Product Review: Dell XPS 13

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The future of personal computing is in doubt. In defiance of early predications about tablets, they have not replaced notebook computers. Tablets simply don't have all the power required when needed, or all the ports or apps required. But the drive toward tablet perfection challenged prevailing assumptions about portable computers.

For a modern notebook computer to be called a companion, it needs to be thin and light. Notebook computers also need to provide features that can't be found on tablets, like easy expansion and integrated keyboards. But that isn't enough. Notebooks also need to have long battery life and wonderfully expressive displays.

With the latest generation of its XPS 13 line, Dell takes massive amounts of market awareness and hones them into extremely functional and beautiful devices that deliver great performance in a package about as small as is reasonable given the wealth of features.

Gorgeous display

The Dell XPS 13's goldish exterior opens into what Dell calls the 13.3" QHD+ (3200 x 1800) InfinityEdge touch display. InfinityEdge is as bezel-less as possible, or perhaps a better way to say it, as bezel-less as is desirable given the fragility of glass. The Corning® Gorilla® Glass NBT™ screen material adds to the overall durability of the display, but it's the solid metal edge that makes it more physically robust than display than displays that push their glass to the edge.

The images themselves are outstanding. While Apple's Retina continues to dazzle, the latest Windows-based notebooks, like the XPS 13, challenge even the top Apple devices with great color, deep blacks and highly responsive pixels. It is easy to image faster processors continuing to improve the computing experience, but even if displays get more pixels, computer users will be hard-pressed to discern differences. Until displays include holographic, 3D real-time augmented reality projected without a headset, the XPS 13 display is as good as a display needs to be.

The low profile XPS 13 also makes a good travel companion. On a recent trip to San Diego Comic-Con, it fit well within the pull down table parameters for viewing videos, even if typing wasn't practical given other airline width factors (like arm room) that were not of the computer's making.

Touch, while responsive and accurate, is only a nice-to-have on notebooks that don't convert to tablets. It can be useful for aiding with security features at start-up, especially for those who select the Windows 10 image login method. Perhaps the bigger use is for those who don't like trackpads and try not to carry a mouse. The XPS 13 touch display supports standard passive styli for navigation, which eliminates my biggest pet peeve with touch screen notebooks: fingerprints all over a lovely screen.

Connectivity and ports

Wireless: All wireless communications sit at the top of the game, including 802.11ac 2.4/5GHz and Bluetooth 4.1.

I have, on occasion, lost Bluetooth connectivity with the XPS 13. The icon just disappears from the tray after a snooze cycle and my mouse won't connect. That may be more of a Windows 10 issue than a Dell hardware issue. A reboot quickly restores Bluetooth—and because the reboots are so fast on the XPS, it doesn't feel as burdensome to fix problems that way anymore. Regardless of the cause and the ease of solution, this needs to get fixed.

Ports: Unlike Tablets, with the exception of some convertible Windows 10 tablets—and Apple, which gives up ports for design simplification –the XPS 13 offers a solid

set of ports that embrace the past and the future despite its thin profile. Ports include one USB 2.0, one USB 3.0 and a USB-C with Thunderbolt support.

The USB-C and Thunderbolt combination makes for a very flexible port. The port supports video output to up to two 4K external displays and offers up to 40Gps data transfer (a 4K movie copies in less than 30 seconds). The port supports a variety of dongles that transform it pretty much into any port you will ever need. A variety of other USB-C accessories, from makers like Accell, provide individual conversions, such as HDMI, Ethernet, VGA or DVI. A fun low-profile Satechi adapter transforms the single USB-C into two USB 3 ports, SD and micro-SD, and includes a pass-through for USB-C. Dell also offers a $75 pocket adapter that connects USB-C to Ethernet, HDMI, USB 3.0, and VGA.

For more on Thunderbolt and USB-C technology see this excellent post at thunderboldtechnology.net.

Internal and auxiliary storage

In terms of main storage, my XPS arrived with a 256GB solid state drive, which facilitates its outstanding performance. I synchronize my OneDrive and Dropbox to the XPS 13, leaving Google Drive in the cloud. Boot times are wicked fast, as are app loads. 256GB is fine for most work, but not enough for massive amounts of video or audio. Dell's configuration system will help XPS buyers upgrade their HD should they need more storage—and there are always those fast ports ready to support external drives, including emerging USB-C drives.

