

Tech Front

Alex Féthière checks out a tiny, lightweight headset, a compact concierge and a souped-up camera

VOCE PREMIUM WIRELESS is a tele-concierge internationally accessible from a dedicated handset and service. This pocket delegate was pretty capable of everything I threw at it; I simply dialed 611 and was connected to an operator who could book me anything, find and reserve whatever I wanted, or research and report on any topic. Information is called back and left in voicemail, text-messaged or e-mailed if you don't answer. Often they will e-mail it anyway. The service is most useful in research-intensive applications. An obscure food product was locally sourced in two hours, though I had given up after years of intermittent searching. When a used copy of a book was not found in New York City, Voce e-mailed me a week later with an update that had found some copies. The only time the service fell short was when I asked Voce to find me a complete DVD set of "The Prisoner" for sale or rental in the city. The Voce assistant didn't try very hard before telling me I could buy it online from Best Buy, and I found it locally myself in under five minutes. It's only a pity you can't graft Voce on to your existing phone service. \$118/month plus tax; www.voce.com



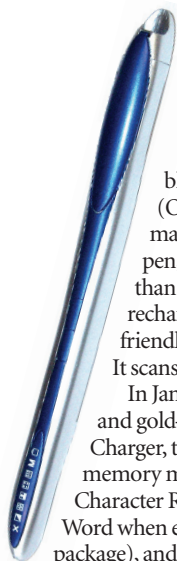
The **CARDO S-800** is the company's new flagship Bluetooth headset. A lightweight wonder, this tiny unit is just the right size to lose—good thing it includes a lanyard to hang it from, and a buzzer that you can activate on it from your phone (when paired) if you lose both the headset and the lanyard. Its noise-balancing feature was very good, but not without peer: Callers said that it consistently lowered the volume of my voice in its zest for purity. Fortunately it also raised the volume of the speaker, if necessary. Though designed to be used without an earloop, the included one was necessary, since the silicon bud was too small to lodge firmly in my outer canal. The earloop made it more stable, but caused it to cant at the wrong angle. These nits might have bothered me more if it weren't for the S-800's robust features. Excellent battery life, SWAP technology that allows users to easily switch the headset's signal channel from one phone to another, an indicator light that shares considerable information with changes in color and blinks (e.g., missed calls, headset status, battery life and auto answer status), and hot-dialing up to three numbers, to name a few. \$85; www.cardowireless.com

The **OLYMPUS E-510** is a light-bodied, 10-megapixel digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera with two Zuiko lenses (14-42mm f3.5-5.6 and 40-150mm f4.0-5.6) included in its basic package. Olympus has added a lot of sweeteners to the entry-level setup: a supersonic sound-wave anti-dust filter, image stabilization and noise reduction that particularly helped me in ISO 1600 shooting conditions. If I'd had other lenses to try, these features would have worked with them as well. I would have traded the supersonic sound-wave filter for a real auto-focus matrix, though—shooting foliage or carnivals proved an agony with the three points provided, and I had to use manual for some high-detail, deep-field shots. Point-and-shoot enthusiasts who miss the Live View on the monitor might be happy to see it with this camera's N-MOS sensor, but I felt it slowed the response time of the shutter and taxed the battery. Color accuracy was great when adjusted, but as an applied camera learner, it was slow going for me with the icon- and acronym-heavy menus Olympus used. If you have time to explore this camera's features and decode its menus, you will ultimately find it one of the more rewarding and kitted-out DSLRs in its class. \$799; www.olympusamerica.com



POWER TOOLS

Alex Féthière considers the speedy and mighty in pocket-sized technologies



Why take notes when you can scan them instead? PlanOn's **DOCUPEN RC800** two-ounce handheld "pen" scanner is more like a quill at nine inches, but can hold black-and-white text aplenty on its onboard 8 MB flash drive. (Only two full pages will fit at 24-bit color, 400 dpi resolution.) Its major innovation is a scan element that runs nearly the length of the pen, so that the user simply scrolls it down the page lengthwise rather than highlight-scanning text, line by tedious line. Its Lithium-Ion rechargeable battery gives it independence from computers, but it is friendly with them—while connected, it will charge from the USB port. It scans in four modes: 24- or 12-bit color, grayscale, or monochrome.

