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Bearable lightness of laptops

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By Paul Taylor

Many ageing road warriors have the aches and chronic back pain that testify to too many business trips spent lugging a laptop through airports, in and out of taxis, and to and from meetings.

Early laptops often weighed an arm-stretching 10lb or more with their brick-like power packs, spare batteries and other accoutrements. The materials and technology used have moved on and most laptops now weigh about 4lb or less.

By definition, an ultra-portable is the smallest traditional notebook design. They typically weigh less than 4lb and are no more than an inch thick.

But anyone looking for the most portable laptop experience will gravitate towards a small subset of ultraportables - super-lightweight versions, which I have been checking out.

Several manufacturers offer super-thin, ultralightweight notebook PCs that weigh less than 2lb - about the same as a newsstand magazine. These were a mainstay of the Japanese domestic market and in the late 1990s Sony helped establish the ultraportable market outside Japan with its Vaio 505 line of mauve notebooks, including one of my all-time favourites, the N505VX.

The Japanese electronics company also introduced one of the first ultralightweight laptops with a carbon fibre case: the X505. Carbon fibre is lighter and stronger, dissipates heat better and is more rigid than the next best choice.

Last year Sony launched the G1, another stunning piece of engineering with a standard 12.1in screen and practical keyboard weighing in at just 1.89lb.

Sony claims the lightest Vaio G1 is the lightest "fully usable" notebook ever produced. Sadly, the only way to get a G1 outside Japan is to order it through a specialist importer such as Dynamism (www.dynamism.com [<http://www.dynamism.com>]) where it costs from \$2,900.

Happily, there are alternatives that are more widely available, such as Fujitsu's LifeBook Q2010 ultraportable.

The sleek, slim and matt-black magnesium alloy LifeBook Q2010 is lighter than other ultraportables such as the Dell Latitude X1, Lenovo's ThinkPad X60s, Panasonic's ToughBook W4 and Sony's Vaio TX family.

At about \$2,400 the Q2010 is expensive. But if you want the utmost in portability and lust after a machine that will turn heads, this may be the machine for you.

Besides its design, the Q2010's most striking feature is its thinness. At just 0.8in thick, 11.7in wide and 8.6in deep, it is wider but thinner than the Lenovo X60s, the Panasonic ToughBook W4 and the Dell Latitude X1. It is also light, tipping the scales at just 2.3lb - less than 3lb, even with the power adapter.

In spite of its diminutive size, the LifeBook Q2010 comes with a 12.1in, bright, wide-screen display and a good set of speakers built into the base of the unit, with a conveniently positioned volume control. Like many more conventional laptops, the LifeBook Q2010 features a biometric fingerprint reader.

The somewhat reduced-size keyboard has a good, solid feel - although not as good as the ThinkPad - and the navigation pad is a little small. Among my least favourite features are the "mouse" click buttons below the navigation pad, which I found too small and too close to the front of the machine.

Fujitsu has made some compromises to keep the LifeBook Q2010 so thin and light. The most obvious is the lack of an optical drive, video port or Ethernet networking socket. For those, users need to buy the optional \$300 media-slice-style docking station, which adds a dual-layer DVD burner, four additional USB ports, an Ethernet port and a VGA video out port to plug in an external monitor.

The LifeBook Q2010 can be configured with a range of Intel processors - the base configuration is a 1.2Ghz Core Solo U1400 processor, 512Mb of Ram and a relatively slow 30Gb hard drive. Like most ultraportables, performance is reasonable but not stunning and the battery life is anaemic at about two hours - Fujitsu also sells a high-capacity six-cell battery that boosts run time to almost seven hours.

Overall, the LifeBook Q2010 is a beautifully designed machine that is not suitable for everyone but will appeal to those who demand the ultimate in portability and do not mind the high price.

THE BREAKDOWN

Fujitsu LifeBook Q2010

Pros: Super-thin and stylish, ultraportable, weighs just 2.3lb.

Cons: Pricey, click buttons are cramped, and the optional docking station is a 'must'.

Neat ways round a portability problem

A growing number of travellers are finding that even the thinnest and lightest ultraportable can be left at home.

For many, a smartphone, especially if it has a full "qwerty"-style keyboard, may be enough for basic functions such as e-mail and web access - particularly if it is connected to a high-speed 3G network.

But typing notes or a longer document on a thumb-operated keyboard or screen-based virtual keyboard is not practical. One of my colleagues has come up with a neat way round this problem - a Bluetooth-enabled Palm PDA and a fold-up Bluetooth keyboard that connects to it by wireless. Unlike earlier PDA keyboards that relied on a physical or infrared wireless connection, the latest Bluetooth devices are reliable and easy to use. What is more, the PDA/Bluetooth keyboard combination is lightweight, convenient and extremely portable - the PDA and fold-up keyboard fit easily into a jacket pocket. One of the most popular keyboards - the Think Outside Stowaway Universal Bluetooth Keyboard - costs about \$85 online, unfolds into a full-size keyboard and includes a carrying case and PDA/phone stand.

Most PDAs, including Palm devices, come with built-in editing software that enables users to write and edit documents on the move, then sync them with a desktop or send them over a wireless WiFi link as an e-mail attachment.

There are other alternatives, too. One, MojoPac, is a downloadable software package that can be installed on any USB 2.0 storage device including iPod, USB hard drive, USB flash

drive or mobile phone (www.mojopac.com [<http://www.mojopac.com>]). I found a mini USB hard drive is ideal.

Once installed, MojoPac allows applications and files to be carried on a device that fits in a pocket.

So, for example, with sufficient capacity on the storage device you can load up personal versions of Microsoft Office and most other programs and access them simply by plugging the USB device into any PC anywhere in the world.

Language settings are stored on the MojoPac enabled device, so you can connect to a Japanese PC and still have everything in English. MojoPac costs \$50 but comes with a 30-day free trial.