The XPS 13 comes with a single memory card slot that supports SD, SDHC and SDXC. The slot is not spring loaded, so a full-sized SD hangs outside of the well-defined edges of the XPS 13. I'm not a big fan of this engineering choice, so I purchased a half-card micro-SD adapter and inserted a 128GB SD full of video and audio. Before doing so I painted the blue edge of the adapter black with a Sharpie to better match the XPS's black exterior. With this card inserted, my media is always available without taking up precious main drive space, or contorting the XPS profile with a flash drive or large SD card. I may never get the adapter out of the slot, but that is a problem for another day. Future XPS designs should consider the spring-loaded micro-SD design found in Dell's Chromebooks.

Input: Keyboard, trackpad and camera

Beyond the OS, keyboards primarily differentiate notebooks from tablets. And that means notebooks must

offer great keyboards. For a 13-inch notebook, the XPS 13 delivers an outstanding keyboard: roomy key spacing, perfect layout and subtle backlighting makes for a great writing experience.

A carbon fiber palm rest, which keeps weight down and heat at bay, surrounds a very serviceable and minimalist touchpad. Unlike some devices, this trackpad doesn't try to be too many things—and if you like a mouse, which I do, it can be turned off easily when Windows detects a mouse.

The only real issue I have with the XPS 13 is the location of the video conferencing camera, which, rather than sitting above the display, hangs out awkwardly in its lower left corner. This is not a flattering location for those trying to keep their chins from being the focus of attention. This is also an issue for people who wear eyeglasses with progressive lenses, at it forces them to look at the camera, and the display, through the wrong area of their specs.

Handling software updates

Soon after delivery, the XPS went through a couple of Dell updates and the Windows Anniversary update with nary a hang. Immediately after the Anniversary update, the Windows file manager did freeze, but applying a proactively downloaded Dell update seems to have solved that problem, and hopefully any other issue related to Microsoft's Windows 10 update.

The new Dell support software is outstanding. No more hunting websites for code or inputting tag numbers to the Dell site. The machine knows what it needs, downloads it, installs it and that's it. This is the way PC software maintenance should run in a connected world.

Overall design

The best word to describe the XPS 13 design: impeccable. Every design choice makes sense (even the placement of the front facing camera given the overriding design aesthetic of the InfinityEdge display).

Other descriptors include sturdy and elegant. As computing technology becomes ever more diminutive and, in some cases, deconstructed, there is a size limit under which effective devices cannot fall. Yes, really small devices can include keyboards, and a wide range of accessories support other forms of input, but keyboards remain the primary form of input for business. The XP3 13 feels as though it has reached the optimal form factor given the various engineering choices available—the device represents a near perfect balance between size, function and durability.

Future notebooks can perhaps get thinner, but that will likely mean abandoning legacy ports as Apple and HP have done. But too thin and notebooks essentially become tablets. The market is nearing that place where thinner doesn't add much when balanced against power and capability. Of course, larger machines will exist to take on beastly processors like Intel's 10-core i7, but when it comes to relatively high-end everyday use of a computer, the XPS 13 fits that mode with precision.

Which XPS to buy

As has been Dell's tradition since the beginning to offer customizable options, the XPS 3 continues that tradition with several configurable varieties. The Serious Insights simple advice holds: buy as much computer as your budget allows at the time. Never going to game or do anything other than basic Microsoft Office tasks, browsing and e-mail? Save a few dollars with a lower-end processor and/or less RAM. But even then, buyers will be pleasantly surprised by the snappier performance and

increased solid-state storage on the higher devices. At least get a version with a Core i5 Intel processor and 256GB of disk to include a little future-proofing of your computing needs.

Bottom-line

With the XPS 13, Dell delivers the near perfect device for a mobile worker looking for a solid, high-performance experience. The company cut no corners, so an XPS 13 won't lead to disappointment on any level. The bright, clear ultra-high resolution screen makes creating and consuming content a pleasure, while the great keyboard defers to the needs of even the most ardent word smith. A full range of expansion ports means being able to connect and communicate without making sacrifices (such as driving 2 4K monitors while using the USB-3 port for fast Ethernet—all while a USB stick mounts for local file sharing).

Dell may well one-up the XPS with future announcements, but that will likely mean faster CPUs and more storage on similar devices—or design departures that offer up entirely new aesthetics. As long as they apply the same rigorous thinking that went into the current XPS 13, any future ultra-mobile notebooks should prove equally useful to creators and curators on the go.

Configuration reviewed

Intel's Core i7-6560U processor, 8GB of RAM, 256GB PCIe Solid State Drive and the 3200x1800 QHD+ touch display. Intel Iris Graphics 540. Current retail for review configuration: $1699.99 (August, 2016).

All images courtesy Dell.