In January 2007, PlanOn announced three color options—black, silver, and gold—and an Executive Kit which packages the Universal Mobile Charger, the Universal Memory Reader, additional 128 MB MicroSD memory module, PaperPort SE document management and Optical Character Recognition software (which easily dumps scanned text into MS Word when engaged—but Mac users will need to spring for the RC800 PRO package), and a retractable USB cable, together in a handsome aluminum case.

An unassuming four-ounce box, the new Universal Mobile Charger (UMC) can fully charge the DocuPen up to 55 times. It takes less than 15 minutes to fully charge the UMC, and its adapter can be used to recharge the DocuPen directly from an AC outlet. PlanOn will release additional connectors enabling the UMC to charge all major cell phones, PDAs and digital cameras.

The Universal Memory Reader (UMR) is a little USB dongle that reads nine types of memory card. The UMR plugs directly in the USB port and allows the user to transfer files from not only the DocuPen, but from cellular phones, digital cameras, video camcorders, MP3 players and PDAs.

A retractable flat USB cable eliminates the cursed "cable nest."

The **MAXTOR ONETOUCH III** is a small, light USB drive complete with a suite of software to automate the most tedious operations of backup and synchronization. Its low profile, single lighted button, and matte steel casing make it functionally minimal. Most computers can run it without auxiliary power, but a cable with two parallel USB plugs opposing one USB mini for the drive is included, should the USB 2.0 port of your laptop/desktop be underpowered.

The software installs in less than three minutes from the drive. It's not necessary to install the software if you only want to move some data; XP will recognize the drive in short order. Once parameters have been specified during the first install, most operations self-execute upon connecting the drive. Alternatively, you can configure the drive to backup or synchronize files by leaving it on all the time and pressing its one LED-illuminated button—hence its name. It self-parks its drive heads when left on for some time and when disconnected from USB power. At eight ounces and 5.2 x 3.5 x 0.8 inches, you'll forget it's in your bag until you need it.

A word of warning to Mac owners—although you may download Mac software for it, I could not effect full functionality on my G4.



Palm has a reputation for sound products and reliable operating systems. With the **PALM TREO 700W WITH WINDOWS MOBILE**, it offers a staggering wealth of functionality at some expense to OS stability. Used to disconnecting, closing, and pocketing a phone in less than one second, I'm annoyed that I have to wait over two seconds just for the Treo 700w to hang up, let alone return to the Today screen to power off the display and keylock.

Don't get me wrong, it's a pretty impressive PDA and its broadband is cracking: Web sites are rendered with good speed and color, and the integrated Google-powered Web search works as well as any computer's. MS Exchange ran marvelously on tasks, e-mail, calendar and contacts. Less charming is the way multiple phone/PDA applications (like checking your voicemail while Exchange is updating and IE is open) can cause resource bottlenecks that crash the unit. Attachments in e-mails are easily opened with Pictel PDF viewer—even the 436-page Treo 700w manual.

Several applications make good use of the blazing broadband. On Demand offers a wealth of regularly-updated information: news, weather, maps and financial data. Virtual Earth's maps were the most comprehensive for worldwide navigation, and can use GPS or Wi-Fi to provide a "You Are Here," though it didn't always have local street-level images for overseas destinations like Reykjavik (but it did for Barcelona, with metro stations as well). Windows Media Player works well, but not with any of the streams I tested—that's asking a lot, though.

The camera and video capabilities are pretty good as well, although the 12 fps 3g2 format files that result from filming are neither easy to move nor convert. All told, I liked it a bit more as a computer/PDA than as a phone.

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Alex Féthière tries out two new tools that minimize workspace clutter, plus software offering free six-way video-conferencing



ICRON's WIRANGER allows cable-free remote USB networking and maximum control of your USB workspace with a radio-frequency-controlled hub. The LEX (local extender) unit connects to your USB 1.1 or 2.0 port, and a power socket, and the 4-port REX (remote extender) unit may be placed wherever its power adapter will reach—ideally, in a cluster of USB-interface devices that don't need to be near your computer.

Installation was easy and required no new drivers. Mine worked well with smartphones, flash drives, and keyboards (as long as only one was connected at a time), but was unreliable with two different mass-storage media players on both Mac and PC, as well as an external drive.

