

The laptop of luxury

Sony portable with matching docking station easily doubles for desktop / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

LAPTOP OR DESKTOP? That was the question I was asking myself in September. On one hand, I needed a fast desktop computer with a network interface and a big screen. On the other, I wanted a lightweight notebook computer that I could take with me when I travel to Boston from Martha's Vineyard.

Buying two separate machines would have set me back more than \$6,000. Two machines also would have saddled me with the difficult task of synchronizing files between the systems, not to mention the legal ambiguity of whether to install the same licensed applications on both. So instead, I opted to spend \$4,000 for a Sony VAIO PCG-705 laptop computer and a matching "docking station."

I was impressed by the system's features and the amount of thought that went into its design. The basic laptop is equipped with a 150-megahertz Pentium MMX processor, a 12.1-inch active-matrix SVGA display, a removable 1.2-gigabyte hard drive, stereo speakers, microphone jack, headphone jack, 33.6-kilobits-per-second modem, touchpad, and two PCMCIA slots.

Along the right side of the unit is a bay that can accept a floppy disk drive (included), a CD-ROM drive (included), or a second lithium-ion battery (\$179 extra). On

the back is an infrared port that can run at up to 4 megabits per second. There are two PS/2-style connectors (one for a keyboard, one for a mouse), and connectors for universal serial bus, composite video, and an external monitor.

The Sony laptop comes with a highly integrated computer telephony system that lets the laptop double as a speaker telephone, an answering machine, a fax machine, and an electronic bulletin board system. The telephony program even includes an Internet electronic-mail client, although most customers will probably ditch it and use a program such as Eudora or Outlook Express instead.

Snap the laptop into its docking station and you get an SCSI port (for external disk drives or a scanner), a 10BaseT network connector, and 1024 x 768 video output (with 16-bit color). The dock also replicates the laptop's ports, including the headphone and microphone jacks. The laptop is "hot-swappable," which means you can dock and undock it without shutting down the computer. (Unfortunately, installing Microsoft's Internet Explorer 4.0 caused my system to crash during hot-swapping.)

The laptop comes stuffed with software, including games, Quick-SE, CyberMedia Oil Change, Microsoft's AutoMap, America Online, CompuServe, and a so-

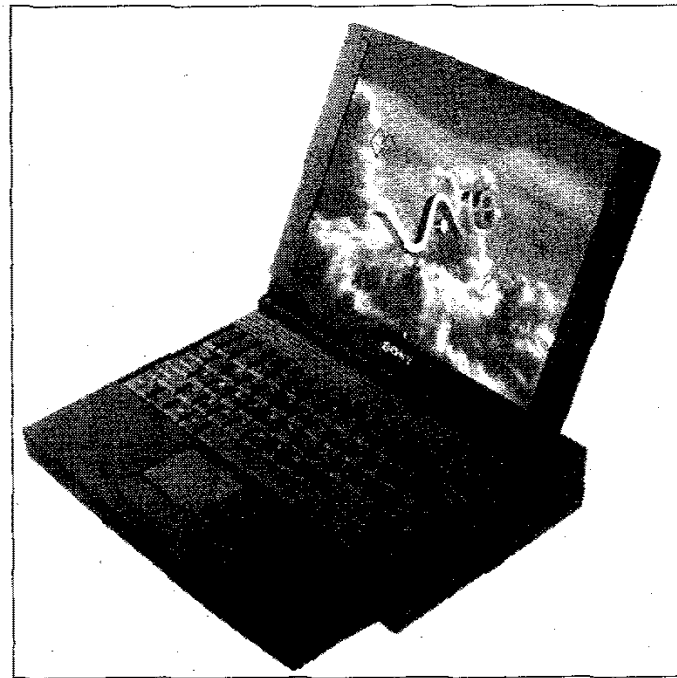
phisticated system for providing remote technical support. Speaking of support, Sony offers a 24-hour toll-free number. I've called it several times, and each time I found Sony's representatives courteous and extremely knowledgeable.

The slide-out hard drive is another nifty feature designed with service in mind. Say you drop your laptop and smash the screen. Just slide out the hard drive and slide it in to another Sony notebook. This feature should appeal especially to businesses, which can get a fleet of Sonys so that there is always a spare. I am also thinking about buying a second hard drive and installing a copy of Unix on it.

Shortly after I purchased my PCG-705, Sony brought out the PCG-717 and sent me one to test. The 717 is fundamentally the same as the 705 but runs at 200 megahertz. It also gets slightly better battery performance — 2 hours per battery, rather than 1 hour, 45 minutes in day-to-day activities. Otherwise, its hard drive, CD-ROM, and base station are compatible with the 705. I think I'll buy one for my wife so that we can be a two-laptop family. They also sell a 707, which has a 166-megahertz processor and a 1024x768 X VGA screen. I find these screens too small to read, but others might like them.

So what's wrong with this laptop? Not much. My PCG-705 had a few bad pixels in the middle of its screen. Sony is replacing the screen free of charge (a corporate policy).

My first month with the 705 I noticed that it seemed to crash occasionally when it woke up from suspend mode. After a lot of ex-



The Sony VAIO PCG-705 comes with a slide-out hard drive.

perimentation, I discovered the laptop's plastic case was picking up the static charge from the nylon lining of my leather backpack. I switched backpacks, and have had no problems since.

Although Sony's industrial design is generally excellent, the PCG laptops do have a problem with the tiny feet that raise the keyboard when you put it on a desk. The feet don't lock, and if you pull the notebook closer to you while you are sitting at a desk, the feet slip out and drop the keyboard. Oops!

The system will play audio CDs while in suspend mode — a unique feature. Unfortunately, Sony 92's CD player program will not let you type in the names of your CDs or the titles of the tracks, the way you can with Microsoft's CD player program.

My main complaint with the VAIO laptop has to do with its sound system. Although it plays music beautifully, the microphone input is noisy. This is especially a problem for people who use voice recognition software such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking and for people who use their laptop to produce radio shows. The noise also carries over to the telephony features, which is unfortunate because otherwise this system would make an excellent speaker phone.

I hope to solve the sound problem in a few months with a high-quality PCMCIA sound card. Unfortunately, no sound cards are currently approved for use with Dragon NaturallySpeaking.

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