

● CONVERTIBLE TABLET PC

HP Compaq tc4200

PRICE £999 (£1,174 inc VAT)

DELIVERY Depends on reseller

SUPPLIER HP 0845 270 4215

INTERNET www.hp.co.uk

VERDICT A little heavy to carry round in slate mode for long, but a decent keyboard, great battery life and low price make this the best-value tablet PC we've yet seen.

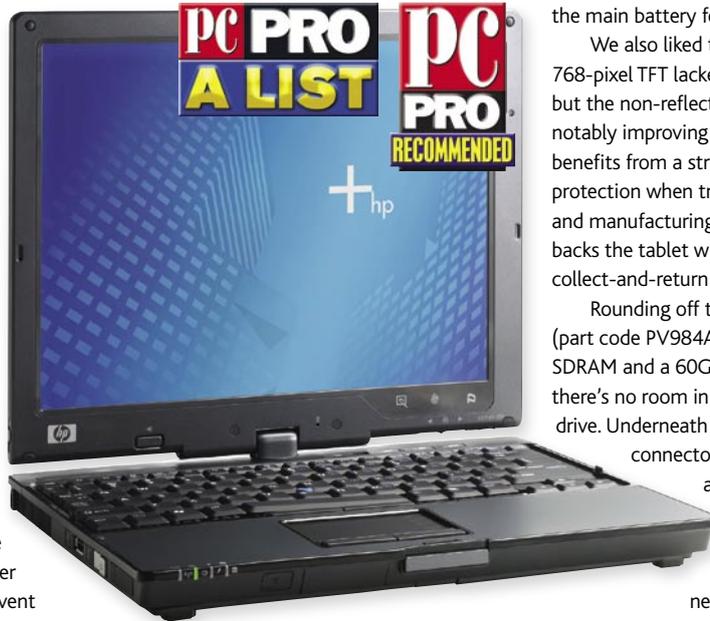
The tablet PC market is heating up, with HP and IBM (under ThinkPad's new owner Lenovo) stepping into the fray with new models this summer. We'll have to wait a couple of months for the Lenovo, but HP's Compaq tc4200 is available now.

It's essentially the Compaq nc4200 notebook with a twist screen, which will suit large companies deploying a mix of notebooks and tablets. But convertibles bring both advantages and disadvantages. Typically more powerful than slates, they also benefit from a keyboard for desktop use. However, they're often heavier, and the single screen hinge is a mechanical weak point.

Hinge movement in the tc4200 is smooth, although the screen is free to move from side-to-side and HP hasn't added rubber stoppers at the corners of the chassis to prevent this. It lets the display lie closer to the base section in tablet mode, at the risk of stressing the hinge in notebook mode if handled roughly.

A clever mechanism holds the screen shut whether in tablet or notebook form. A magnet pulls the catch from the base as the lid closes, so there's nothing to snag when it's open. This doesn't provide much mechanical strength, but plastic lugs either side of the keyboard, with matching recesses in the lid, help to secure it.

The longer we used the keyboard the more we liked it. The spill-resistant board is firmly



Battery life breaks the magic five-hour figure.

supported underneath, eliminating bounce, and the keys have a quality feel. HP has trimmed down some key sizes, but thankfully it's restricted to lesser-used keys such as backslash and the number '1' key, leaving normal typing unaffected.

There's also a trackpoint to complement the touchpad, but the latter's mouse buttons travel too far below the surrounding palmrest to be easily triggered with a thumb, so we tended to rely on the trackpoint instead. Handy volume controls lie above the keyboard, although we'd prefer a thumbwheel on the side that could be used in slate mode as well.

In slate mode, you pop the rather ordinary stylus out using a button in the display's bezel, which prevents accidental release when the lid's closed. Also on the bezel is an ambient light sensor and three symbols that can be activated with the stylus: screen rotation; the writing pane; and the Q menu, which controls a variety of hardware settings. Pen calibration is precise and, when carefully adjusted, doesn't suffer any significant misalignment, even at the screen's outer edges. There's a handy jog dial too, for scrolling through slide shows or large documents.

However, it's in slate mode that the convertible's weight disadvantage is noticeable. For a notebook, 2.1kg is admirable, but it starts to feel heavy after a short time. When looking

under the bonnet, though, we see one of the convertible advantages. There's a 1.86GHz Intel Pentium M 750 inside, giving a good level of standard notebook power, and the latest 915GM Express chipset too. Our benchmarks recorded 1.75, proving there's no compromise on performance – and battery life is just as good, with the tc4200 powering on for five hours, 32 minutes under a light load with the screen dimmed. HP also sells a clip-on travel battery (£103 exc VAT) that you can run in parallel with the main battery for day trips from the office.

We also liked the screen. The 12.1in 1,024 x 768-pixel TFT lacked brightness at the top end, but the non-reflective coating is effective, notably improving readability. The screen also benefits from a strong backing inside the lid for protection when travelling. The general design and manufacturing standard is high, and HP backs the tablet with a reassuring three-year collect-and-return warranty.

Rounding off the specifications, our tc4200 (part code PV984AW) had 512MB of DDR2 SDRAM and a 60GB 5,400rpm hard disk, but there's no room in this chassis for an optical drive. Underneath you'll find a docking

connector, which is one obvious way to add an optical drive to your setup – just note that a docking station costs £105 (exc VAT) and you'll then need to buy a MultiBay drive to

slip into it. A DVD-ROM/CD-RW combo drive, for example, costs £149 (exc VAT).

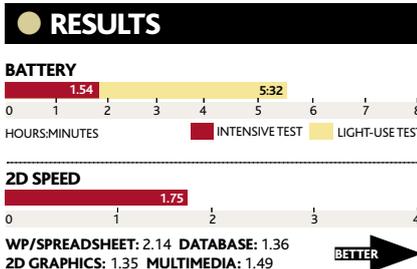
The tablet's ports include three USB 2 connections, a Type II PC card slot and SD card reader, but no FireWire. Bluetooth and 802.11b/g provide wireless connections. Security can be enhanced with the optional TPM (trusted platform module) chip, and HP's Credential Manager software encrypts and manages passwords and network accounts, and provides single sign on (SSO).

The layout, features and battery life make the tc4200 usable in both formats, and it represents good value for money. As a slate, it doesn't match Motion Computing's LE1600 (see issue 130, p68), and it's a bit heavy for extended use in this mode. But if you want unrestricted power and an integrated keyboard, the tc4200 is an excellent candidate.

ROGER KIRKWOOD



A slate tablet with all the performance of a notebook.



PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS 1.86GHz Pentium M 750; 512MB PC3200 DDR2-SDRAM; 60GB Toshiba MK6026GAX hard disk; Intel GMA900 Express graphics; 12.1in 1,024 x 768 TFT; 56K modem; Gigabit Ethernet; Bluetooth; 802.11b/g WLAN; infrared; 3 x USB 2; SD card slot; Type I/II PC Card slot; VGA out; S-Video out; Windows XP Tablet PC Edition; 3yrs C&R warranty. Dimensions: 285 x 246 x 39mm (WDH). Weight: 2.12kg. Part code: PV984AW.