OnePlus 7 review: designed to make you want the OnePlus 7 Pro

OnePlus pulled some sleight of hand with its naming of the OnePlus 7 series. It announced the 7 Pro like it’s the new addition to the lineup, and that is indeed a phone full of new things, but the novelty for OnePlus’ strategy is that the company is now doing an Apple-esque upcycling of older models as its entry-level offering. That’s what the OnePlus 7 is: a OnePlus 6T with an update to a Snapdragon 855 processor and a 48-megapixel camera and not much else.

Am I complaining? Only a little. The 6T had the fastest and smoothest performance of any Android device until the OnePlus 7 Pro arrived. It had a reasonably sized notch and slimmer display bezels than you’ll find on an iPhone XS Max. But OnePlus has now made those compromises less acceptable by hiding the selfie cam in a mechanical pop-up module, throwing in a gorgeous 90Hz screen, and turning the side bezels into pencil lines on the OnePlus 7 Pro. None of the original good things about the OnePlus 6T change in the 7, for better or worse, but the 7 Pro is just constantly there, mocking you with its superiority and availability. If you can afford it. In the UK, the OnePlus 7 with 6GB of RAM and 128GB of storage costs £499, while the same spec in a 7 Pro is £649.

Outside of OnePlus’ portfolio, the £499 price point has become much more competitive recently. Google’s £399 Pixel 3A undercuts the 6T by a nice margin while having a vastly superior camera. And the Black Shark 2 and Razer Phone 2 both offer beefier gaming performance, with the latter also having a 120Hz screen like the new OnePlus flagship. Where does the OnePlus 7 fit into this highly competitive landscape?

8 Verge Score

Good Stuff

- Good ergonomics for a large phone
- Buttery-smooth performance
- Pretty display
- Strong battery life

Bad Stuff

- No wireless charging or waterproofing
- Faces tough competition from Google’s Pixel 3A
- Mirror finish is a fingerprint nightmare
- Camera bump is annoyingly prominent

From the point of view of the naive phone buyer, the OnePlus 7 is pretty great. It costs less than the most expensive smartphones while performing every bit as smoothly and looking every bit as glamorous. Granted, I detest the fingerprint magnet that is the glossy glass back of this phone, but that’s another quality that it shares with super premium devices. The main point is that if I hand a OnePlus 7 to an uninformed consumer, they’d be rather delighted with it for a starting price of £499 (₹32,999 in India or €559 in EU) or even at £50 more with 8GB of RAM and 256GB of storage.

This is the classic flagship-on-a-budget that OnePlus is known for, and to get the in-depth account of all its intricacies like battery life, performance, display quality, and ergonomics, I direct you to my OnePlus 6T review. If you don’t care beyond the question of whether this is a good phone, it is, and since so little has changed since the 6T, that review is all you need.

But *value* is the slippery fish that we're all trying to capture when making a considered purchase like a smartphone. It's not enough for it to merely be good, it has to be worth the money, and that can only be judged in the context of the broader market.

So let's not dodge the obvious confrontation here: is the OnePlus 7 worth it when compared against Google's cheaper Pixel 3A or 3A XL? The spec sheet would tell you "hell yes": the 7 is one of the most affordable Snapdragon 855 devices, it comes with at least 2GB more RAM than Google's meager 4GB, has a larger 6.41-inch screen, and the Pixel is stuck with only 64GB of storage that isn't expandable. Dual-SIM enthusiasts should also write the Pixel off straight away and find a cozy home for their cards in the OnePlus phone.

Despite the OnePlus 7 having the rehashed 2018 design, it's the Pixel 3A and 3A XL that look like they're from last year. That speaks to the design leadership of OnePlus as well as the corresponding weakness of Google's bezel-tolerant aesthetic. If I were buying a phone as a gift, I'd go for the OnePlus 7. But shopping for myself, I'd opt for the Pixel 3A XL.

It's not because the Pixel is faster. Even the premium Pixel 3 can't match the fluidity of OnePlus' keenly tuned performance. And it's not because the speaker or display is better — both are good for the price and on par with the OnePlus 7 — or even because the Pixel 3A models have headphone jacks. No, friends, it's almost entirely about that unparalleled Pixel camera. I am willing to tolerate slightly slower performance, chunkier bezels, and a worse multitasking interface from Google just to get my hands on the best camera to ever grace the market below

£500. OnePlus uses the extremely popular 48-megapixel Sony sensor that produces 12-megapixel shots of decent quality. Its secondary lens is for a 5-megapixel depth sensor to help with portraits, though the Pixel camera still takes better portraits even without dedicated depth equipment.