Key remote uses like printing and scanning were where the WiRanger shone, producing a color .tif scan in under two minutes from about fifty feet away, through several dividing walls. It facilitated printing as quickly as a direct connection. Because it has a PHY rate of 54 Mbps and an actual max transfer rate of 30-35 Mbps, most USB devices will work with it—but the company will introduce an 802.11n version later this year, which will offer a PHY/actual of 300/150 Mbps. 4.25" x 2.5" x 1"; \$395; www.icron.com

OOVoo video-conferencing software improves on the services of existing programs, and all for free. It can handle up to six people on one conference, and do so with great economy, requiring only a minimum of 100 Kbps per person for its video and audio feed. It is very easy to install and operate, even on secured systems: if you can browse the Internet, you can launch ooVoo, and you won't be waiting long for its 7 MB to download. All you'll need beyond that is a USB video camera not much more than three years old, and a headset.

In its six weeks of beta, 150,000 people have registered worldwide, thousands of whom are deaf—that ooVoo can be used effectively for video sign language chat says it all about image resolution. One-minute video messages may also be sent, and standard IM functions are included.

At press time, the Mac release was about four weeks off. Big plans are in the offing: youtube/cellphone video adaptability, synchronous sharing (and simultaneous editing) of a document among up to six users, recording of conferenced conversations, and importing Outlook contacts are some features in development. Free; www.oovoo.com



COM ONE's SKYPE OVER BLUETOOTH KIT cuts the cable anchoring you to the computer when making phone calls via VoIP. By plugging a thumb-sized dongle into a USB port and installing the provided drivers, you can finally get rid of that corded headset that you kept for Internet-based calls. The plugin also provides full Bluetooth operability. Skype software was included in my kit, but had already been outmoded. In seven minutes all was set up and working, and it was indeed liberating to get a drink while on an international call.

Frequent travelers who minimize costs with Skype rejoice—the last personal telecom cord has been cut. \$24; www.com-one.biz



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Alex Féthière checks out audio accessories and a comfortable keyboard

ALIPH'S JAWBONE is a design-distinctive headset by Yves Béhar, a MoMA-exhibited designer who has lent his talents to names like BMW, Birkenstock and Toshiba. Technology combines with sleek futurism to create this Star Trek tank-commander accessory. Military-grade noise-reduction technology is housed inside the microphone's frame, so that I could do dishes and vacuum while on the phone. A voice sensor at the front touches the cheek, stabilizing the unit and fortifying the signal—as long as it's resting near your jaw, the noise cancellation won't phase out your voice. The incoming signal is clear and balanced, and the silicon-bowstring earpiece comfortably straps the heavyish unit to the ear.

Voice dialing and commands worked great, and it gave me five hours of talk time. Charge configuration is exclusive: power intake is cleverly USB or AC on one end, but the business end is a five-pin custom design, forcing you to carry yet another cord. But that's a trifle in a market full of blue-blinking ear bits, and the Jawbone lives up to its looks. **\$120, www.jawbone.com**



GRIFFIN TECHNOLOGY'S ITALK PRO is a handy and well-optioned stereo microphone attachment for the iPod. Because the mics are two inches apart, the CD-quality .wav file product is just a bit more nuanced in depth than a mono recording. Griffin included a mono option for the consumer who just wants to record

a long meeting without using all the space on her iPod. Simply plug into the port and press the red iTalk button to record, or adjust recording level and stereo/mono mode. A stereo mic plug is included if you'd rather place your own mics. **GRIFFIN'S TUNEJUICE 2** is a cute little module that attaches to the dock/charging port of the iPod and provides up to 14 hours of additional play. Four AAA batteries inside provide this power, taking us back to the days of carrying batteries for continual music. In many circumstances, that can be much easier than jockeying for an outlet. **iTalkPro, \$50; TuneJuice 2, \$30, www.griffintechnology.com**

GRIFFIN'S AIRDOCK combines many of the best features of the reclining iPod with a radio-frequency remote whose signal penetrates walls. Compatible with the iPod Video, iPod Nano, iPod (4g), and iPod Mini, the Airdock allows syncing with iTunes, playing through a TV or stereo via the included Home-Connect triple-RCA cable, and charging from USB or wall current. Photos and videos can be browsed from a distance, since the same controls for the iPod are on the Airdock's remote. The included PowerBlock adapter, with interchangeable plug faces, allows the user to connect the Airdock to any outlet the world over. **\$70, www.griffintechnology.com**



The **ALPHAGRIP AG-5** is a remarkable and affordable addition to the experimental-keyboard market. Don't be put off by its gamepad-like design; it's also more compact than a lot of the competition, and its integrated thumb-trackball mouse is precise enough unless you're a designer. As a package, it allows you to be any distance from your monitor (it includes a 10-foot USB cord that plugs very securely into the back), in any position. The rocker-switches on the back input most of the letters with the help of two shift-tier keys, and unless your hands are very small, you shouldn't have any trouble reaching.

