

Alienware m15x Laptop Review

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We have been waiting to get our hands on an Alienware laptop for years, every since we first laid our eyes on a glossy photo in some long forgotten magazine and now that we have finally got one to review for ourselves, we have to admit that the Alienware has certainly lived up to our expectations and dreams. So please read on to find out what we thought about the m15x and check out the gallery at the end for stacks of images.

Default

If you decide to buy your Alienware m15x without any extras you should find the following items enclosed within the box. A rugged mouse mat with an Alienware logo on the top, a leather bound folder containing your recovery CD's and technical information, a soft cover to protect your laptop from scratches, an Alienware cap and an AC mains adaptor.

Customise

As with their partner website, Dell, you can customise your purchase before embarking on laptop heaven. So for example you can adjust what type of laptop lid you want, graphics card, CPU, hard drive, accessories, that sort of thing.

As you can see from above you won't get a lot of extras for your money, but we were lucky to some extent that one of our colleagues' (not attached to the mag) had already bought the m15x Alienware laptop and was able to show us the quality of the case that you can buy at an extra - check out the image gallery on the 3rd page.

This was a large silver case that could easily withstand the odd knock or two and is equipped with several pouches for your games and places for your accessories (AC Mains etc).

You could argue that for £2000 you should have got one as standard, but the above is certainly a lot better quality than your average laptop bag and is the reason for the extra cost.

Reviewed Spec

The spec that we reviewed was as follows....

- Laptop case: Silver Skullcap Design
- 15.4" WideXGA+ 1440 x 900 LCD (720p) with Clearview Technology with Webcam
- OS: Windows Vista Home Premium with SP1
- 512MB GeforceGo 8800M GTX Graphics card
- Intel Core 2 Extreme X9000 2.8GHz (6MB Cache 800MHz FSB)
- 2GB DDR2 667Mhz Memory

- 160GB 7200rpm SATA Hard drive
- Bluetooth
- Dual Wi-Fi 802.11 b/g
- 8 x DVD-RW Drive
- 3 x USB
- 1 x Firewire port
- 1 x HDMI
- Alienrespawn (bit like windows restore)
- Alienware Mesh Cap
- Alienware Personalised Nameplate
- Alienware Mousepad
- Alienware Owner Identification Card

Design

In terms of design we got our hands on the Silver Skullcap version for our review, which features a similar look and feel to the Area-51 desktop cases with its ridged alien looking contours. Again it was lucky that our colleagues' laptop had the Silver Ripley Design, which gave us chance to compare the two. In all honesty both designs look equally as good as each other, the Ripley design provides a smoother surface (like an alien head supposedly) and as the price is identical its just down to personal taste at the end of the day (check out the gallery at the bottom of page 3 for some examples of the two lid designs).

Alienware certainly want you to feel that you have bought one of their laptops (that's for sure). For a start they have added an alien head to the top of the laptop lid which glows different colours when the laptop is being charged - cool effect.

Likewise a small alien head is used for powering on the laptop and the keyboard, sides of the LCD screen, touch pad and buttons directly below the display are also backlit. The latters colours can also be changed using the command center software supplied with the device and when you check out the gallery at the end of the review you can have a look at some of the colour choices we had a play about with.

The above would seem like a bit gimmicky for most people, but it actually does provide a great visual experience when the laptop is used in the dark. Of course you can turn off the back light completely if this is not your cup of tea.

Dotted around the sides you have various ports for connectivity, 3 x USB, 1 x Firewire, 1 x HDMI, 3.5mm headphone/mic jack, Ethernet port, 1 x PCMICA card slot and 1 x SD card slot which are both under protective covers.

You won't find a DVI port, so for outputting to an external monitor you will need a HDMI to DVI cable which will cost around £14. Again we would have expected one to have been included in the price.

However the HDMI port does allow you to output to larger LCD screens for movie/games playback and if you have the Blue-ray drive option you can watch HD films on a bigger screen to.

