

Apple iBook G4 Review -- 12-inch Screen Version (pics, specs)

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Getting an Apple laptop was unthinkable for me at first. I felt nothing from Apple's clever "Switch" ads, and as with many fellow PC/Windows users, I thought Macs were for newbies, graphics designers, grannies, and others who couldn't handle more than one mouse button.

However, when I began my quest to purchase an affordable portable, I ran into many problems. The ultraportables and subnotebooks often lacked basic features I wanted such as an optical-drive, and would easily burn a hole in my wallet... several times over. Thin-and-Lights looked very appealing, so I researched that category the most. Some of my favorites include the [Fujitsu S6210](#), [IBM T40 series](#), and [Dell 600m](#). Yet, even the ones I liked didn't work out because they didn't fit my budget (about \$1,000).

Then I was introduced to a strange mix of the above. [Apple's 12" iBook](#) weighs in at touch under five pounds, but is in the ultraportable form factor. It's too heavy to be an ultraportable, but its small screen means it doesn't fit with most thin-and-lights. What really caught my attention was the price tag. Other than [Averatec](#), this is the only [notebook](#) I came across with a retail price of \$999 that came in under 5 pounds. But like any consumer ready to shell out hard-earned money, I was still skeptical.

I continued to do my research and consistently heard good things about the iBook. Finally, Apple and Amazon gave me a sign. In late October, Apple included Airport Extreme (802.11g) and bumped up the base processor to 1.2Ghz. Additionally, Amazon still had a \$150 rebate for Apple laptops. It didn't take long for me to figure out that \$850 + \$20 shipping was a darn [good deal](#). I placed my order on the following and patiently waited.

Specifications

- 12.1" TFT XGA
- 1.2Ghz G4 processor w/ 512k level 2 cache
- 256MB PC2100 ram, 1 slot available
- 30 GB ATA/100 4200RPM hard drive
- Slot-loading combo drive (DVD/CD-RW)
- 1 FireWire 400 port
- 2 USB 2.0 ports
- VGA Out, S-Video and composite video cable optional
- 56K V.92 modem
- 10/100BASE-T Ethernet
- Airport Extreme 802.11g wireless
- Mac OS X 10.3 Panther
- 90 phone support, 1 year hardware warranty



Closed iBook ([view larger image](#))



front open iBook ([view larger image](#))

First Impressions

There's not a doubt Apple spends more money on design than its competitors. Just the box itself screams 'gorgeous'. I tore through the packaging like a child on Christmas morning. Underneath all the booklets, manuals, and CDs, I finally got to the iBook. I recommend keeping the thin foam as a screen protector.

Once I turned on the notebook, I was immediately filled with dread. In the upper right corner was a stuck blue pixel. I decided to not think about it, and continue exploring my new toy. (note: all images are of the replacement I received)



solid strong hinge in the back doubles as place for heat exhaust ([view larger image](#))

The laptop is absolutely gorgeous. Had I not seen the price tag, I would've thought the iBook to be much pricier. The bare simplicity of the notebook is stunning. Other than the obligatory Apple logo on top (which lights up!), there's nothing but rounded edges. No bevels; No latches; No doors. When I hold it in my hands, it feels like holding a polished piece of marble. (in reality: polycarbonate plastic, and magnesium alloy)

The construction is really top grade. Pressing against the back of the reinforced LCD doesn't cause any ripples in the image, nor does flexing the screen between my hands. I'd feel safe putting this notebook in a cramped backpack. The hinge connecting the screen also looks quite beefy and doubles as an exhaust for heat. The slot loading drive is just too cool to describe. Everyone gets mesmerized by how the iBook sucks in CDs. Apple also claims to have rubber-mounted the [hard drive](#) to absorb vibrations and impacts.



right-side of iBook with power plug and optical drive ([view larger image](#))

Inputs and Ergonomics



iBook keyboard ([view larger image](#))

One aspect of the iBook I really enjoy is how comfortable it is to work on it. It's completely silent except at boot up or when reading a CD. The hard drive is only audible in a quiet room with my ear held close to the [keyboard](#). The keyboard is good, but lacks the expensive solid feel IBM keyboards are known for. I also believe that the iBook keyboard is one step down from the [Fujitsu S6210](#), but it is definitely way better than Dell [keyboards](#). Keys are fullsize except for the top function keys. I'm grateful for the full size Return, Delete (Backspace), Shift, and Command (equivalent to Windows-key). The trackpad feels just as capable as its competitors, but I dislike the feel of the single mouse button. It makes a loud cheap plastic "Click!". I've changed to tapping the trackpad instead. To get over only having one-button, it's as easy as holding down Command while clicking. There's also an added bonus of having an internal microphone. For those who dislike the given inputs, the iBook can be custom ordered with internal bluetooth, or one can use one of the two available USB ports to attach external input.



inputs and ports, thickness next to 150 page paper notebook ([view larger image](#))

I consider myself to be a PC poweruser and often have multiple applications and windows open on my desktop. I'm very used to working on one document, and then switching over with alt-tab in a Windows environment. Luckily, in this latest version of OS X shipped with the iBooks, Command-tab does the same. What's more is how hotkey friendly OS X is. While command-tabbing, I can tap other keys to have an action done on the highlighted application. I can cmd-tab to an application I no longer want, and tap Q to quit it or H to hide it. There are also hotkeys to open the Applications folder, and my Documents folder.

