Time Machine: Sharp Actius A150 Ultra Light Notebook

John Oswald

Every month we delve into the PC Update archive to take a look at what computing was like in the past...this month, a laptop review from July 1999.

I have always wanted a portable computer, or at least since the early days of computing. I remember lugging my computer components to a meeting of the Ballarat SIG many years ago. There had to be a better way.

As portables became laptops and as laptops eventually led to palmtops, I enthused that the time for a purchase was imminent. However, people were still lugging portables around in one case, with their other needs in a separate case. This, of course, meant that they would be well balanced, a heavy weight on each side. The desirable ones were also all very expensive.

So I considered what I needed, and waited till the right machine came along. I wanted:

A lightweight inexpensive machine
A good screen
Good life battery
A sizeable hard disk
State-of-the-art Windows (98) with fairly universal connectivity.

The tiny Toshiba Libretto appealed, but the keyboard was too small, and the screen pedestrian and compact.

I did not want to carry around a heavy external power source, or a

Floppy disk Large keyboard
Mouse
CD-ROM
Multimedia paraphernalia
Printer.

But I would want them to be available on my desk at home.

So I was delighted when I read that Sharp had released its new ultra-light notebook, the Actius A150. It is only the size of an A4 sheet of paper, and 21.2 mm thick (for those of you who are wedded to American technology, that is less than one inch!). It was the star of the USA autumn (Fall) Comdex and won the PC Magazine Editors' Choice Award, January 1999. It weighs only 1.4 kg! The price, under $4,000!

It had:

A 266 MHz Pentium Processor
64 MB of EDO RAM
2 MB video RAM
A 4.3 GB hard disk
A 28.7 cm (11.3 inches) SVGA (800 x 600 dots) TFT LCD with High Aperture technology, which provides a 250:1 contrast ratio (2.5 times higher than the average notebook PC). An unbelievable screen
A very usable keyboard, with a beautiful feel

A built-in 56 kbps modem, and a high-speed infrared port
A great glide pad to control the mouse
A PCMCIA2 slot for a network card and a USB port
A built-in battery with a 2.5 hour life, and a lightweight, small external power source
An infra-red port
Multimedia capability.

It also has, as an external port replicator, a floppy disk device, which in turn can be connected to keyboard/ mouse, and printer. An external CD-ROM and a long life (eight hour) external battery were also available.

It has a video port at the back, so if I need to do a PowerPoint presentation, it is just a matter of plugging in the cable.

The computer fits in one half of my satchel, leaving plenty of room for other papers and paraphernalia. It has a case made from wetsuit material, but even in this jacket it is only the size of a small handbag.

Everywhere I take the Sharp, people want to talk about it. It is impressive, from its compactness, to its brilliant screen, to its magnesium alloy case.

So what else could I ask for? Perhaps the port replicator could be more convenient, constructed as a base plate, with the floppy, CD-ROM, printer, screen and power source connections, with a bayonet lock to secure the Actius as a top layer. Perhaps more user-friendly power management tools, and instantaneous boot up, but that might be up to Microsoft.

The next model was scheduled for release in the USA on 4 June. The Actius 250, has a 300 MHz chip, a built-in 10Base-T and a 100Base-TX LAN port, and a bigger hard disk. The retail price of the new machine is under US$2,500. So how long can you wait before you plunge in? I will be happy with my Sharp for a long time to come.