



Slinkier and smarter than ever with an expanding range of software, your handheld PC can help you conduct business on the road or find your way around foreign parts while keeping you entertained with music and movie clips. Alex Katz uses his PDA to keep tabs on his work schedule too

Personal digital assistants have superseded diaries and Filofaxes as the best way to store all your personal information. The advantages are plentiful: no flipping through illegible scribbles for that client's all-important address. What's more, records are stored electronically so they can be updated and backed up to your desktop. And the integration between your PC's organiser software and the data on your PDA makes managing information easier and more efficient than it ever used to be.

But for many PDA users that's where the buck stops. They don't realise that the device they're holding in the palm of their hand is a pretty powerful miniature computer in its own right. Where early PDAs were limited in terms of functionality, modern devices are capable of much more – they can connect to the internet, run office software, read e-books and even play games.

There are mountains of PDA applications available as downloads from the web or from a

high street computer store. But where do you look? And what sort of software should you be looking for? Whether you're using your handheld device for business, pleasure or a mixture of the two, here's our guide to the best of what's available in the world of PDA software.

### Connections that get results

One of the main reasons for investing in a PDA is to have access to desk-bound information while on the road. Many modern handhelds have either built-in mobile phone technology, allowing you to directly dial up to the internet, or offer Bluetooth/infrared capabilities so you can link up the device to a compatible phone. But once your PDA is connected, how do you make the most of that link?

Most internet-enabled PDAs include the required software for standard tasks such as web or WAP browsing and accessing email, but by using third-party solutions it's possible to expand your PDA's functionality.

## Choosing a PDA

**P**alm once dominated the PDA market but the picture has changed significantly in recent years. Palm OS licensees have made considerable inroads by producing devices every bit as good as (and in some cases better than) Palm's.

Palm has recently acquired its original competitor, Handspring, but Sony's Clie range keeps going from strength to strength, combining classic Sony style with Palm's elegant operating system.

But Palm faces stiffer competition still from devices based on Microsoft's Pocket PC operating system. After a shaky start as Windows CE, Pocket PC is now a mature operating system in its own right and a wealth of big-name PC manufacturers and mobile phone companies are producing devices based on it.

It used to be quite simple to differentiate between the two major types of PDA but there is now a great deal of overlap between them. The latest Palm OS, version 5.0,

handles graphics with aplomb and is able to run on fast ARM-based processors, while the latest update to Pocket PC, Windows Mobile, adds ease-of-use and connectivity features alongside other enhancements.

Some users prefer Palm OS because it's very simple and intuitive; others favour Pocket PC because of its instantly familiar Windows look. But ultimately it comes down to a matter of personal choice. As we've seen, many of the major third-party applications support both platforms.

When you go to buy a PDA ask for demonstrations of both product families and see which one you feel more comfortable with. Keep in mind other important factors such as whether you need built-in Bluetooth or wireless networking, or perhaps having a built-in digital camera or MP3 player is important.

There are plenty of Palms and Pocket PCs with these features – the choice is yours.



People who regularly travel often have Hotmail accounts so they can access their email from anywhere. Greg Friege's Pocket Hotmail (available from [www.handango.com](http://www.handango.com)) gives Pocket PC users full access to their Hotmail account for \$5.



Alternatively take a look at OneMail (<http://net.worth.com.hk/onemail>), which

consolidates mail from Yahoo, MSN, Hotmail and even standard POP3 mail in a single application.



AOL customers can install a Palm version of the ISP's client. This allows you to access email, view AOL content and even send instant messages. As with the desktop software, a built-in database means you can get online with a local call anywhere in the world.



Of course not everyone wants to go to the trouble of hooking up their PDA to the internet while out and about, particularly given the exorbitant cost of data calls via mobile phones. However, it's possible to view web content on a PDA without using a live connection.

With AvantGo (<http://my.avantgo.com>) you sign up to your selection from a huge range of 'channels' – basically, websites optimised for viewing on a small screen. When you sync your PDA (assuming your PC is connected to the internet), all the latest content is downloaded from AvantGo and stored on your personal digital assistant for offline browsing. You can also use AvantGo for live browsing if your PDA is online.