The internal 15.4" screen was in itself great for playing games, with no motion blur, ghosting or problems to report during testing. DVD movie playback (you get Cyberlink PowerDVD software for this) was also of an acceptable quality, blacks were not perfect, yet they weren't poor either.

Likewise the sound quality was also better than we had expected, movies were possibly a little bit on the weaker side in terms of playback quality, but in terms of gaming they made for a great experience during testing.

As we got the 1440 x 900 res display as opposed to the 1920 x 1200, the only advantage to be had from the latter would be for playing back movies at FULL HD (slightly higher than 1080p), however for games there is no point.

The device is powerful enough to handle the 1440 x 900 resolution, but 1920 x 1200 would be more of a struggle - not to mention difficult on the eye due to the smaller display.

At the top of the screen lid you also get a Cyberlink webcam, we are not sure what the mp (mega pixel) rating was for this but it did produce a good video image and is equipped with loads of funny extras for transforming your picture during video calls.

On a negative note we were not as impressed with the overall build quality - especially for the price. Whilst the laptop itself is heavy, we did notice that the frame surrounding the 15.4" screen felt a touch loose and bouncy when pressed, however this could be down to our review unit as our colleagues' Alienware did not have the latter's issue.

Also the case has a cheaper plastic feel to it (though it's not as bad as it sounds), especially when you close the lid, so it may be advisable to protect your investment - when transporting - with one of those heavy cases or grab hold of the 3 year warranty, as opposed to the 1 year.

The integrated keyboard we felt was really good, it does not have the heavy strong feel of say an MSI, but it was more than capable of providing hours of stress free gaming.

As for the touch pad, this is flush to the casing and has a nice added bonus of turning itself off when you plug in an external mouse.

To be honest we found the touch pad to be a bit fiddly in terms of responsiveness, however it does just enough for most OS tasks, such as web browsing, but for series gamers you will want to add your own mouse anyways - something that is once again an added extra.

Noise levels are not too bad, with the hard drive being mainly silent throughout and the fans kicking up a storm when heavier demands are placed on the graphics card, but it's never enough to stop you from enjoying your games.

Though if you want to use the laptop on your lap you will find it start to get a little uncomfortable after an hour or so (as the laptop can get quite warm), but our colleague bought himself a laptop cooling tray which he says seems to keep things pretty cool.

Where's my buttons gone

The first thing that will puzzle you with the Alienware is where your eject and volume controls have gone, normally you push in at the side of the DVD drive to eject the tray or hold down the FN key to up the volume, but with the Alienware you have to press a keyboard combination to eject the drive and likewise for the volume you have to press a touch sensitive button and swipe your finger from left to right to adjust the volume.

The latter is a pretty cool touch which only has a slight drawback, in that some games did not work alongside the fancy volume control, so we had to resort to entering the games menu in order to change the volume.

Next to the above you also get a few other touch sensitive buttons in the form of your Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, Command centre and Stealth option (more on this in a bit).

Battery

Battery performance when playing games will provide you with around an hour and 20 minutes in high performance mode and for DVD's it was a similar story, though there are still a few ways you can adjust your laptop to improve battery life.

The first method is to use the command center to customise your own power management profile, i.e. when to put hard drives into standby mode or reduce the power of your CPU.

Secondly you can press the Stealth button which automatically throttles back the power of your CPU and GPU in order to reduce battery drain, though you must ensure that you turn off the Stealth mode before playing games, otherwise you could be wondering why your laptop is performing slower.

Performance

For testing we decided the best way to benchmark the Alienwares performance was to use FRAPS, which allowed us to play the games in real-time and get an average FPS score in the process. For some DX10 games - that had issues with the above software - we either used the built in benchmark utilities or made a visual inspection of how well the game(s) performed.

Also worth mentioning is that all our tests are carried out with the virus checker (AVG) and the Windows defender program running, plus we make sure that loads of action is going on the screen - thus a better representation of the

laptops performance is gleamed.

Crysis

Our first game out of the blocks was Crysis (with latest patch), which we ran in DX10 mode for testing. However as Fraps was not recording the average frame rate performance properly we had to make a visual analysis instead.

