

Google Pixelbook Go review: the price of simplicity

There are two great things about Google's new Chromebook, the Pixelbook Go. The first is the keyboard, which is a joy to type on and yet incredibly quiet. The second is the battery life, which is as good or better than any Intel laptop I've used in recent memory.

Those are the great things, but there are plenty of good things, too. It has a simple, unfussy design, good speakers, and a solid trackpad. The model I am testing, which has an Intel Core i5 Y-series processor, is fast and responsive. Virtually everything about this laptop makes me want to recommend it as the go-to, default Chromebook for everybody.

Everything, that is, except for the price. It starts at \$649 and the model I'm testing is \$849. Comparable Chromebooks cost at least a hundred bucks less for similar features. So with the Pixelbook Go, what are you paying for?

Simplicity.

Verge Score 7.5 out of 10

Good Stuff

- Excellent keyboard
- Good battery life
- Simple, clean design

Bad Stuff

- Expensive compared to competition
- No microSD storage expansion
- 16:9 screen can feel cramped

The Pixelbook Go is a handsome 13.3-inch laptop with an understated, clean design. Or at least, the black model I am using is understated – it will also eventually be offered in a color Google calls “Not Pink,” that has a soft pink finish with a bright, coral base. It’s not hugely different looking from a MacBook Pro, if you could get one of those in black.

It weighs 2.3 pounds and feels sturdy and trustworthy thanks to a magnesium chassis. Many Chromebooks have plastic bodies, so part of what you’re paying for with the Pixelbook Go is the materials. Google has coated that magnesium with a soft paint that’s almost plastic-like. I can’t tell you if it will chip or scratch easily – it hasn’t during my week of testing, at least – but I suspect it’ll hold up fairly well.

The whole thing is gently curved around the edges, and if it weren’t so well-made I would say it’s prototype-y in the way Google hardware used to be. The most notable design element is the bottom, which is ridged for grip. The keyboard is backlit and flanked by two speakers that are respectable, if not impressive for a laptop of this size.

I mentioned in our first look at the Go that I needed to make sure I didn’t get too excited about the keyboard without further testing. Now that I have, I can just say that I love it. It is my favorite thing to type on by a long shot.

Google took the already excellent Pixelbook keyboard and iterated on it a bit, making the keys slightly quieter. I’ve tried keyboards that aim for silence in the past and they usually end up feeling mushy, but that’s not the case here at all. The keys have good travel and a good amount of springy

resistance. If you like clacky mechanical keyboards, this isn't for you.

The trackpad underneath the keyboard is large, but not massive. Google has done a good job with palm rejection on it, too. Unlike the Pixelbook, the trackpad on the Go doesn't extend all the way to the bottom lip of the keyboard deck, so it's less prone to mis-clicks.

Unfortunately, the Pixelbook Go doesn't have any kind of biometric authentication like a fingerprint sensor or face unlock. Google points out that you can pair it with an Android phone and use that phone's biometrics to unlock the laptop. Same applies for the lack of LTE options – it's easy to tether to your Pixel phone directly from the system menu.

You can lift up the screen with just one finger, but you can't flip it all the way around to put the laptop into tablet or tent mode. As bad as tablet mode on Chrome OS still is, I do wish it was still an option here, if only for setting it up in a tent mode to watch movies on a plane.

Three of the four Pixelbook Go models come with a 1920 x 1080, 16:9 LCD touchscreen. The bezels on the top and bottom of the screen are on the large side, but the screen itself gets plenty bright and doesn't inspire any complaints. Really, my only problem is with that aspect ratio: I'm not a fan. I know not everybody likes the taller 3:2 aspect ratio on laptops, but even 16:10 would have felt a little less cramped when I'm browsing websites.

All Pixelbook Go models are fanless because all of them use Intel Y-series chips. In fact, Google is using 8th Gen Intel chips instead of something newer. That's partially a cost saving measure, I suppose, but the truth is I didn't notice any real problems with speed. I'm testing the mid-range model

with the Core i5 and 8GB of RAM and have yet to encounter any real slowdowns.

Battery life is also excellent. I haven't quite reached Google's claimed 12 hours of use, but I haven't had any problems getting through a full eight-hour workday. The Pixelbook Go also supports fast charging over either USB-C port, and in my test I brought it up from zero to 35 percent in 30 minutes. (Chrome OS still has some kinks to work out, by the way: its time remaining estimate was consistently wrong.) The USB-C ports also handle the usual USB stuff, including video out, but they don't support Thunderbolt 3.

One of the reasons that the Pixelbook Go runs so well is that Google has simply tried to do less with it than it did with last year's Pixel Slate tablet. That device performed and sold so poorly that Google ultimately scrapped its plans to make more Chrome OS-based tablets and just made this simple laptop instead.

You can run Android apps, but I avoided them for the most part. I used Spotify for music, mainly. Chrome OS still has a double-app problem – the web version and Android versions of Gmail were both vying to send me notifications, for example. At the end of the day I mostly stuck with web apps and their quality is better than you might expect. This year I've been super impressed with Adobe Lightroom's web app.

I unfortunately can't speak to whether the low-end, \$649 Pixelbook Go, which has a Core M3 processor, will perform as well as this one. However, I have recently tested several Chromebooks with chips in that line and so long as they have 8GB of RAM, I didn't have any complaints. Fortunately, even

the low-end the Pixelbook Go includes that much RAM.

There's a \$999 model that has 16GB of RAM and also a \$1,399 model with a 4K screen. You would have to be a pretty dedicated, hardcore Chrome OS lover to come anywhere close to justifying either of those purchases. I sort of feel like they exist simply to hand out to Google employees or for the handful of people who like to use Chromebooks for Linux.

The big question with the Pixelbook Go for me is whether it can justify its price relative to other Chromebooks. I recently reviewed a half-dozen of them for our best Chromebook article and found that everything in the \$500-600 range is incredibly similar. One stood out for its screen and build quality, though, the Asus Chromebook Flip C434.

As of this writing, a C434 with nearly identical specs to the base Pixelbook Go costs \$599, \$50 less than the Pixelbook (prices on non-Google Chromebooks vary often, however). The C434 has an all-metal design too, its screen is nearly bezelless and can flip around, and it has both a microSD card slot and a standard USB-A port.

The Pixelbook Go weighs less and gets slightly better battery life, but what you're really paying for with that extra \$50 is mainly a more elegantly-designed laptop. That's definitely worth \$50 to a lot of people, but giving up the extra ports and the option to flip into tablet mode seems like a bad trade.

Simplicity in product design is mostly good, but on the Pixelbook Go it also means fewer ports and fewer ways to use the screen. Neither is a deal breaker and all things

considered I enjoy using the Pixelbook more than I do the C434, but that doesn't make it a better machine.

If you are in the market for a Chromebook and happen to find the Pixelbook Go on sale, definitely give it an extra look. But at full price, you have to ask yourself how much simplicity is worth to you.

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