

Review: Meet the best budget phone with premium features, Google Pixel 4A

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Google has been selling the Pixel phones since 2016, to little fanfare. But what would have happened had it launched back then with the Pixel 4A, the new phone set to debut on Aug. 20?

My prediction: It would have sold millions and millions of what I believe

is clearly the best budget phone out there, by far, selling for \$349, with a 5.8-inch screen and a generous 128 gigabytes of storage.

I could actually go even further. This phone is so good, it's a rival to take on the big \$1,000 guns like the Apple iPhone 11 Pro or Samsung Galaxy S20.

I've been playing with the new Pixel 4A for several days, and it's fair to say I'm in love with the beautiful screen, the only-for-Pixel-users features like instant captions of videos and transcripts of audio recordings and the excellent camera. The only negative: a lower-performing battery that got me only about five hours of screen time, despite Google's boast that it's an all-day battery. (It may, indeed, be, if you keep your brightness way down, don't watch any video, and let the screen go dark as much as possible. That's not how I use phones.)

The Pixel line was designed to be a state-of-the-art showcase for Google to show off the best of Android in a phone under the Made by Google line, but the company hasn't been consistent in its marketing.

Consumers will surely be confused if they walk into a store and compare the last Pixel, the 4, released in October, to what is supposed to be the smaller, cheaper cousin, the 4A.

The 4 (\$799) also has a 5.7-inch screen and comes with 64 GB of storage, to the 5.8-inch 4A (\$349) with 128 GB of storage. Got that?

The 4 does have geeky features you can't find on the 4A, like motion sense, which lets you operate the phone with a wave of the hand and two camera lenses, instead of one.

At a time when top-of-the-line iPhones and Samsung Galaxy phones sell for considerably more than \$1,000, it may be a great opportunity, more

now than ever, to ponder what you can get for less.

The revived iPhone SE (\$399) was released in April and was a major contributor to Apple's record-breaking recent quarterly earnings, according to the company.

But the 4A dwarfs the SE in every category except for photo management—more on that in the camera section below. It has a bigger screen (5.8 inches versus 4.7 inches) a way more full-featured camera, more storage (128 GB versus 64 GB) and audio and caption features that are extraordinary and unique to the Pixel brand.

These are the Pixel 4A standouts:

Captions

Touch the volume button while you're watching a YouTube video, listening to a podcast or playing back a video you've just recorded, and audio captions, in real-time, begin playing. And in my tests, they seemed about 99% accurate. What's new on this Pixel: captions for your voice or video calls, in real-time. However, you can't save the transcripts.

Audio transcriptions

For my entire journalism career, there's one thing I've wanted more than anything else. The ability to have my interviews transcribed—without having to do it myself. The Pixel 4A doesn't do it perfectly, and it has to be done in real-time, but the process works. And saves me at least an hour, if not more, of transcribing agony.

Caveats: This has to be done through Google's voice recorder app (which has excellent sound, by the way) where there is a transcript button to

click as you record. And it records the text as one long dialogue, without specifying who is doing the talking, and there's no punctuation; but trust me, I'm not complaining. It's better than my note-taking. This feature is available on the Pixel 4 as well, but you won't find it on an iPhone or Samsung Galaxy—not yet.

Camera

The iPhone SE camera has one lens and the usual collection of Apple goodies: Portrait mode, to blur the background, time-lapse, slow motion and stellar video. The 4A goes even further, with Portrait, time-lapse and slow-mo, plus Night Sight—the ability to shoot in ultra-low light, to the point where you can actually photograph stars and such in the skies. In my tests, this worked really nicely. (But you'll need either a tripod or to mount the phone steady against a book or a rock, to make this work.)

With the one lens, you can't use optical zoom to get closer to the subject, but instead digital zoom, which basically just crops the image. Most digital zoom use cases are generally awful. Here's an example of Jinx the cat, at 7X zoom, where Google uses "computational" photography to basically capture several images, and combine them for a higher resolution version. I think the results here are acceptable—but I miss the second lens. (But at \$349, I can live with one.)

For video, the footage just isn't as sharp and crisp as stuff I've done on an iPhone. And for photo management, Android phones just can't compare to Apple's iOS, which uses the "AirDrop" feature to send via Bluetooth, sans wires, from phone to device. On Android, photos by default go to Google Photos, which is generally good, but lowers the resolution of your photos unless you pay Google a fee. Your alternative is connecting your [phone](#) to the computer with a cable and transferring them that way.

(Samsung Galaxy users, which shares Google's Android operating system, has its answer to AirDrop, Quick Share, which also moves photos around via bluetooth.)

Google is set to release a 5G version of the 4A, for use on the new high-speed wireless networks for \$499, and a successor to the 4, the Pixel 5, which will also be available in 5G. Google hasn't announced pricing, or specific availability, just that both will be available in "the fall."

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