## Get productive

Your PDA comes with all the essentials in terms of productivity software: a diary, an address book, memo pad and to-do list. Most models include additional packages such as document readers and notepads. But if you want to use the device as a genuine business tool, the chances are you'll find the supplied software limited in terms of functionality and flexibility.



If you want to get more out of your Palm's organiser functionality, take a look at Agendus ([www.iambic.com](http://www.iambic.com); \$24.95). This package uses your existing address book, diary and to-do list but integrates them into a unified display that makes full use of colour and high resolution screens. A toolbar provides quick access to common tasks such as switching between calendar views, opening lists and searching for items.

You can perform complex tasks normally only available in desktop organiser software such as linking contacts to appointments or viewing all previous information relating to a particular contact. A \$39.95 Professional edition with integrated email capabilities is also available.

If you like the sound of Agendus then Iambic's other apps may also appeal. AllTime is a \$39.95 tracking utility that captures time, expenses and autolog entries. These can be used later for billing, reimbursement or general tracking purposes. AllMoney, meanwhile, helps track your personal finances.



Another personal finance package, SplashMoney ([www.splashdata.com](http://www.splashdata.com)) synchronises your Palm data with desktop applications such as Microsoft Money and Excel. SplashMoney is available on its own or as part of the \$39.95 SplashWallet bundle. The bundle's other useful applications include SplashShopper, an electronic shopping list creator; SplashID, a security utility that keeps track of logins and passwords; and SplashPhoto, an image viewer and browser that is also available separately for Pocket PC devices.



Perhaps one of the most popular handheld applications is DataViz's excellent Documents To Go, which is effectively an office suite for your PDA. It originated as a simple document viewer so you could access your Word and Excel files on the move.

Over the years it has evolved into a fully fledged productivity suite with which you can edit existing documents and create new ones. Files are synchronised with

your desktop, so if you change any information on your Palm the updates are reflected in the original.

Documents To Go also supports PowerPoint presentations, Outlook email, PDF files and graphics. A limited edition of the suite is bundled with some Palm and Sony PDAs (which are based on the Palm OS). An upgrade to the full DataViz product costs \$29.95. For new users, it costs \$69.95.

## Get exploring

One of the beauties of having a device as portable as a PDA is you don't have to think twice about whether it's worth slipping into your briefcase or suitcase. It weighs so little, takes up next to no room and can prove invaluable when heading to pastures new. It can help you locate a hotel, plot distances between venues or towns and provides an easy introduction to the baffling local public transport infrastructure.

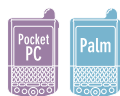


Residents and visitors to London alike will welcome Tube London ([www.visualit.co.uk](http://www.visualit.co.uk)). As its name suggests, Tube London is a full-colour scrollable PDA version of the London tube map. Enter the name of the station you're travelling to and the software plans your optimum route. The Pro version (£15.48, as opposed to £11.61 for the Standard edition) includes a corresponding street-level map. Visual IT also covers many other cities including Paris, New York and Hong Kong.



Keen travellers should take a look at ViaMichelin's Red Guide Europe ([www.pda.viamichelin.co.uk](http://www.pda.viamichelin.co.uk)). For \$39.99 you get a comprehensive guide to restaurants and hotels throughout western Europe. If space on your PDA is limited you can load information country by country. There's plenty of databases to choose from including UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Switzerland and Benelux.

Installing the whole lot will provide you with a list of over 10,000 venues. You can search by location, facilities, price and other criteria. The seriously culinarily conscious can even search by the number of Michelin stars an establishment has been awarded.



Once you've found your restaurant or hotel you'll need to know how to get there. TomTom RoutePlanner ([www.tomtom.com](http://www.tomtom.com)) is a journey planner that provides maps and directions between cities and towns throughout western Europe.

For even greater detail, TomTom's CityMaps provide street-level detail for the majority of major cities and towns across the continent. Individual maps for major cities can be purchased for \$14.99 while the CD-ROM (which features 240,000 cities and towns) costs \$59.95.

## Make an informed decision

PDAs aren't just a useful alternative to clutching a paperback or newspaper; they lend themselves equally well to reference materials. There's also a huge variety of applications for tracking and providing information about specific subject areas from sports, health and fitness to music and entertainment, plus topics related to specific jobs or hobbies.

