iPad (2020) micro-review: Battle-tested and more than fast enough

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  The back of the 2020 iPad.
  Samuel Axon
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  An angle of the front of the 2020 iPad.
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  Unlike the Pro and the new Air, it still has a Lightning port.
  Samuel Axon
-
  It has a headphone jack, too.
  Samuel Axon
-
  Here’s the camera—the same old camera.
  Samuel Axon
-
  The 2020 iPad Pro with a Smart Keyboard attachment.
  Samuel Axon
-
  The Smart Keyboard also doubles as a cover.
  Samuel Axon
-
  The iPad with an Apple Pencil.
  Samuel Axon
-
  Here’s the USB-C charging brick and the included Lightning-to-USB-C cable.
  Samuel Axon

Last month, Apple revealed and launched the 8th-generation iPad. You might have forgotten; it was overshadowed by a radically redesigned iPad Air, two new Apple Watches, and other announcements from the company. But nonetheless, this is likely to be one of the most popular iPads, if not *the* most popular in Apple's lineup because of one thing: price.

At $329 with 32GB of storage and $429 with 128GB, it's going to be ubiquitous in environments where cutting-edge features aren't called for, like point-of-sale, industrial use, and in schools. But it's also going to be a content consumption device for a wide array of consumers.

All that said, there's very little different about this year's iPad compared to the last. In fact, it all comes down to performance. So we're going to go over just that today, along with a few quick notes on how it compares to the previous model.

Impressions

Specs at a glance: 2020 Apple iPad	
Screen	2160×1620 10.2-inch (264PPI) pressure-sensitive touchscreen for the mini
OS	iOS 13.1
CPU	Apple A12
RAM	3GB
GPU	Apple A12
Storage	32GB or 128GB

Networking	802.11ac Wi-Fi, Bluetooth 4.2 (LTE optional add-on)
Ports	Lightning, 3.5mm headphone jack
Camera	8MP rear camera,1.2MP front camera
Size	9.8″×6.8”×0.29″ (250.6×174.1×7.5mm)
Weight	1.08 pounds (490g) for WiFi model; 1.09 pounds (495g) for cellular
Battery	32.4-watt-hour
Starting price	$329
Other perks	Apple Pencil support, Smart Keyboard support

So why is this a “micro-review?” Well, because there’s not much to review. In almost every way except the silicon inside, this is last year’s iPad. It has the same dimensions, is made out of the same materials, and has the same rear camera and screen. (The front-facing camera has ƒ/2.4 aperture, while last year’s was ƒ/2.2, according to Apple’s specs pages.)

The same downsides that I talked about last year are largely still present. There are still only two storage options: 32GB and 128GB, neither of which are enough for people downloading lots of high-quality videos and games for a long trip. The bezels are still quite large by modern standards.

The Apple Pencil is a little less nice to use on this display than on the higher-end iPads, and further, it only supports

the first-generation Pencil. The cameras are still mediocre, and the speakers only deliver stereo audio when held in portrait orientation—the way you're least likely to be using when watching a video for which stereo audio would be worthwhile, naturally.

On the other hand, one of my biggest criticisms of 2019's iPad was performance on the A10—not that it was too slow for current use cases, necessarily, but it didn't instill confidence in the longevity of the device. The A12 is much faster than the A10, by contrast, and unlike the A10, it has all the major components necessary to drive Apple's current slate of big iOS features.

It's also likely a good investment in terms of long-term support; Apple indicated to app-makers that the A12 would be an important baseline for a while to come at its developer conference this year.

But for me at least, there's almost something *comfortable* about this now-older iPad design. The iPad Pro and the new Air are notably different in design and style than this unit, which follows more directly in the footsteps of all the iPads that came before it. No, it won't turn any heads, but it's familiar, and as a tablet, it's far better than anything else in its price range.

The big sacrifice you're making by going with this iPad instead of the Pro or the new Air is that it supports neither Apple's trackpad-equipped Magic Keyboard nor its second-generation Pencil. All the other differences are nice-to-haves but not critical.

But this device is positioned as a budget option, and the tablet on its own only costs *a little bit* more than a Magic Keyboard. I point that out so as to say that it's unlikely those pricy peripherals you're missing out on would have been on the table even if this iPad did support them—this is a

tablet, not a productivity machine, and it’s about budget, not expensive attachments. As far as its use cases, it is an old-school iPad, through and through.

There’s nothing at all wrong with that. If someone came to me asking what tablet to buy and they told me they’re not looking to use it like a laptop for heavy-duty work, I would have no reservations about recommending it over the competition. That’s partly because of the performance.

Performance

We ran our usual suite of synthetic benchmarks on this iPad, expecting it to perform in line with previously released A12 devices. As you can see below, that’s generally the case.

That’s a big jump in performance over last year’s model—which had the now-four-years-old A10—and it’s mostly in line with last year’s iPad Air, which had the same chip as this unit. (That also means this iPad should generally provide performance comparable to that of the 2019 iPad mini and 2018’s iPhone XS and XR.) In terms of CPU tasks, it’s plenty fast enough for anything you’d use it for.

Graphics, though, are more of a mixed bag—especially compared to the vastly more expensive iPad Pro. This isn’t an ideal tablet for demanding 3D gaming, but it should be fine for other kinds of games, and it’s more than adequate for any kind of video you want to watch.

Verdict

The 2020 iPad is more of the same, and few will complain about that. It combines an older-iPad-Air-like chassis with the A12, a two-year-old chip that Apple has identified as the baseline for its most cutting-edge apps, features, and content.

While the design looks a little dated now, it’s good enough

for the price—and it doesn't hurt that you can use the trackpad-less Smart Keyboard with it, as well as the first-generation Apple Pencil.

That said, there are some big sacrifices compared to the higher-end tablets Apple sells: there's no edge-to-edge screen, the screen's design makes the Pencil less fun to use, the speaker system doesn't work in both orientations, it doesn't support the Magic Keyboard, and graphics performance is just OK compared to many other Apple gadgets.

This is the ideal iPad for kids and most commercial uses including point-of-sale—but it also delivers all the basics for those who just want a good tablet for content-consumption but aren't planning to use it as a daily driver for productivity.

Oh, and it still has a headphone jack—which is a good thing for a budget device, since it wouldn't be reasonable to expect entry-level buyers to spring for pricy wireless headphones. (Tell that to the iPhone SE team too, please.)

Sometimes, the tried remains true.

The good

- Affordable pricing for a tablet of this quality
- Very strong performance for this price
- A12 ensures some degree of longevity of support
- Still has a headphone jack
- Smart Keyboard and first-generation Pencil support

The bad

- The screen is not as good as that on the Pro—or likely the new Air—for Pencil use, among other things
- Limited storage options
- Speakers only deliver stereo audio in portrait mode
- Older design with large-ish bezels

The ugly

- No support for Magic Keyboard or the second-generation Apple Pencil

Listing image by Samuel Axon

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