Test Drive Report for Asus MyPal A730

Foreword

As the flagship Pocket PC from ASUS, what does the A730 bring to the table? It sports an Intel PXA 270 handheld computer processor, VGA screen resolution, 1.3 megapixel camera, and Windows Mobile 2003 Second Edition for Pocket PC OS.

Externals

Though the A730's 3.7" VGA screen puts it over the H1940 in terms of size, it is far slimmer than previous MyPal ever were. Dimensions are 4.65 x 2.85 x 0.66 inch, having gained in length, but losing a lot front-to-back. 163g seems a bit heavy at first, but it is in fact nothing for a high-end professional handheld.

The sheer number of features crammed into the A730 means that there are going to be interfaces and buttons/keys sprouting up all over the place, but rest assured, they are all kept in good order. Located below the screen are four standard Pocket PC keys (custom assignable), and a 9-way navigator.

On the left is a rear cover lock, which comes in especially handy because you don't want the replaceable batteries coming out should you slide the cover open by accident. On the right are the indispensable power on and audio record buttons. Though the placement of the power button is original, we didn't feel inconvenienced at all during our tests. Up on top you will find the requisite microphone jack, well-hidden IR port, and CF/SD card slot, while all the way at the bottom is the sync port and reset aperture. Speaker and digital camera are also integrated into the body.

The A730's stylus is given a bump up fashion, and is housed inside a silo, but the difference is that it goes in from the bottom, rather than the top.

The A730 stylus has a hint of CLIE in it
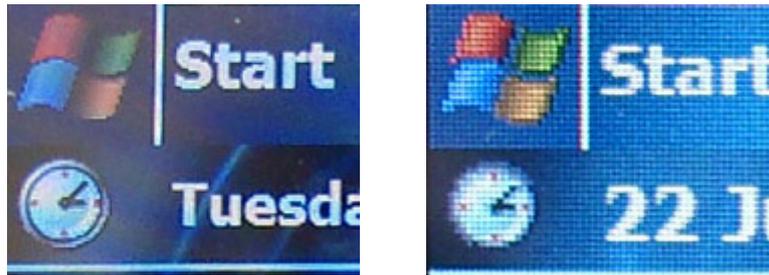

The plasticky A620 stylus

Included in the package is a very neat carrying case (pictured below), which is a long-standing Asus practice. The case included with the A620 didn't have great workmanship, and wasn't eye candy either, but the latest one changes our perspective on Asus. The case looks just like a mini portfolio.
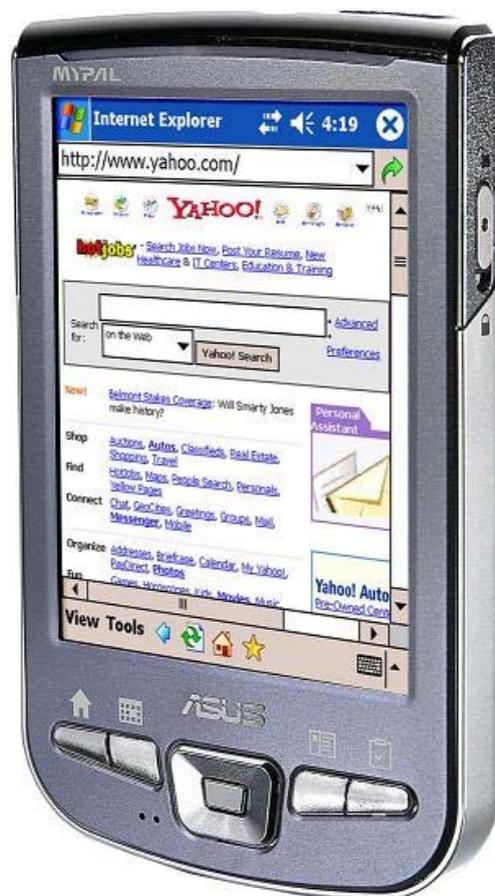

Screen

The 3.7" screen on this baby is pure heaven, as the on-screen picture becomes far sharper, and far more lucid. It is definitely a very big boost in screen quality, and those who spend lots of time working on their handhelds will adore it. This magnificent increase in screen performance comes not from the larger screen size, but rather from the addition of a whole lot of extra pixels, or should we say, improved resolution. Many Pocket PCs have had their screens limited at 240 x 320 pixels, but improved Pocket PC OS have made it possible to

bump this figure up to 480 x 640, which is exactly what the A730 has.

640 x 480 vs. 240 x 320

In reality, the upgrade means that there is not just double the content of a 240 x 320 pixel screen, but quadruple instead. This is excellent news as far as Web pages, Pocket Word, Pocket Excel and other applications of its kind are concerned, as it helps to boost the user's productivity. The Pocket PC 2003 SE's support for horizontal display helps to take this a step further by making applications easier to work with.