In terms of resolution we used the Alienware's highest resolution of 1440 x 900 and set everything to high - with no AA.

During the opening level, which is primarily outdoors, we headed for a spot that contained loads of action and we found the laptop to average around the 15fps mark, so not really that playable.

In medium settings the laptop performed better, reaching 26 to nearly 30fps at times (when the action was quietening down).

At low settings we were getting nearly 50fps (46fps) and to be honest the lowest DX10 setting still looks as good as the medium setting on DX9 mode.

Next up we ran the same tests again but in DX9 mode and for this we were able to get more accurate readings due to FRAPS working again.

1440 x 900 on High achieved an average of 23.340 FPS - though we still found this just about playable.

1440 x 900 on Medium achieved an average of 36.307 FPS

1440 x 900 on low achieved an average of 62.957 FPS

Whilst the above does not seem like a lot, you will find most desktop PC's struggle to run this game properly.

COH

In Company of Heroes Opposing Fronts we ran the internal benchmark tests first and used Fraps as a direct comparison, but once again the DX10 shaders caused some issues.

First of all we set the resolution to 1440 x 900 and flipped everything onto high with DX10 shaders. In this mode we got an average of 29.2 fps. Without the DX10 shaders we were getting closer to 60fps. So like Crysis if you want to play the DX10 driven games you will need a few adjustments to the settings.

Whilst the above is a good idea of how the game will run in the story driven mode, as the fraps results showed an average of 53.520 FPS, we wanted to test the laptop in an 8 player skirmish match with tons of action going on.

We were pleasantly surprised that the laptop still managed some respectable scores considering the settings we had the game set to (see image gallery at the end of the review).

So when there were tons of tanks on the screen, explosions going off we got these results...

Frames (9946), Time in ms (300000), Min (25), Max (45), Avg (33.153).

Call of Duty 4

This looked absolutely stunning on the laptop and it ran at 1440 x 900 with high settings and 4 x AA without a problem. We used the outdoor level called "All Guillied Up" as the bases of the test and it achieved these results.

Frames (14254), Time in ms (300000), Min (26), Max (158), Avg (47.513).

Rainbow Six Vegas

This is a game that has always run like a dog on our Quad based PC system, but the Alienware proved to be completely the opposite. For testing we ran at the maximum resolution it could provide -1280 x 720 (720P Xbox 360 port limitations) with everything set to max quality on a Terrorist Hunt level and got an average of 57.918 FPS.

Unreal Tournament 3

This game runs well on most systems and the Alienware is no exception, we ran at the highest setting of 1440 x 900 and cranked up detail to max and then played a team death match on one of the outdoor levels against 15 bots and got these results....

Frames (17342), Time in ms (300000), Min (36), Max (63), Avg (57.807)

Stalker Shadow of Chernobyl

This is one game that impressed us the most in terms of FPS. Considering everything was on max settings, inside some of the building we were still getting over 400fps so we thought there must be a glitch somewhere, but there wasn't, so check these scores out...

Frames (54107), Time in ms (300000), Min (62), Max (413), Avg (180.357).

Of course a lot of the scores would pale against a really high-end desktop card, but for a laptop you can easily play most games on a respectable high resolution with high settings.

LAN Party

As mentioned we had one of our colleagues bring over his own personal Alienware m15x laptop and we used the opportunity to play some network games, thus simulating a LAN Party atmosphere.

Once again the Alienware performed excellently throughout the evening, we had to kick Crysis down to medium settings on DX10, but it still played fine and then we ran through Unreal Tournament 3. At both times one of the Alienwares (exactly the same spec in both laptops) was acting as the server and considering we went up against 15 bots and the laptop was controlling two players at the same time, the games still ran smoothly.

Finally we tried an excellent Unreal Tournament 3 mod to finish off the evening called "The Haunted", a Zombie fest game that has a Resident Evil feel to it which was so much fun it had us in stitches.

So overall if you want to a laptop to take to a LAN party this Alienware will deliver hands down.