Ultralight contenders

With its bigger screen and lower price, Sharp WideNote W-100T is a winner / Simson L. Garfinkel

TODAY'S LAPTOPS DO a pretty good job crunching your back when they are not crunching you spreadsheets.

Weighing in at 7 or 8 pounds, plus accessories, these machines are really designed to be carried about from desktop to car trunk, rather than dropped into a backpack and lugged around.

Fortunately, so-called "ultralights" – machines that weigh less than 5 pounds – are getting popular again. For the past month, I've been testing two of the best: the Hewlett-Packard OmniBook 800 and the Sharp WideNote W-100T.

In many ways, these two computers are quite similar. Both feature a high-speed Pentium processor, stereo sound, a serial and parallel port, and a high-speed infrared port that lets you print your document or exchange files without hooking up cables. Both get roughly 90 minutes of use on their lithium ion batteries.

But the similarity stops there. These two laptops are different in several important ways. Understanding those differences will help any prospective laptop buyer.

● **Size, weight, and screen.** The HP OmniBook 800 measures 11 inches by 7½ inches by 1½ inches and weighs 3 pounds, 15 ounces on my postage scale. It's got a 10 2/5-inch diagonal screen with 800 by 600 pixels. The Sharp WideNote weighs 4 pounds, 10 ounces, and is half an inch wider than the HP. True to its name, the 11-inch diagonal screen is 1,024 pixels across by 600 pixels down. This lets you display two pages side-by-side or the top half of each page.

I found both of the screens readable, but 10-point text was definitely too small and uncomfortable. If this is your only machine, get a 15-inch external screen, which plugs in the back.

● **The mouse.** On the side of the OmniBook is a pop-out mouse that's roughly the size of a matchbox and connects to the laptop with a plastic stick. There is no ball on the bottom of the mouse. Instead, the laptop senses which way the stick is moving. The stick is flimsy but foolproof: One day I accidentally pulled the stick out from the side of the machine. I pushed it back in and kept working. The pop-out mouse is a neat idea, but I found it impossible to use unless the laptop was set firmly on a table. It cramped my hand.

The WideNote comes with a touch pad. Unlike trackballs, touchpads don't get dirtied by grease from French fries – a definite plus. I also prefer touch pads to those pointing sticks that IBM has: the sticks give me shoulder pain. But be sure you are using the correct driver. The WideNote didn't work properly until I went into the Windows 95 mouse control panel and changed the driver from Microsoft Mouse to ALPS GlidePoint. I also disabled the feature that lets you click the mouse by tapping your finger on the pad: The pad was just too sensitive.

● **Modems & PC cards.** The Sharp has both a built-in 28.8 modem and two PCMCIA Type II slots, which you can use for adding a better modem, an Ethernet card, a SCSI adapter, or a CD-ROM. The OmniBook 800 doesn't have a built-in modem and only has a single PCMCIA Type II slot. On the other hand, it has an SCSI connector on the back of the laptop, making it easy to connect external CD-ROM, SCSI drives, or a scanner.

● **Controls and ports.** The HP has two buttons for controlling the screen's brightness. The Sharp has a dial on the side that you can use to quickly change your speaker volume. If you are ever in a crowded meeting, you will discover that it's a lot more important to be able to quickly silence your PC's speaker than to dim its screen.

On the other hand, the buttons on the Sharp's touch pad are recessed beneath the laptop's case, making them difficult to push.

A friend at the MIT Media Lab suggests making them higher with a piece of duct tape. That's an ugly kludge, but it works. Sort of.

HP puts its infrared port on the back: to print, just set the computer next to an IR-equipped printer. Sharp puts the IR port on the side: This makes file transfer with other portables easier, but printing a bit awkward.

● **Device conflicts.** Imagine this: device conflicts on an all-in-one computer. Sharp's WideNote won't let you run the Infrared port, the 28.8 modem, and external serial port at the same time. Instead, you have to go into the computer's setup mode to change the machine's configuration. That's a confusing time-waster.

■ **RAM.** Get plenty. Both machines that I tested came with a pitiful 16 megabytes, which is probably one of the reasons that the batteries ran down so far. (With little RAM, the computers have to use their power-hungry hard disks more often.) Unlike desktop machines, RAM for laptops is expensive and proprietary. Don't buy a machine with less than 32 megabytes.

■ **Batteries.** More than 10 years have passed since the introduction of the first laptops, yet PC makers seem unable to standardize the battery. The HP has a 7.2-ounce battery the size of a small remote control, while the Sharp has a 14.8-ounce battery that is the size of a large flashlight. Laptop batteries typically run between $80 and $150. I like to travel with two or three extra batteries. Unfortunately, that adds $250 to the cost of every laptop that I buy.

■ **My favorite.** All in all, my preference is the Sharp: It's got a bigger screen, better feel in its keyboard, a built-in wrist-pad, and costs substantially less (models are $2,999 and $3,499 compared to the HP's price tag of $4,500).

But shop around: If you don't need a super-light machine with a huge screen, you can get many of these features in a laptop costing $1,000 to $1,500.

Sharp WideNote W-100T weighs 4 pounds, 10 ounces, and its 11-inch diagonal screen is 1,024 pixels across by 600 pixels down.

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