LG’s palm-reading G8 has a unique vision of the future

Last year, LG released the G7 ThinQ – by no means a bad phone, but certainly one that struggled to make its mark. At this year’s MWC, LG is announcing its successor, the LG G8, which brings some new features and upgrades to try to stand out where the G7 faded into the background.

It’s hard to notice changes on the outside, but LG has done a lot with the updated front-facing camera setup, which it calls the “Z-camera”. What that actually means is that LG is using a ToF sensor that lets the G8 detect motion, gestures, and depth in front of it.

LG has really exciting hand-unlocking and gestures ideas
And that camera system is getting used for a truly unique feature that LG calls Hand ID: by pulsing an infrared signal at your palm, the G8 can extracts a map of your veins based on how the hemoglobin in your blood absorbs the IR signal, allowing you to unlock your phone by showing it your palm. LG says that these vein maps are extremely hard to beat from a security perspective.

And why would you want to use your palm to unlock your phone? That ties in to the other major feature LG is using the Z-camera for: Air Motion, or gestures that allow you to control your phone simply by waving your hand over it. The idea is that by combining Hand ID with Air Motion gestures, you’ll have full control over your phone – everything from shortcuts to answering calls to controlling music and videos to adjusting the volume – without needing to touch the phone itself.

The gesture system is a letdown in practice
It sounds cool in theory, but in my brief time trying out the G8, neither the palm unlock nor the gestures worked great. It took a lot of hand waving just to get the phone to recognize my palm just to unlock it, and the gestures — which require a complex sequence of placing your hand closer to the phone, drawing it a few inches back, and then making the gesture — were even tougher to do. Part of that may just be my own unfamiliarity with the system, considering that it's just not a familiar way to use a phone, but after a few minutes with it, I'm not convinced that it's the kind of marquee feature worth upgrading for.

There are some other additions from the G7: the 6.1-inch, 3120×1440 display is an OLED panel this time around, instead of an LCD, which is a welcome upgrade — although for better or worse, there's still a notch. And LG has also upgraded to the latest Snapdragon 855 processor, as expected for a 2019 flagship.

LG has also updated the rear cameras — there's a new Night View mode that combines up to 10 pictures into one image to reduce noise, and support for portrait-mode style video, complete with a live bokeh effect that you can adjust in real time. As an added bonus, the new cameras are completely flush with the back of the phone, instead of sticking out with a camera bump.

The last major update is LG's new Crystal Sound OLED speaker. Instead of a top speaker, the G8 vibrates the entire glass front panel of the phone to create sound instead (the regular bottom speaker is still there.) It sounded fine in a test call, but the lower speaker is still more powerful if you're listening to music or watching movies.

Rounding out the specs is 6GB of RAM, 128GB of storage, a rear mounted fingerprint reader (in case you needed a third method of biometric security), and a 3500 mAh battery.

There's nothing bad here — but there's also not a lot to inspire

Again, there's nothing bad here — but there's also not a lot to inspire. Last year, when LG released the G7, the company was coming off an announcement of a new philosophy: "We will unveil new smartphones when it is needed. But we will not launch it just because other rivals do," said LG Electronics Vice Chairman Cho Sung-jin.

Yet, barely a year into that plan, LG has started releasing phones at an even faster cadence — the LG G8 is getting announced months before the company announced the G7 last year, and the company is also announcing the V50 at MWC, instead of saving it for a traditional fall release. For a company claiming that it won't let its rivals govern its release strategy, it feels like LG's actions are being dictated by the competition more than ever.

Photo by Vjeran Pavic / The Verge

Interestingly, though, while the stock G8 is the only one set to come to the US, LG has two other variants planned for international markets too: there's a more premium G8 model that will feature a third, telephoto camera lens, as well as a cheaper G8S model, which will offer most of the G8's features at a lower price (albeit at the sacrifice of things like screen resolution.)

There's a lot we still don't know about the G8 lineup, including, crucially how much it'll cost or when it'll be available. But even more so than in previous years, it's looking like another uphill battle for LG to make waves in the smartphone market.

Photography by Chaim Gartenberg.

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