When it comes to images and videos, the benefits are yet more obvious. The PXA 270's ability to process video files is well documented these days, but the addition of a VGA screen means that high-resolution video files will finally be getting the justice they deserve. The leap forward in quality from low-resolution PPC screens cannot be overstated here.

Camera Module

Asus engineers weren't happy simply to integrate any old camera module into this Pocket PC. What they did instead was to add various features to bring out the best the camera has to offer! Though the 1.3 megapixel resolution doesn't compare to what you'll get with real digital cameras, it really isn't bad at all for every day imaging on the fly.

Still images and short video takes are no sweat, and Asus adds some simple editing functions and a photo album app for good measure. Knowing full well the CMOS sensor's demand for ample lighting, Asus includes an LED light to work as a flash light and an auto focusing assistant lamp.

Also included is a very small mirror so you can see what is actually going on when you point that lens at yourself (self-portrait).

1.3 megapixel camera
1. Flash light/Assistant lamp
2. Mirror

The A730 camera will capture stills at the resolution of 1280 x 960, and videos at the maximum of 352 x 288 in AVI or 3GPP formats.
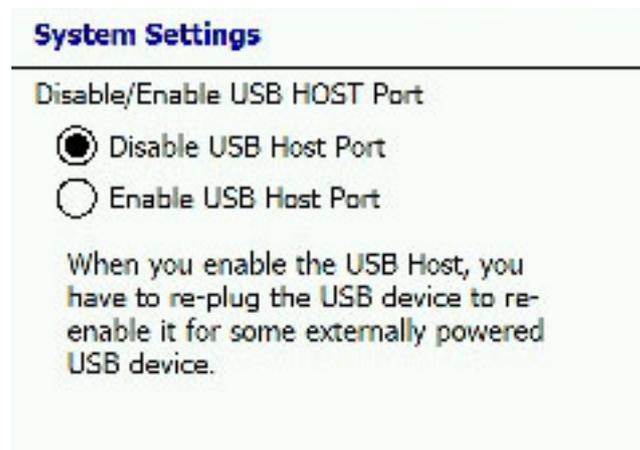
Hardware Configuration

Being a high-end Pocket PC, the A730 was always certain to be given a good processor. Well, the 520MHz Intel PXA270 certainly fits that bill and will do all that is asked of it. In the thick of it is 64MB of ROM and 64MB RAM, of which 45MB is available to you, the user.

Your storage cards won't be going to waste because the A730 provides both the CF and SD dual slots. Accepted formats are CF types I and II, as well as SD, MMC, and SDIO devices. For the storage and IO devices on the market today, that's almost limitless compatibility.

At the bottom is the very commonly seen custom sync port, though there isn't anything

common about its functions. In most circumstances, the sync port will synchronize and charge your battery, but added here is the USB Host function, which allows the A730 to access standard USB devices. In fact, the included USB Host cable sees to it that the A730 reads from any USB storage device (flash/HDD), allowing their data, and their memory to become available to the A730. Can you say "unlimited handheld storage"?

How to enable the USB Host Port

Though A730 standard doesn't include a wireless network card, it does include the ever popular Bluetooth. The A730W is complete with WLAN card. Bluetooth functionality basically matches what you see in most Pocket PCs, so short distance data transfers with other Bluetooth enabled devices are no problem at all. When Bluetooth is activated, the indicator lights up as seen in the image below.

Bluetooth indicator lights up

Multimedia

Multimedia capabilities have always been a Pocket PC strong suit, and the A730 is set to continue that trend, thanks to the inherent advantages found in its PXA270 processor and the screen resolution. The combination certainly does bring screen quality and video reproduction to a whole new level. Low bit rate video clips or MP3 music? Do we even need to say anything?

The A730 includes a 3.5mm earphone jack for your listening pleasure, but it does more than that by providing support for MIC Build-In earphones as well. Some of you might ask what purpose that serves, as it really isn't a cell phone, but we think it does plenty, as SKYPE, the popular VoIP software, has already hit the Pocket PC. So as long as you are connected to the internet (either WLAN or Bluetooth + GPRS) you are going to be able to talk to your SKYPE contacts in much the same way you would on a cell phone. If you are already a paying user of SKYPE, you can then reach contacts on SKYPE supporting cell phones or any fixed telephone at fractions of the cost you would have to bear when dialing international from a standard cell phone.

Power

Retail versions of the A730 all carry an 1100mAH Li-ion slab capable of 5.5 hours of normal work at 50% backlight, which also means that you won't be getting that much MP3 and video playback time. Asus has prepped an optional 1800mAh battery for your separate purchase.

Summary

The A730 makes a successful jump into the big leagues on the strength of its 3.7" VGA screen, capacious memory, and high frequency processor. Although the A730 standard doesn't come with WLAN card, the A730W integrated with WLAN is also available. Anyway, we like what we see, and like it a lot. The Asus A730 is a keeper in our books.