

Review: iPhone 11: Great camera, long battery, but not a must-buy

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Expectations for the latest iPhones are almost always impossibly high—except when they're not.

The narrative leading into Apple's unveiling last week of the iPhone 11, iPhone 11 Pro and iPhone 11 Pro Max was more measured than usual, with the expectation that the phones would only receive marginal improvements and might even come across as a bit boring.

I've had a week testing the new iPhones to come to a conclusion, and while not all the answers are clear cut, these are the best iPhones Apple has engineered. But whether you should rush out to buy one still mostly depends—on your budget and how long it's been since you last upgraded your phone.

The iPhone 11 starts at \$699, a fair price for a solid new iPhone and probably the best choice for buyers who don't need or want to pay at minimum a \$300 premium for the extra [camera](#) and longer [battery life](#) that comes with the Pros.

Here's a closer look at my experience:

What's to like about iPhone 11

Multiple cameras: Smartphone cameras of recent vintage (and in the premium class) have ranged from very good to excellent, something to keep in mind when you consider the improvements Apple makes with the 11. Yes, the cameras in all of the new iPhones are good—really good, in fact—producing true-to-life colors in all kinds of light, at least in many of my shots. But what you have may still be good enough.

The iPhone 11, which is the smartest way to go for many mainstream iPhone buyers, has two rear cameras, dual wide and ultra-wide, the latter letting you capture that much more of a stunning landscape.

The 11 Pros add a third telephoto camera for closeups. Multiple cameras let you shoot from any of these vantage points without having to move

your body.

You also have multiple options in portrait mode, where you can artistically blur the background while focusing on a main subject or in the case of a wide lens, multiple subjects.

I also like that you can capture an area "outside the frame" of the photo or video you've shot, visible through a new interface. This gives you a chance to make adjustments to the way these are composed after the fact. If you're worried about taking up extra space on the phone with this unused material, what you've captured outside the frame is automatically deleted after 30 days, if you haven't used it within that time.

Now the reality check: Apple is hardly the first phone maker to offer three rear cameras: among others, Samsung's rival flagship, the S10, also has rear ultra-wide, wide and telephoto lenses.

Plus, the slightly elevated bump housing the three cameras on the 11 Pros, may turn off some people. For what it's worth, my teenage daughter thought it was "ugly," though in the same breath she said she wanted me to buy her the new phone.

What the design of the three cameras oddly reminded me of were the heads on a Norelco electric razor.

Night mode: Sticking to photography, this will be the killer feature for many of you, and it is available on all of the 11s and 11 Pros. As the name of the feature suggests, Night mode lets you capture great—or, in my experience, at least perfectly acceptable—photos in dim light, without having to fire up a flash. I appreciate that using machine learning, Night mode kicks in automatically; you don't have to make a calculated decision of when to turn it on. It also determines whether shooting with a flash is a better option.

On Google's Pixel phones, which have had a similar (and impressive) feature for awhile now, require you to manually turn on the feature.

On the iPhones, you'll see a moon icon in the upper left corner of the display revealing how many seconds—one, two or three—you need to hold the phone still. But Night mode can also detect when the phone is on a tripod; in that case it can take up to 28 seconds.

Night mode—which takes advantage of the wide sensor but doesn't work when you're shooting a telephoto—essentially grabs multiple images and fuses them together for the promise of a brighter image and fewer imperfections.

Slofies are a thing: "Slofies," what Apple is calling slow-motion selfie videos, are definitely a thing. I don't know about their long-term appeal, but the bet here is this will be one of the first things you'll try to do with the new phones. The feature is a bit goofy but fun, and they'll potentially forever change the way you use a fan or hair dryer.

Battery life: By now, you've likely seen the bold claims from Apple: that the iPhone 11 Pro and 11 Pro Max can deliver battery life up to four and five hours longer than their immediate predecessors, and the iPhone 11 an hour longer than the iPhone XR it nominally replaces.

Battery life is something to watch over time, but the early, unscientific indicators are extremely positive.

Now, while I haven't done any formal battery benchmarking, I did informally monitor the battery indicator in the upper right corner of the display on both the 11 and the 11 Max Pro that I tested, and I wasn't lacking for juice or end up desperately searching for an outlet all day and well into the evening, even after watching a full-length Hollywood movie on a cross-country flight.

As before, the phone has wireless charging and fast charging with the proper adapter, which is included with the Pros.

Bump up in specs: Apple will tell you that the A13 Bionic chip inside all of the iPhone 11s is the fastest CPU and GPU (for graphics) in a smartphone. That's not always an easy thing to gauge for a user. What I can report is the phones felt snappy and the displays—5.8 and 6.5 inches on the Pros, 6.1 inches on the 11—looked sweet.

The new phones also support Wi-Fi 6, the emerging new version of wireless that promises to eventually deliver faster downloads. You may not see this immediately, but, under the hood, you'll be glad the capability is there.

Improved Face ID: With an assist from iOS 13, Apple's facial recognition authentication system Face ID is faster and works from a wider angle. I was able to get past the lock screen with my mug even when the phone lay on a table or when I approached the screen from a bit of a distance and not quite face-on.

iOS 13: Now, iOS 13 brings benefits to all iPhones dating back to 2015's 6S and 6S Plus models. So Apple's new mobile operating system is not reason enough to upgrade to any of the 11s. But I'd be remiss to not mention that iOS 13 brings a host of big and small improvements, and you'll see them on the new devices, ranging from a more informative dashboard display in CarPlay and swipe-able "QuickPath" keyboard to the ability to automatically dispatch robo-callers to voicemail.

I can certainly recommend any of the new iPhones 11s, especially if your current phone is showing signs of fatigue. The cameras in the 11s are likely better than what you have, as is the precious resource we all need, battery life.

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