

Samsung Galaxy S21 smartphones: Will upgraded and cheaper Android get iPhone users to switch?

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Samsung Galaxy S21 5G (left) and Galaxy S21 Plus 5G (right). Credit: Samsung

The lower prices for Samsung's new Galaxy S21 phones may be the biggest feature to help the device maker defend its lead in the smartphone wars.

Each arrives at a starting price \$200 below its predecessor in the S20 line. But the look, feel and improved features of the S21 models may drive Android users to upgrade and perhaps even get some folks to consider switching from Team iPhone.

Let's start with price: The S21 starts at \$799.99; the S21+ starts at \$999.99; and the S21 Ultra, which for the first time gets S Pen support, starts at \$1,199.99. All S21 models offer 5G wireless.

Of course, if you have a trade-in, you don't necessarily need to pay that full price. With Samsung's limited offer you can get the Galaxy S21 for as low as \$4.17 a month, the S21+ for \$8.34 a month and the S21 Ultra for \$13.89 a month (with an eligible trade-in value up to \$700 on Samsung.com).

T-Mobile has a promotion earning you a free Galaxy S21 with a trade-in and up to \$800 for trade-ins on the other new S21 models. AT&T is offering up to \$800 off with a device trade-in and Verizon is offering up to \$750.

If you are due for a trade-in, you will likely be coveting one of these new Galaxy devices.

Samsung S21 phones: The look

The 6.2-inch AMOLED 2X Full HD+ 120 Hz display on the new Phantom Violet-colored S21 that Samsung lent to me sports dynamic refresh rates, which makes flipping through Twitter, for instance, and between apps super smooth. The S21+ has a similar but larger display at 6.7 inches.

But the Phantom Black S21 Ultra—a smartphone that Darth Vader might wield—boasts a 6.8-inch AMOLED QHD+ 120 Hz display that

boosts resolution up to 4K quality.

The displays are beautiful and certainly compare favorably to the iPhone competition. Compared to the iPhone 12 Pro, the S21 looks just as crisp watching an NFL Network broadcast and the same football action—and a Washington Capitals game—appear almost 3-D on the S21 Ultra.

What Samsung Galaxy S21 phones don't have

Often we focus on what the shiny, sleek new phones feature, but also important to users is what they're missing. In this case, Samsung is following Apple's playbook in ditching the earbuds and plug-in charging brick from the box, including only a USB cable to charge the [phone](#). The 3.5 mm headphone jack was axed in the S20 and—sorry to the headphone hold-outs—it makes no miraculous return in the S21. All that comes in the box is the phone, a USB C-to-USB C data cable and the ejection pin.

One of the selling points for Samsung Galaxy phones has been their expandability. This iteration cuts that out, losing the microSD card slot and with it the ability to add on-board storage. While all base S21 models come with 128GB of storage, that seems an unfortunate feature to lose as the phone gains an additional camera and more functionality that will prompt users to shoot more images and 8K videos, the biggest storage hogs.

Also gone is some of the RAM its predecessor had standard, leaving the S21 with only 8 gigabytes, or 4GB less than the S20. And the backing has gone from Gorilla Glass, which encased the entire S20, to reinforced plastic on the S21. As a result, the S21 doesn't feel quite as sturdy as the S21 Ultra.

But it's the Samsung Galaxy cameras, stupid.

Shutterbugs who rely on their smartphone for photos and videos will love the phones, especially the top-of-the-line S21 Ultra, Samsung's first with five cameras.

That's right, there's one for the front and four on the back, including a dual telephoto lens that captures up to 100X Space Zoom. I especially liked the ability to actually take a picture of the moon at night using its Zoom Lock for a more stable image. Wish I had this for last year's Super Moon. But there are more coming in 2021, with the first in March, according to Space.com.

The S21 and S21+ top out at 30X Space Zoom.

All the phones have an improved Portrait Mode that lets you add blur, studio lighting and other effects. It was as easy to use as iPhone's Portrait mode, with a few more ways to tweak the image.

Also really cool is the Director's View, which shows you multiple angles while shooting video and lets you choose the one you prefer. You can also opt for what Samsung calls a Vlogger view, which records a selfie point of view at the same time as what is happening in front of you. It's a feature that could come in handy for unboxing videos and other uses by online influencers.

And if you love taking photos of your kids or pets—and they don't like to pose for you—there's an 8K video mode that lets you shoot a video clip and then when you are done grab the best individual image for a full high-res photo.

Another returning feature from the Galaxy S20 line, which came out in February 2020, is the Single Take feature that captures 10 seconds of

imagery, you are asked to move your camera a bit to get slightly different angles. Then you can choose the best pictures or short video clips afterwards.

Another reason to love the S21 Ultra: it supports the S Pen, which I did not test and are sold separately. There's one made for the S21 Ultra (\$39.99) and you can also use third-party S Pens and those made for Note devices.

The smartphone wars tighten

As for the smartphone competition, Samsung took the lead in the U.S. market from Apple in the third quarter of 2020, increasing its share to 34%, compared to Apple's 30%, according to Strategy Analytics.

Even though Apple had a record-setting October-December 2020 quarter—with iPhone revenue hitting an all-time quarterly high of \$65.6 billion—it will still fall short of Android phones' dominance in the U.S., eMarketer estimates. During 2021, Android will command 54% of smartphone users, while Apple gets 46%.

Samsung expects its new wave of smartphones will further its dominance of the Android competition, too.

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