Much information and reference software for PDAs comes in the form of e-books but you'll need to ensure you have the appropriate reader software installed. MobiPocket ([www.mobipocket.com](http://www.mobipocket.com)) and TealDoc ([www.tealpoint.com](http://www.tealpoint.com)) are two of the main ones worth downloading and you should also grab a copy of Acrobat Reader ([www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)). This will allow you to view standard PDF documents, a popular format for distribution of e-books.



A dictionary can be indispensable when you are travelling. Paragon Software's SlovoEd ([www.penreader.com](http://www.penreader.com); from \$14.95) is a multilingual dictionary range for both Palm and Pocket PC. It is available in a huge variety of language pairs, from the usual French and German to English right through to Swedish-Portuguese and Slovenian-Croatian. Even for non-travellers, a standard dictionary could come in handy.

➤ There are plenty of PDAs out there, all of which provide a mass of information and entertainment – whether you require directions or need to pass the time



## Software resources

Some PC stores stock a reasonable supply of the most popular PDA software, but the choice will inevitably be limited because it's impossible for them to carry even a tiny proportion of the vast number of applications available.

Without doubt the internet is the best place to find software for your PDA, but where should you look? The resources available vary depending on whether you've got a Palm- or a Pocket PC-based device, although many websites have complete lists of software for both platforms.

A good starting point is on the operating system developers' own sites. Both Palm (<http://software.palm.com/europe>) and Microsoft ([www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile](http://www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile) then follow the Downloads link) maintain extensive libraries of downloadable software. The products listed on these sites contain a mix of commercial, shareware and freeware offerings.

Similar independent resources are available online at Handango ([www.handango.com](http://www.handango.com)), which supports both the Pocket PC and Palm platforms as well as other PDA operating systems. Also head to PalmGear ([www.palmgear.com](http://www.palmgear.com)) and PalmSource ([www.palmsource.com](http://www.palmsource.com))

for Palm OS products and PocketGear ([www.pocketgear.com](http://www.pocketgear.com)) for Pocket PC software.

While it can be reassuring to buy software from a commercial developer, do not discount the shareware products. Because of the nature of the PDA market, many of the best applications are developed by smaller outfits. Most of the web's major shareware websites such as CNet Shareware (<http://shareware.cnet.com>) have links to just about every title imaginable.

If you're thinking about downloading software that you haven't heard of, it's a good idea to get it from a site which offers user reviews. This way you can tell whether the application does what you want it to before you go to the trouble of downloading it.

As with PC software, not all PDA applications work as they're supposed to and they can have compatibility issues or cause data corruption.

For further details, most products are also available from the developer's own website. Don't be afraid to send the company an email with any questions you may have about its software.



↑ Plan your travels using Visual IT. Enter the name of the station you're travelling to and the software plans your optimum route



Perhaps you'd rather stick to a dictionary in a language with which you're more familiar. MobiPocket offers an electronic version of the Pocket Oxford English Dictionary as well as other Oxford University Press publications. Each book costs around \$20 and you'll also need to install a copy of the MobiPocket e-book reader.



Keyoe's Diet & Exercise Assistant ([www.keyoe.com](http://www.keyoe.com); \$19.95) allows you to manage your daily nutrition, exercise and health. You can establish a weight loss program, track your daily calorie intake, automatically convert food servings to standard units and create exercise programs.



If you're more interested in what you're putting in your mouth than the effect it will have on your waistline, you'll savour Landware's Wine Enthusiast Guide 2003 ([www.landware.com](http://www.landware.com)). This gives you instant access to up-to-date details, reviews, ratings and retail prices for over 10,000 wines worldwide. There are 21 optionally installable lessons on wine appreciation and a glossary of 1,400 winemaking and wine-tasting terms.



Film buffs should take a look at MovieMentor ([www.moviementor.com](http://www.moviementor.com); \$11.95 annual subscription) a database of the top 2,000 movies that's updated weekly. Each movie is rated and you also get crew and cast information plus a plot summary.

