

Tech Front

Alex Féthière takes eleven notable portables for a high-tech test-drive

1 **GATEWAY'S E-155C CONVERTIBLE NOTEBOOK** is a fine addition to their convertible notebook-tablet PC line, marrying the best features of notebooks with those of tablets allowing digital pen and touchscreen input. My review unit was well-equipped to run resource-intensive Windows Vista with a dual-core U7500 1.06/1.07 GHz ultra low voltage processor and 1 GB of DDR2 memory at 533 MHz.



Text may be entered in either mode via a floating tablet, and flicks—one-inch radial movements in any of eight directions—are used for major mouse operations. I managed about three hours of intensive Internet work and writing on the “Balanced” power plan before I had to plug it back in. Power conservation is further enhanced by an ambient-light sensor that subtly adjusts the brightness of the screen as circumstances require. Bluetooth, 802.11a/b/g wireless, and 802.11n (when finalized) effect cable-free peripheral and Internet operations.

The integrated UPEK biometric fingerprint reader, equally accessible in typing or tablet mode, can secure Windows Vista and more; Absolute Software's Computrace Complete is integrated into the firmware and will track the unit itself if lost or stolen. 11.9”x 9.9”x 1.17”, 4.5 pounds; \$2,074; www.gateway.com

The **NIKON D40X** is the perfect SLR for those ready to graduate from Point-and-Shoot University. Attractively priced, ergonomic, small and light enough to appeal to consumers who've grown used to photographic packs of cards, this next-generation D40 has a ten-megapixel CCD and an increased ISO range (100 and HI 1, roughly equivalent to 3200), plus a higher continuous shooting frame rate of 3 fps.

I tested the D40x outfit, which includes a AF-S DX Zoom-Nikkor lens with the camera body. The lens has its own motorized focus drive (the camera body has none), and the menus are easy to learn. However, many point-and-shoot users, as well as photographers will likely be bothered that ISO and white balance are not controlled with hard controls, but rather within nested layers of menus.

I was pleased with the color and resolution on all settings, although the image recording quality settings were annoying—why would anyone recording a NEF file (Nikon's RAW) not want to choose the quality of the accompanying JPEG (it's always the worst quality, Basic)? At least it can do that at a very competitive speed, and on balance it's a heavy contender for the entry-level DSLR market. \$799; www.nikonusa.com



2 **BACTRACK** is a long-overdue product that places control over one's intoxication firmly in the hands of the individual before it lands in the gloves of the police. The breathalyzer is lighted for targeting and viewing: opposing air inlets and the LCD screen are backlit. The subject simply exhales into either inlet for five seconds and in three seconds the unit renders a BAC. It proved a fun party trick to see how well people understand their limits, but it can save lives and licenses besides. 4.25”x 1.63”x 0.81”, \$89; www.bactrack.com



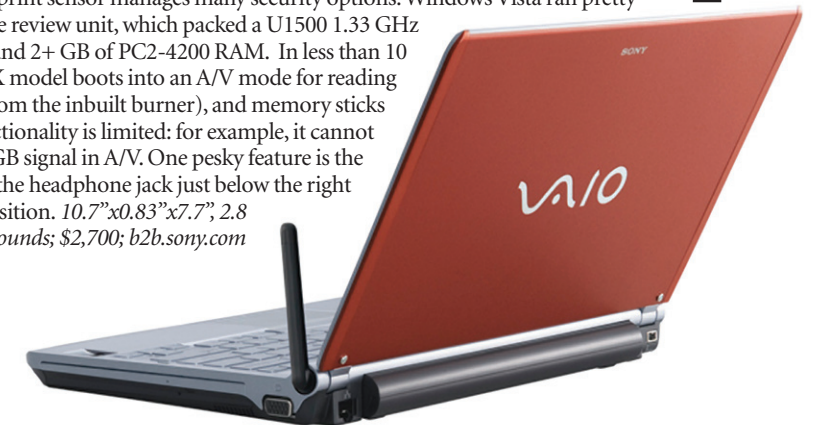
4 I've tried, managing louder sound conveyance with sharp, clear highs, crisp mids, and bass that jumps the gap into the ear—no need for something rubbery wedged in the canal. \$99; www.bose.com



After staying out of the market for years because of perennial dissatisfaction with the sound quality of earbuds, **BOSE** has broken through with its **IN-EAR HEADPHONES**. These are a fine set of plugs that clear up a lot of earbud issues with their ergonomic molding, vented design and notable sound.

