

IBM's laptop of luxury

Packed with speed and power, the 760E offers many things. Perfection, however, is not one of them / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

FOR NEARLY TWO MONTHS, I have been using the laptop of luxury: IBM's 760E. This unit, with a street price of \$5,400, comes with a 150-megahertz Pentium processor, 16 megabytes of EDO RAM, a 2-gigabyte hard drive, 2 megabytes of VRAM and a 12.1-inch screen that sports a resolution of 1024x768 pixels.

If you are into numbers, that last pair should impress. Two years ago, it was all but impossible to buy a laptop with a screen other than 640x480 – the same resolution as a 14-inch desktop monitor. Last year, super-VGA screens with 800x600 pixels came to market. That's like a 15-inch monitor. But the XGA screen built into my 760E is the equivalent of a 17-inch display.

The first thing I discovered with XGA is that 12.1 inches is really too small to squeeze all of the pixels that you find on a typical 17-inch display. Menus are difficult to read. Text must be zoomed. Still, it won't be giving up the XGA.

There are a lot of other things to like about the 760E. The back of the keyboard tilts up when you open the case, giving your fingers a nice typing surface. The keys have a good feel. The sound is great. And there's a little LCD display that shows how much power is left in your battery, and how many days the batteries will last in sleep mode.

Throw two latches on the side of the case and you can flip up the keyboard. Underneath are three bays. The right bay holds a replaceable hard disk drive. You might have one drive for Windows, another for UNIX. The middle bay has your battery

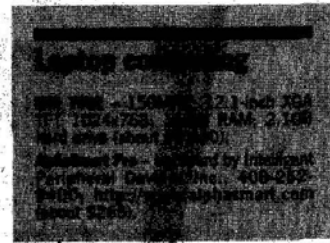
– it holds 90 to 120 minutes of power.

The left bay can hold a second battery, a floppy disk drive or a CD-ROM drive.

The 760E comes with IBM's MWave digital signal processor. Software that loads into the MWave can make it a 28.8 kbps data/fax voice-over-data modem. The MWave can also be used as a speaker phone and an answering machine using bundled software supplied by Global Village.

I like the 760E a lot, but it's got its problems. The first is the keyboard: Although it doesn't hurt my fingers the way other laptop keyboards do, I find that my typing isn't as accurate on the 760E, because I keep missing letters – whoops! – letters.

In the middle of the 760E keyboard is a red pointing stick that IBM calls a TrakPoint. I've gotten pretty good at using it, but lately I've had terrible back and shoulder pains, which I believe are related to using the stick instead of a mouse. (Since then, I've plugged a mouse into a port in the side of the laptop and the pains have started to go away.)



Intelligent Peripheral Devices' AlphaSmart Pro, a portable keyboard, works away from computer.

I've also had numerous problems with the MWave: There is a bug in the modem's software and the DSP keeps crashing, sometimes freezing the computer. I hope that doesn't happen during a phone call.

But the biggest problem with the 760E is that it weighs too much – a whopping 6.4 pounds. Maybe that's also contributed to my back problems.

Far lighter and cheaper is the AlphaSmart Pro, a 2.4-pound portable keyboard manufactured by Intelligent Peripheral Devices.

The AlphaSmart Pro is an excellent keyboard – good enough to use full time, and it plugs into both Macs and PCs. But what's so great about the \$264 device is it comes with a pair of AA batteries (good for 200 hours of typing), 128K of RAM (good for holding 60 pages of typed text) and a four-line screen (good for editing the last few words you typed). Just unplug the AlphaSmart Pro from your computer and take it to a meeting or a lecture. Type in your notes, editing them on the screen as necessary. Then take the keyboard back to your desktop and press the "send" button. While you watch, the keyboard silently re-types your notes into your word processor.

IPD is marketing the AlphaSmart Pro to elementary schools: For the price of a single PC or Mac, you can outfit an entire classroom with these machines.

They're great for teaching kids how to type or for having them do simple classroom exercises. I think the keyboard is also great for college students and journalists: It's a lot easier to carry around than a ThinkPad.

Even better: You can drop it on the floor without fear.

Unfortunately, you can't use the AlphaSmart for e-mail, so I've finally coughed up the cash to buy a new Apple Duo 2300c. With the 48MB RAM cartridge I picked up at MacWorld for \$350, I've got a system that has 56MB of RAM, a 1-gigabyte hard drive, an active matrix screen and a modem for less than \$2,200. That's a price PC laptops just can't touch. For that price, I'll put up with the smaller 640x480 screen – especially since I'm about to buy a 17-inch screen for my docking station.

Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net.