reasonable Google phone

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- The front of the 4a looks better than any other Google phone, no matter what the price.
  Ron Amadeo
- The back looks and feels cheap though. The (also plastic) Pixel 3a was much nicer.
  Ron Amadeo
- The soft-touch back material is a magnet for grease, grime, and fingerprints.
  Ron Amadeo
- The hole punch camera and tiny earpiece.
  Ron Amadeo
- The screen is flat, and the bezel is nearly uniform all the way around.
  Ron Amadeo
- Part of the back's problem is the really basic design. The single camera lens in a block looks like a placeholder for a better camera. The no-frills fingerprint sensor looks like it's been stamped out of the same piece of plastic as the back.
  Ron Amadeo
- The small hole in the bezel is the proximity sensor. Under the screen is the display brightness sensor.
  Ron Amadeo
- The side, featuring an power button with the slightest

whiff of the color green.
Ron Amadeo

- The top has (gasp) a headphone jack!
  Ron Amadeo
- The bottom, featuring a USB-C port and one of the stereo speakers (the other hole is for fun.)
  Ron Amadeo

The Pixel 4a sure has had a rough path to market. The leaks, rumors, and common sense all pointed to a Google I/O 2020 launch, but the coronavirus pandemic put a stop to that and every other major real-life gathering. Many were still hoping for an online launch, but Google ended up canceling two of its attempts at an I/O replacement event, the first due to logistics and the second out of respect for the nationwide protests against police brutality. The delay meant we had seen fully working prototypes *five months* before the actual release of the phone. Just like everyone else, the Pixel 4a has had a rough 2020.

Now that the Pixel 4a has finally arrived, it feels like it’s built for the era. It’s a cheap, functional, utilitarian design that arrives at a time when the economy is not doing so hot. This phone is just the cure for people who are sick of $1000 smartphones. You can do better, but for the price, the Pixel 4a is a great entry-level phone that won’t leave you wanting for much.

Design and build quality



Google Pixel 4a

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From the front, the Pixel 4a is the best-looking phone Google has ever designed, which is an odd thing to say about a budget model. The company finally designed an all-screen phone without reserving a huge chunk of front real-estate for a strange gimmick or giant notch, and the result is beautiful. With slim bezels, a single hole-punch camera, and a minimal earpiece trucked into the top edge, the front of the Pixel 4a looks positively modern, premium, and reasonable. Like the OnePlus Nord, the display is totally flat with a moderate border around the edges, which is preferable to the curved screens you see on most high-end smartphones. The curved displays distort the image and pick up tons of glare. Plus, as the curves get more and more dramatic, it's easier to accidentally trigger the side of the touchscreen. Flat screens are the best, yet they're extremely rare on high-end Android phones these days.

The back, by contrast, looks dreadfully cheap. It *is* plastic, but I'm not using "cheap" as a euphemism for all plastic backs. The Pixel 3a back was plastic but looked great, thanks to the lovingly crafted two-tone design. The Pixel 4a is just a huge slab of drab, soft-touch black plastic that collects a ton of fingerprint grease. Google's attempt to replicate the Pixel 4's camera block looks awful and pointless when there's

only one camera, and the simple, round lens cover on the Pixel 3a looked much more attractive.

SPECS AT A GLANCE	
Pixel 4a	
SCREEN	2340×1080 5.8-inches (443 ppi) OLED, 19.5:9 aspect ratio
OS	Android 10
CPU	Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 730G Two 2.2GHz Cortex A76-based cores and six Cortex A55-based cores at 1.8GHz, 8nm
RAM	6GB
GPU	Adreno 618
STORAGE	128GB
NETWORKING	802.11b/g/n/ac 2×2, Bluetooth 5.0 + LE, GPS, NFC, eSIM
PORTS	USB Type-C, 3.5mm headphone jack
CAMERA	Rear: 12.2MP main camera Front: 8MP camera
SIZE	144×69.4×8.2 mm

WEIGHT	143g
BATTERY	3140mAh
STARTING PRICE	$349
OTHER PERKS	rear fingerprint reader

On the back you'll get an old-school rear capacitive fingerprint reader instead of the in-screen reader that ships in more expensive phones. Most phones, including the Pixel 3a, give some kind of treatment to the rear capacitive fingerprint reader like a chamfered edge, or colored highlight. Seeing the plan Pixel 4a fingerprint reader shows you why. The whole back looks like it is stamped out of a single piece of plastic. The entire back of the Pixel 4a is an ugly disaster, and you do not even need to compare it to flagship phones—this is speaking strictly in comparison to the Pixel 3a. This isn't a huge deal since most people will put the 4a in the case, but it's a strange downgrade when it felt like Google got things right last generation.