The silicon-jacketed sound conduit sits just outside the ear canal, and stays there in part by its shape and in part by the tacky surface of the silicon (which doubles as a lint sweep for the inside of your pocket or purse). Three different silicon gels are included. From my experience one is uncomfortable but secure, and one is comfortable but a little tottery. I managed to dislodge one side by running down two flights of stairs. As for the sound, it beats the three comparably-priced earbud models

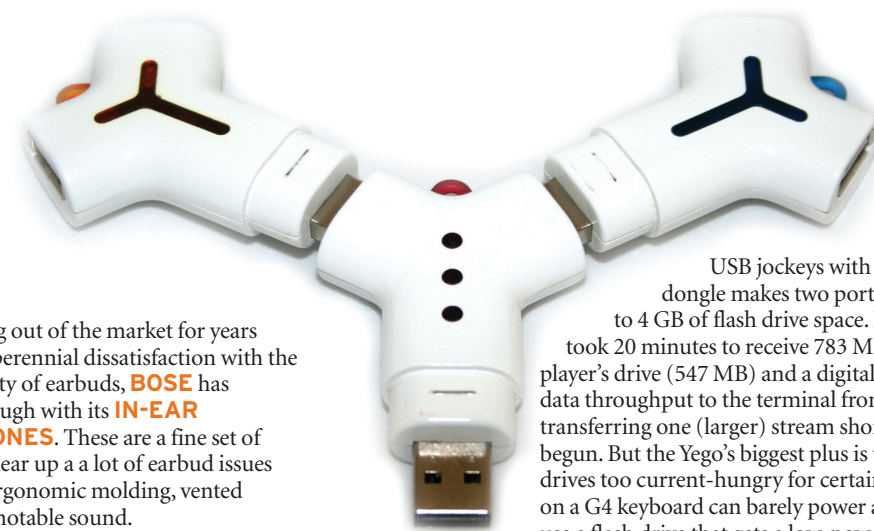
The **SONY VAIO TXN27N/B**'s dashing profile and color coding make it one of the premier pieces of computer couture. Covering less area than a piece of letter-sized paper, this ultraportable has plenty of power. Sony's SmartWi utility facilitates the management of WLAN, WWAN and Bluetooth protocols, and there's Gigabit Ethernet, too. Colors on the razor-thin 11.1” screen are gorgeous, and battery life is sound: I got 5.25 hours of work on VAIO Optimized power. The integrated UPEK fingerprint sensor manages many security options. Windows Vista ran pretty smoothly on the review unit, which packed a U1500 1.33 GHz processor and 2+ GB of PC2-4200 RAM. In less than 10 seconds, this TX model boots into an A/V mode for reading DVDs, CDs (from the inbuilt burner), and memory sticks and cards. Functionality is limited: for example, it cannot send an RGB signal in A/V. One pesky feature is the placement of the headphone jack just below the right wrist position. 10.7”x 0.83”x 7.7”, 2.8 pounds; \$2,700; b2b.sony.com



6 The **CASIO XJ-S35** projector is a tiny wonder with a 2,000 lumen brightness and clarity that live up to company promises. RGB imaging was excellent at distances of 5 to 10 feet or so, and auto-keystone correction took just over two seconds. The USB port in back is a great feature, and well supported: out of three cameras cabled into it, it recognized two (one was the Exilim V7), and slideshows could be run from them with its onboard controls. If your camera is unsupported, you need only copy the images to a flash drive; the XJ-S35 opened all images on all the flash drives I had loaded, but not on two mixed-media drives given to me. For ultimate presentation portability, a Powerpoint can be saved to a stick as images. The electronic mosquito noise the fan makes is the weakest point of this item, but was greatly diminished in “eco” mode. The zoom also sounds a bit ratchety, but shouldn't keep this from the top of the list. <8”x 11”x 1.7”, \$1,599; www.casio.com