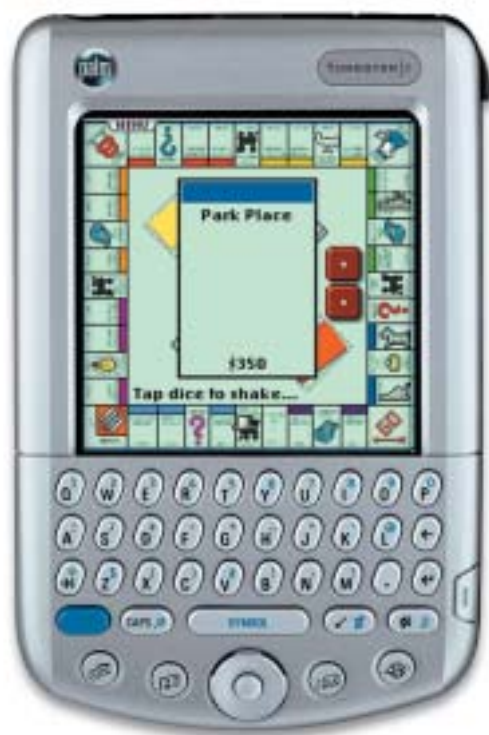
The database is fully searchable so you can look up information about a particular film before you rent it or just keep track of your favourites flicks.

### At your leisure

No handheld device is complete until it's fully loaded with releases from the most important software category: games! There are literally hundreds of PDA leisure titles to choose from, with programs ranging from classic shoot-'em-ups to old favourites like solitaire.

Modern personal digital assistant technology means that today's devices are capable of handling full-blown arcade-style games. Don't get too excited – you're not going to experience the kind of graphics and performance that you would on a console or PC. But you can enjoy the sorts of titles that would have pushed your desktop system to its limit only a few years ago.

↓ While away the hours with classic games like Monopoly or manage your photos with an image viewer such as SplashPhoto



Zio Interactive ([www.ziointeractive.com](http://www.ziointeractive.com)) produces a wide range of PDA conversions of popular desktop titles such as SimCity 2000, Age of Empires, Fifa 2002 and Tiger Woods' PGA Tour Golf.



You don't need all-singing, all-dancing games to while away the hours. Indeed, you may feel it's not worth trying to play action-packed roleplay games on such a small screen. You'll find plenty of classic titles, available for download from the internet, which are perfectly suited to this sort of device.

Our personal favourite is the absurdly addictive Monopoly ([www.handmark.com](http://www.handmark.com); \$29.99). It translates surprisingly well to the small screen where you pit your financial and property buying wits against the computer. Note, though, that it uses original US street names. Handmark also makes an excellent pocket version of Scrabble.



Other classics for Palm OS users include backgammon, chess and arcade conversions such as Lode Runner, Defender and Joust. There's a huge variety of even simpler games and some of these are

enormous fun. For example, Shanghai Pocket Essentials ([www.landware.com](http://www.landware.com)) brings the classic Mah Jongg-style tile matching game to the small screen.



With an unfeasible number of solitaire games available, it's hard choosing between them all. Try Standalone's Solitaire Pack for Palm OS ([www.standalone.com](http://www.standalone.com)) and Multi-User Dimensions' Pocket Solitaire ([www.mud.ca](http://www.mud.ca)). If card games are more your thing, Purple Software's Omar Sharif Bridge and Casdra Software's Cribbage Partner ([www.purplesoftware.com](http://www.purplesoftware.com)) could be right up your street.



Of course, no section on PDA gaming would be complete without mentioning Tetris. There are many variations of the title, but Handmark's Tetris Classic is one of the most faithful we could find for Palm OS. NENworks' ([www.nenworks.com](http://www.nenworks.com)) Pocket Tetris is a nice version for Pocket PC. If you find it hard to justify spending money on games for your personal digital assistant, there are also plenty of freeware products available.

One of the best examples is the legendary classic game Lemmings, a full version of which is available for free from [www.ardiri.com](http://www.ardiri.com).



See the cover disc for trials of many of the PDA packages mentioned in this article, plus links to download sites

## Expand your horizons

We've only scratched the surface of PDA software over the last few pages, looking at some of the best packages available within a handful of categories. So if you're looking for an application that does something we haven't mentioned it doesn't mean it's not available.

A quick look on the internet will give you an idea of the huge quantity of products available, many of which have been created for particular areas of business and industry. Handango.com, for example, has project management and teachers' lesson planning apps while other sites offer database tools and security software. You'll also find plenty of solutions for the medical, aviation and legal professions.

It's possible that your PDA will do everything you need it to do straight out of the box. But next time you're using your PDA to look up an address, just think how much else you could be doing. ■