Display

The display is very crisp, and more than bright enough for use indoors and outdoors. The lowest setting turns off backlighting completely. The display didn't have the same wow-factor as the Fujitsu S6210, but it's definitely bright and clear. Thanks to the separate ATI video chip, DVDs run without any artifacts, and color representation is sharp. There's also an optional S-Video and Composite adapter available for \$20. Unfortunately, there is only screen-mirroring. In order to achieve screen-spanning, there is an a [well known hack](#) one can use. Since I don't see myself using this feature, I'd rather not risk it.



the camera does not capture just how crisp the screen looks ([view larger image](#))

Speakers

Speakers are just as bad as any other notebook speakers. Tinny, with no bass. They're located just above the keyboard area. Just plug in some headphones and you're all set.

Performance

Boot up times are slow at 56 seconds, but once started, the system is very snappy about multitasking. Looking at the specs, it's very obvious that the iBook was targeted at students. The processor and ram can handle basic usage such as web surfing, and document editing. One major difference I noticed about how I work on the iBook is that I leave programs running even when I don't use it. For example, there's a half second delay to fire up Safari browser, but once started, I can open any page even after I've closed the last window and the page will load instantly. Unlike Windows, closing the last window will NOT exit the program on a Mac. While other programs are running in the background, I can have multiple browsers open, chat with friends, and compile my computer science work. There's no discernable delay in the GUI when I switch between applications, and documents open up instantly if the application is already running in the background. If the system ever starts to feel sluggish, I can easily upgrade the ram myself, as it's right under the Airport Extremecard, which is located under the keyboard. Another solution is to reinstall OS X without all the extras that Apple bundles.

Wireless now comes standard, and while I haven't been able to fully test the range of Airport Extreme, I can reassure that it works flawlessly at my friend's house, on campus, and at local cafes. As with the IBMs, Apple connects it's antenna to the back of it's screen to provide a stronger signal.

Graphics comes in the form of an ATI Mobility 9200. 32MB is plenty for any eye-candy tricks OS X can dish out, but it still holds true that the latest and greatest games will not run on a Mac. Please don't bring up UT2k4 and other titles, because there is just no comparison between the number of titles available for Windows and Mac. Since I don't play games anyways, I feel the graphics system is great.

Storage, on the other hand, I find somewhat lacking. For a reasonable fee, one can customize their iBook to have a 40 or 60 GB hard drive. Apple could've done better in this area and included at

least a 40 GB drive as standard. To make matters worse, the preloaded demos and overkill basic configuration that comes as the factory default leaves only 19GB free initially. I recommend doing a clean install of the operating system without the unnecessary extras. The drive spins at 4200RPM, which probably contributes to the slow bootup time, but helps prolong battery life.

Battery Life

Here is where the iBook really won me over. With wireless on, and the screen set to the 2nd to dimmest setting, I can continuously work an average of 5 hours before I have to plug it in! Apple estimates 6 hour battery life, and I can see myself getting more than that if I put the iBook to sleep. I do sorely miss the ability to "Hibernate" on 2000/XP systems, but the iBook does obediently sleep whenever the lid is closed or it detects no activity for several minutes. There's even a nifty battery setting in preferences that's specifically made for viewing DVDs. It keeps the hard drive asleep, and the screen and optical drive going. I watched Kill Bill Vol 1 on a full charge and still had half an hour of charge left over to edit this review.

Software

I dislike previous versions of Mac OS, but I am very biased since I grew up on Windows and Linux/Unix. OS X has matured a lot and I'm happy to say that I like it. There are numerous reviews online about OS X, so I'd rather not delve too deeply into that area, but I have a couple of good experiences to tell. Out of the box experience with OS X is great. I plugged in my Olympus digicam, my Muvo MP3 player, and my Lexmark USB printer, and they all worked without a hiccup and no setup. Another perk was the included software. Instead of having to install MS Office, AppleWorks does a great job. Development tools are preinstalled, and since OS X is unix-based, there are tons of open-source goodies that are available for free! Try these sites to see what I mean: [Version Tracker](#), [Apple Downloads Page](#), [Darwin Ports](#), [Fink](#).

Support

A few days after I discovered the dead pixel, I thought I'd take it in to a local retail store and see how well support is. There was only one "Mac Genius" on duty, so it took two hours before I got a chance to see him. Luckily, one can set an appointment online before going to the store to shorten the wait. The Mac Genius was polite, courteous, and very knowledgeable. He verified my dead pixel by running a series of solid color images through it. He double-checked my information, which he pulled up my info from an Apple database (I registered my iBook as soon as I got it), and reassured me a replacement within 3-5 business days. I absolutely loved how I did not have to show him my receipt, or retell him my info. He knew all of it already. That's the benefit from Apple having such a tight hold on it's products and distribution. All is well now, and I still have the remainder of this year to purchase a 2 year extension to my warranty. I think the \$250 extension to AppleCare is probably worth it, and with a student discount, it's only \$183!

Pros

- Battery life
- Durability and design
- Software, and stability
- Support
- Price

Cons

- Heavy for it's size, slightly thicker than other 12" notebooks
- Unfamiliar OS (Windows users)
- Gets dirty easily (palm rests turn black, smudges)
- Hard to upgrade small capacity hard drive (solution: external hard drive)

Conclusion

It's hard to make a direct comparison between the iBook and competing PC products. However, it's clear that Apple has done its homework and provided an affordable laptop with everything a student needs. I am far from becoming a rabid Apple fanatic, but I can definitely understand the strong appeal and value of the new iBook. With or without the student discount, the iBook just cannot be beat for its price. With the money I saved, I could easily buy upgrades for the iBook, or blow it on other worthwhile gadgets.



uncluttered bottom of the iBook with battery indicator ([view larger image](#))



cool LCD backlight shows through the Apple logo on top ([view larger image](#))

Pricing and Availability