5 The **RIDATA YEGO USB** hub drive fills a small but urgent niche for USB jockeys with limited ports. The Y-shaped LED-lit dongle makes two ports from one, and itself contains from 1 to 4 GB of flash drive space. For using its onboard storage, the Yego took 20 minutes to receive 783 MB, with data arriving from a media player's drive (547 MB) and a digital camera (236 MB) simultaneously. For data throughput to the terminal from the same devices, the Yego stopped transferring one (larger) stream shortly after the second (shorter) was begun. But the Yego's biggest plus is that it draws enough power to supply drives too current-hungry for certain ports. For example, the feeble USBs on a G4 keyboard can barely power an LED, but the Yego allowed me to use a flash drive that gets a low-power warning unless plugged into the main G4 case—it even makes iPod charging possible! 1.75”x 0.5”x 2.75”; \$16 (1 GB); \$40 (2 GB); \$70 (4 GB); www.ritekusa.com



8 The **BOSE QUIETCOMFORT 3** headphones are much smaller than their QC2 predecessor while maintaining the same outstanding active noise reduction technology and improving sound reproduction. The over-ear memory foam design of the QC3s is butter-soft, but doesn't breathe well. The slight discomfort to some is worth the freedom from yoke-like headphones that scrape the jaw.

Bose has changed the power source for their QuietComfort phones to a lithium battery that sockets into the top of one cup. Its stated charge life is 20 hours. The battery's list price is \$49.95, so be sure you have a spare if you'll be away for long; like the QC2, the sound dies with the noise cancellation, and can't operate without it.

Noise cancellation is a slight misnomer. The babies crying as a plane descends will be no less piercing. But any roaring, constant, regular sounds will be attenuated to a remote hiss.

That might not be the best feature for anyone who buys Bose's adapter that allows the QC3's use as a headset for many music-enabled cell phones. The adapter, which adds a hanging microphone on the line, allows the user to switch between listening to music from the phone and making calls, all with the benefits of noise cancellation. The microphone is not as amazing as the headphones, so forget about calling your clients while cruising with the top down on the PCH. \$349; adapter \$40; www.bose.com



RIM's handsome **BLACKBERRY 8800** is a godsend for those who want data service with an excellent phone, music, and some PDA functionality. The notched keyboard helps users learn the layout with tactile memory. Image rendering on the 320x240 screen is breathtaking, and the illumination adjusts to suit the ambient light. Mine paired effortlessly with a Scala BT-700 Bluetooth headset, and sounded loud and clear with a slightly tinny cast at high volume.

9 Cingular's GSM service distinguished itself on a trip to Berlin and Helsinki: the phone found networks even in the Berlin metro. Regardless of programming languages used, Web pages functioned on the browser. Battery life is impressive, with an easy two days between charges when talk time was less than three hours per day, regardless of e-mail or Web usage.

But the phone cannot function as a modem, and it's bothersome that I can't import Entourage/Outlook contacts with what's in the box. It's also a bit of grief to open the battery case to change batteries, SIM cards or memory—the clasp is very challenging. 4.49"x2.6" x0.55"; \$299 (with Cingular plan); www.blackberry.com



10 The **NEC NP40** is a solid and portable 2,200 lumens projector at a reasonable price. Start and shutdown are fast, auto-keystone correction takes about five seconds, and zoom/fan sound levels in any mode are low. The eco setting is rated at 2,000 lumens, and I prefer it because it's still quieter and more efficient,

perhaps because of NEC's patented Hybrid Cooling System. The RGB signal was quite good and response to computer display shifts was prompt, range is stated at 5–18 feet and I noted satisfactory results at 10. It's nice of NEC to include a bulb-life gauge (in hours) in the firmware, since it's surely a special-order part one won't have lying around. 9.68"x2.83"x6.96" (plus slight protrusions), 3.5 pounds; \$899; www.necdisplay.com



11 The **CASIO EXILIM V7** is a 7.2 MP camera offering a 7x optical zoom and technologies that reduce camera shake and improve tracking of moving objects. ISO and white balance adjust are buried in menus—the price of limited camera-body real estate crowded by a nice 2.5" screen. It shoots quickly, and well enough. The mechanical stabilization did work wonders when I affected overcaffeination. MPEG-4 video shooting was quality, but why place frontal "stereo" mics within an inch of each other? That said, the mics differentiate signals noticeably when the camera is oscillated a few inches in front of a sound source and the movie watched with headphones. But the adapter cords and cradle that regulate power and USB transfer are a net space loss, regardless of port space saved on the camera body: less camera to carry = more clutter for travel. 3.75"x2.25"x1"; \$399; exilim.casio.com