

Apple TV:



After a long wait Apple have revealed their TV product to the waiting gadget world, the big question was is it a simple streaming device or a bold step towards IPTV and video on demand? Previously known as the iTV the new Apple TV unit measures 195.6mm square and 27.9mm deep and is remarkably light to lift.

Inside the ice white and neatly styled case lies a 40gb hard drive, 802.11n WiFi card and more connectors than you can shake a stick at. Apple have designed the Apple TV to be Hi-Def ready from day one so the video chipset used supports 1080i and 720p plus support for 576 PAL resolutions. The Apple TV set top box connects to the TV via either a component video plug or via HDMI for high definition signals, neither cable is supplied in the standard

package so make sure you have them already.

We had hoped that the Apple Television would connect directly to the Internet and use our standard WiFi router, we were half right. The AppleTV unit uses WiFi 802.11 which is backwards compatible with the older b/g standards to connect to a home network, of course Apple push their Airport kit like it is the only WiFi which will work but that is just tosh and the TV unit works fine with any standard network. What it does not do is use the Internet connection without a PC or Mac; instead it needs to connect via iTunes running on Mac or PC.

iTunes syncs over the WiFi connection to the inbuilt 40gb hard drive making the media available locally so it can be played even when the main PC / Mac is offline. Alternately the unit will stream media over the WiFi connection in real time from your iTunes library. What doesn't seem possible is to stream direct from the internet onto the unit, perhaps this will come in time via a firmware upgrade but for now this is not an IPTV offering.

From our brief demo the picture quality seemed good even on a large 42" LCD screen, this was with High Def material at 1080i which would eat a lot of the 40gb hard drive and will need a very good 802.11g or n connection to stream reliably from PC or Mac iTunes. Running more standard def content (H.264 1.5Mbps) showed some compression artifacts and in this mode you may get near Apples claimed 50-hour storage for the Apple TV unit itself.

The menu system is a real winner and while not quite up to a Sky+ style PEG it is a kind of colorful iPod interface with natty images relating to the media and cover art. You can access audio files (MP3 and ACC) as well as images and Pod casts in fact any source that iTunes can handle. The UK version of iTunes is a bit devoid of video at present with more music videos and hardly any TV shows or

Movies. We suspect that as the AppleTV unit goes on UK sale iTunes will offer a good range of TV shows and movies much like the US site.

The small white Apple remote looks remarkably like the older iPod shuffle and while it works perfectly we couldn't help but wonder if this is where all the unused old shuffle cases ended up. Probably not but it does give you full control over the on screen menu system via its 4 way pad and selector. The rear panel of the unit houses both analogue audio and digital audio outputs, the HDMI or component video connectors along with an RJ45 cabled Ethernet port and USB 2.0 socket.

Our short play with the Apple TV unit proved that what Apple have created is a very competent media streamer which works well with iTunes. We do not like the fact that you need iTunes to download media and in this respect the previously branded iTV box is a bit of a let down, we had really hoped to be able to stream live from the web and download with needing the PC or Mac to be powered up. Further there is no TV tuner built in so conventional TV cannot be viewed or recorded on the device, this leaves us still needing a PVR.

Priced at \$299 / £199 and on sale in February the Apple TV unit does have serious competition from other media streaming devices and the recently announced Sony cross media units which can directly access the internet from selected Sony Bravia TV sets. It does seem to be a very polished device as you'd expect from Apple, however we were expecting much more and can only hope that a future firmware update allows on demand viewing without the Mac or PC. The brand new Sumvsion K -Pac MP4 player with its 2.2-inch screen offers a great introduction to MP4 players. Capable of playing both MPEG-4 video and MP3/WMA/WAV audio files, it's an all-in one solution for portable entertainment.

The K-Pac also features an SD Card slot, to add additional memory and expand the quantity of movies and songs you can carry. Mini SD cards are available in up to 2GB capacity, on top of the 2GB in the player.

The display is a bright and crisp 256,000 color TFT, providing clear video and allowing you to easily navigate through your files.