There's a rare headphone jack on top. When the smartphone powers that be came for the headphone jack, one of the justifications was that removing it would leave more room for the battery, but it's interesting that the Pixel 4 with no headphone jack had a 2800mAh battery and the similar-sized Pixel 4a *with* headphone jack has a 3140mAh battery.

Other than that, there isn't much else to the phone. There's a USB-C port, stereo speakers (one on the bottom, one in the earpiece), and the usual buttons on the side. The one interesting design touch is the contrasting power button, which isn't white—it has the slightest whiff of green to it.

The Pixel 4a is an interesting effort in Google's supply chain cost-cutting. The phone only comes in one size, in one color, and in one storage configuration. There is a single Pixel 4a sku and that's it. Compare that to the Pixel 4, which had two

sizes, with two storage configs each, in three colors each, and that quickly multiplies up to 12 skus. Apple is absolutely flexing when it offers the iPhone 11 Pro in 24 different varieties (four colors, three storage options, and two sizes). Throughout the Pixel's history, Google would frequently run out of a certain color or storage option, but with the Pixel 4a, it doesn't have to worry about any of that—the Pixel 4a is the Pixel 4a, and it's either in stock or it isn't.

Other cost-cutting features you may or may not miss compared to flagship smartphone: the Pixel 4a has a single camera, no wireless charging, and no water resistance.

Versus the competition

We wrote last year that the Pixel 3a was "the only Pixel phone you should buy," and things would feel the same way this year. Google really doesn't have a solid argument for why the $800 Pixel 4 and $350 Pixel 4a should exist side-by-side, or how there is $450 worth of difference between them. The $350 Pixel 4a has a bigger display, slimmer bezels, a bigger battery, a headphone jack, more storage, and the same OS and camera as the $800 Pixel 4.

Most of the Pixel 4's cut extras won't be missed, either. Trading the Pixel 4's face unlock for the Pixel 4a's rear capacitive fingerprint is, in my opinion, an upgrade, since the fingerprint reader is faster and more reliable. The Project Soli air gesture system in the Pixel 4 never really worked well, didn't attempt to do much (it skipped music tracks and one or two other things), and was redundant when you have a giant touchscreen. The Pixel 4 has a 90Hz display, which *is* a big deal, but the phone doesn't have a big enough battery to support such a feature. The only Pixel 4 features you'll actually miss are the water-resistance and maybe the wireless charging.

Google seems to understand that the Pixel 4a really limits the Pixel 4's appeal, and the company took a proactive stance and discontinued the Pixel 4 just days after Pixel 4a was announced.

The Pixel 4a will see some good competition in the mid-range market, but how things work out depends a lot on which country you're talking about. For whatever reason, no company is taking a worldwide approach to the mid-range market, so pricing and availability varies wildly.

The best bang for your buck in the Android space is still the OnePlus Nord, which at around $100 more than the Pixel 4a, gives you a bigger screen, bigger battery, and faster SoC. Most importantly though, you'd be upgrading from a 60Hz display on the Pixel 4a to a buttery smooth 90Hz panel. Faster displays means Android runs at a faster 90FPS framerate, and that makes animations and scrolling look and feel better. The Nord isn't available in North America, though—you'll need to be in Europe, Hong Kong, or India to buy one. India, one of OnePlus' biggest markets, is getting an incredible deal on the Nord, with an exclusive, cheaper 6GB/64GB sku for $335. If you're looking for an Android phone and can buy a Nord, you should buy a Nord.

If hopping ecosystems is an option, the iPhone SE is a major temptation, with its top-of-the-line Apple A13 Bionic SoC in a $400 device. This "mid-range" phone will turn in faster benchmarks than even the most expensive Android devices, which is a pretty embarrassing situation for every Android manufacturer and Android's primary SoC vendor, Qualcomm. The iPhone SE's headline-making $400 price is only a thing in the United States, though. In Europe and India, the iPhone SE is €489 (~$580), a 45 percent premium over the US price. The SE also only has a baseline storage of 64GB, while the Nord and Pixel 4a start at 128GB. So if you want to compare like-for-like storage, add about $50 to the price of the SE.

With the Pixel 4a, Google continues to struggle to compete in the worldwide smartphone market. The phone will only be for sale in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. That’s a measly 13 countries; the iPhone SE launched in 40 countries and is expected to add to that number. OnePlus is only a subsidiary of the Chinese conglomerate BBK, so it doesn’t have a global mandate, but it still launched the Nord in 30 countries. We’ve complained about it before, but Google Hardware can never be more than a small hobby until Google dramatically expands its distribution network.

The biggest competition the Pixel 4a might have for its prospective audience is from Google itself. This is probably a side effect of the numerous delays, but Google has already been teasing the Pixel 5 and a “Pixel 4a 5G” before the Pixel 4a hits shelves.

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