



● VALUE NOTEBOOK

EXCLUSIVE

Acer TravelMate 2403WXCi

PRICE £455 (£535 inc VAT)

DELIVERY £7 (£8 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com

INTERNET www.acer.co.uk

VERDICT From the solid construction to the decent performance, this budget notebook packs in great quality and tremendous value.

Budget notebooks often stand out from the rest: they're the chunky plastic ones, generally belching out noise and approaching the size of a briefcase. Not so in the case of the TravelMate 2403WXCi; on looks alone, the svelte silver and black chassis could belong to a machine costing three times as much.

Pick it up and you'll find it marginally heavier than expected, but at 2.38kg you won't dread lugging it around. And, even forgetting about the price, it's impressively well constructed – hold it with one hand and you'll find a little give in the chassis, but it feels more planned than mere flimsiness; sit it on a desk and start typing and it feels rock solid.

Glancing through the relatively modest specifications, the principle compromise is Intel's budget Celeron M mobile processor – to all intents and purposes a slimmed-down Pentium M. It retains the Execute Disable Bit support, but there's half the Level 2 cache (1MB) and a slower 400MHz front side bus, which reduces the speed the processor can communicate with main memory. The most significant omission, though, is Enhanced SpeedStep, meaning the CPU runs at 1.5GHz no matter what. Nonetheless, we still saw reasonable light-use longevity from the 4000mAh battery. Three hours, 18 minutes is enough for catching up with a bit of work on the train, although it won't see you through the day.

Performance wise, there were no major complaints, with our benchmarks returning an overall score of 0.54 – still more than adequate for word processing, email and Internet browsing. That's with only 256MB of RAM installed too, up to 128MB of which can be shared with the Intel



With a solid construction and a gently curved keyboard, the TravelMate feels as good as it looks.

GMA 950 integrated graphics. Doubling or even quadrupling the system RAM would be a wise and reasonably inexpensive move, although you'll need to dump the existing module that sits in one of the two slots. As it is, you'll still need to avoid having too many apps open at once to keep the system responsive. Our strenuous multiple-application test took nearly 37 minutes to complete, compared to around ten minutes for a typical high-end desktop machine.

In day-to-day use, though, there's little about the TravelMate that will leave you wanting more. The 14.1in widescreen TFT not only lends the machine an eminently portable form factor, but also runs at a sensible 1,280 x 800 pixel resolution. The increase over the more standard 1,024 x 768 of most budget offerings is tangible, with the extra screen real-estate becoming useful in both office and creative applications alike. It's also bright, crisply defined and has viewing angles that tread just the right line between clarity and privacy.

We were even pleasantly surprised by the keyboard – an area where the quality usually slips in a budget notebook – with the gently curved rows make typing generally a pleasant affair. The problems come when you start using non-alphanumeric keys. With Backspace and Delete being crammed in with the page-navigation keys, the chances are that you'll

frequently end up randomly hopping around a document or accidentally deleting the occasional letter. But there's a separate cursor group, generally well-sized keys and a quiet action. The touchpad is surprisingly responsive too, and even the mouse buttons have a pleasing solidity to them.

While the price and specification make the 2403WXCi a reasonable business option, the company doesn't have quite the pedigree of corporate security and support as HP, Dell or Lenovo. There's no Trusted Platform Module or fingerprint reader, although Acer's

Empowering Technology suite does encompass system backup and recovery, as well as power management, in a comprehensive and easy-to-use manner. More expensive models in the 2400 range include access security and hardware-based file-encryption options, although these are lacking on the 2403WXCi. Also of note is Acer's GridVista software, which divides the Desktop into several discrete zones, allowing you to lock windows into them – a far easier way of managing multiple applications than the usual shuffling.

Rounding off the specifications, there's 802.11b/g LAN, controlled by a sturdy orange-backlit switch on the front (the Bluetooth switch next to it isn't functional on this model), plus wired 10/100 Ethernet and a 56K modem. The back is home to just the power input and a single USB port, while a further two USB ports, a Type II PC Card and VGA D-SUB output are housed on the left-hand side. It's not an exhaustive showing – there are no parallel, serial or FireWire ports for a start – but unless you can't live without them it's certainly no deal breaker at this price. Similarly, while we're spoiled with dual-layer DVD writers and 100GB hard disks these days, the TravelMate's CD-RW/DVD-ROM combo optical drive and 40GB of disk space are perfectly practical.

So the TravelMate ticks just about all the right boxes for a machine at this price. It may not have the extravagance, power or sheer wow factor of more costly machines, but it's more than capable of coping with daily use in most situations. Given all that, you're getting a tremendous amount for your money, and the TravelMate takes a well-deserved spot on the A List as our value notebook of choice.

ROSS BURRIDGE



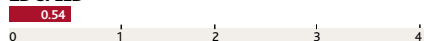
With side-mounted expansion ports, you won't have to scabble behind the screen to plug in peripherals.

● RESULTS

BATTERY



2D SPEED



OFFICE: 0.58 2D GRAPHICS: 0.66

ENCODING: 0.56 MULTITASKING: 0.34



An explanation of our new benchmarks can be found on the cover disc.

PC PRO RATINGS

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

SPECIFICATIONS 1.5GHz Celeron M 370; 256MB PC2700 DDR 2 RAM; 40GB hard disk; Matsushita UJDA770 combo drive; Intel GMA 900 integrated graphics; 14.1in 1,280 x 800 TFT; V.92 modem; 10/100 Ethernet; 802.11b/g WLAN; 3 x USB 2; Type II PC Card slot; VGA out; Windows XP Home; 1yr international C&R warranty. Dimensions: 335 x 240 x 32mm (WDH). Weight: 2.38kg. Part code: LX.TA905.032.