After an hour of daily practice for four days, I was comfortable enough to use it, albeit slowly, for most of my typing—including this review. Included decals may be stuck anywhere to help you learn the rocker keys. The greatest loss, besides my customary 80 words a minute (for now), is some of the hotkey combinations I'm used to. In the future, AlphaGrip might offer a suitable key remap on their Web site (there are presently no Mac remaps), or someone might program one. But as a lifelong touch-typist, taking the strain off my wrists and back is starting to feel worth it. **\$99, www.alphagrips.com**



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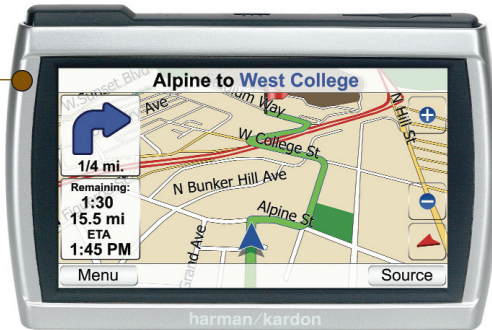
Alex Féthière tries out some élite earpieces, an enhanced GPS/media player and a stand-alone Internet-radio unit



HARMAN/KARDON'S GUIDE + PLAY

continues the trend of combining everything of everyday use into a sandwich-sized box. Part movie player, audio player and GPS, it is easily set up and painless to use, whether you can look at it or not. I found it indispensable when traveling by car or bicycle—on the dash or in cargo pocket, it was clearly audible and accurate. It was also resourceful, tacking close to its recommended route for some time, but shifting if I persisted in blazing my own trail.

The touch screen was easy to use and responsive, but I was annoyed that it could only be used for navigating menus, not selecting locations on the map. Preloaded satellite-navigation maps will triangulate you when you turn it on, and there's no dithering about with a computer to load maps. Mine was enabled for the U.S. and Canada, and there is a separate EU unit. An SD memory card slot allows you to fortify the device with up to 4GB of audio and video, but serves no other function. The media player works respectably, but unremarkably. One serious drawback for the international traveler is that there is no way to add maps to the guide + play. \$399; www.harmankardon.com



FUTURE SONICS' ATRIO SERIES

canalphones are the sort of élite earpieces used by Bono and Shakira, and you won't wonder why when you listen to familiar tunes through their curvilinear plugs. I tried them out on three very familiar songs with layers of engineered sound, and in two of them heard things I had never noticed in months or years of listening. The Atrio not only reproduces sounds clearly and loudly, but also articulates them well. The cords just below the buds are reinforced with clear plastic sheathing, which is prescient because these are strain sites. On the downside, the canalphones must be fully inserted in the ear canal to reject ambient noise (up to -26 dB reduced), which can be uncomfortable—even with any size of the included three silicon and two foam sleeves attached. Bass drive is also weaker than is customary, but some might find that refreshing. \$199; www.futuresonics.com



ROKU'S SOUNDBRIDGE M1000 seems to belong in a pneumatic tube, but the messages it carries come from the ether of the Internet. This trim cylinder is an Internet radio that also jukeboxes the audio files in your PC or Mac via Windows Media Player, iTunes or Rhapsody. You can easily browse networked music libraries via the wireless or choose from the bountiful soundgarden of the Web, then save your favorite stations to presets. Digital audio outputs (Toslink or SPDIF coaxial) allow you to preserve the binary purity of the signal, but there's also a peskily-recessed (not very accessible to the common L-plugs) 1/8" plug. The vacuum-fluorescent display is visible from across the room, and the unit may easily be mounted in an audio cabinet. I would have liked preset hot-buttons on the remote to quickly escape commercials. There are no buttons on the unit itself—to preserve its good looks—so don't lose the remote. \$150; www.rokulabs.com