There are other advantages to taking up the Pixel path, too. While both the 3A XL and OnePlus 7 have a 3,700mAh battery and a 1080p screen, the smaller Pixel display drains that battery more slowly and makes that phone a bit of an endurance champ. I may be in the minority, but I also really enjoy the lighter feel of the plastic Pixel 3A devices. They're easier to handle and operate, and I'm really not sure how we came to this point of believing that phones weighing in excess of 180g / 6.4oz, as the OnePlus 7 does, are normal. It's like we've all developed collective amnesia about the glorious, polycarbonate-clad Nokia N9.

The OnePlus 7 does have one particular design feature that bothers me, and that is its camera bump. It's far more pronounced on this phone than it is on the 7 Pro, Pixels, Galaxy devices, or anything Huawei or Apple make. The Huawei P30 Pro and iPhone XS Max both have nicely softened edges to their pill-shaped camera modules, and their designers have the good sense to place those bumps off to the side of the phone. OnePlus sticks this big, almost sharp slab in the middle of an otherwise very polished and soft shape, and it's a persistent irritation in the hand.

Turning to the gamer-oriented Black Shark 2 and Razer Phone 2, both now priced identically to the OnePlus 7, I find another situation where my experience disagrees with the specs. Only

this time, the other phones are the ones with juicier specs, whether it’s the Black Shark 2 and its souped-up cooling system or the Razer Phone 2 and its extra buttery 120Hz screen. Both have light-up logos on the rear, used to signal notifications, the engagement of gaming mode, or their user’s complete disregard for good taste. Both have great speakers. Both can be handled roughly without worry. And both are ridiculously heavy to be considered reasonable everyday phones.

The OnePlus 7 is a dainty feather compared to that pair of beefy brutes, and yet it still has that top-tier Snapdragon system-on-a-chip to make light work of any gaming task. Its 1080p resolution comes in handy here, helping to assure good battery life by not overworking the GPU. It has most of the gaming capability of the Black Shark and Razer Phone, but doesn’t scream about its performance might the way that the other two do.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t also mention the Xiaomi Mi 9, arguably the most similar phone to the OnePlus 7, featuring the same 48-megapixel sensor, albeit in a more capable triple-camera arrangement. Xiaomi also fits the Snapdragon 855 *and* wireless charging inside the Mi 9, but that phone is a total non-starter for me because of EMUI. OnePlus simply does the best version of Android, and I might even include Google’s original flavor in that statement. Plus, OnePlus has committed, in both words and deeds, to delivering prompt and long-term Android updates for its phones. Xiaomi’s still living in the 2012 era of Android skins.

My abiding impression of the OnePlus 7 is that it’s a OnePlus 7 Pro *Lite*. The Pro has the 90Hz screen, which is not just smoother, but also more accurate. That phone also gets the 30W Warp Charger in the box, whereas the OnePlus 7 has the same

fast charger as you could've got with the OnePlus 3T. And though both phones have the 48-megapixel sensor and UltraShot camera tech, the 7 Pro has a wider aperture on the main camera, ultrawide and telephoto cameras, and the ability to take slightly better shots. On the aesthetic front, you only get the fingerprint-loving mirror black option on the 7 (with a red edition for India with the higher memory spec), whereas the 7 Pro has that gorgeous matte blue and an upcoming almond edition, the latter of which I've seen and very much like.

Two points work in the OnePlus 7's favor in comparison to its prettier, bigger, more powerful sibling. First is the size, as the OnePlus 7 still exists in the "large phone" category, whereas every reviewer who's wrestled with the OnePlus 7 Pro for longer than a day has remarked on its big-unit proportions. The other thing is the absence of the curved screen sides. The OnePlus 7 still has the so-called 2.5D Gorilla Glass, but that's just a softening of the very edge, whereas the 7 Pro has some gratuitous slopes on its sides that make it harder to grip and easier to accidentally palm something on screen. The Huawei P30 is a similar example of the cheaper edition of a phone having the better screen ergonomics by virtue of its designers simply not having the budget to fiddle too much.

It feels like OnePlus invested all its time designing the 7 Pro, and then the company trickled down what it could fit into the OnePlus 6T chassis and budget space. I'm perfectly okay with that. I think the OnePlus 7 is a phone that most people will enjoy using, though it might be a frustrating reminder of the 7 Pro's existence for the geekier among us.

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