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Sony VAIO L Series

Windows 7 and a touch PC is a winning combination.

Sony
www.sonystyle.com.au
$2,999

Looks good; works very well.

Expensive; one TV tuner.

SPECIAL FEATURES
24in touchscreen
VAIO Media Gallery

We've seen several panel PCs over the past year. Some were poor-quality iMac clones, while others were cheap alternatives with netbook-level power. Only a few have offered 'touch' capabilities, and in most cases it hasn't been a great success. Previously, in order for touch to work well, it's had to rely on manufacturers' proprietary software while clumsily assimilating Vista's Tablet PC utilities. The best one by far has been HP's TouchSmart but, out on its own, it felt like a novelty. Windows 7, however, has changed everything.

The new OS has been designed with 'touch' in mind and it shows. Sony's brand new L Series is the first we've seen to use it and it didn't take long for us to be impressed. It's based around a 24in LCD, a Core 2 processor and a 500GB hard disk.

Navigating around the computer via the enhanced Task Bar is a dream but it's the multimedia features that really see improvements. The first is Windows Media Center. The new interface works fantastically well with touch: dragging the large menu up and down and selecting functions with the big buttons is intuitive and responsive.

We were disappointed with the TV tuner, though. It's a hybrid digital/analogue model (you can only use one at a time). Overseas customers sensibly get two digital tuners. However, setting everything up is mercifully simple, not least because Microsoft finally supports an Australian Electronic Program Guide. However, Media Center still can't natively watch Blu-ray, so Sony includes WinDVD for that. It all looks great on the vibrant screen and sounds great thanks to two powerful 5.5W speakers.

Another huge boon with 'touch' is internet browsing. After a while, the notion of using a keyboard and mouse seems archaic. Navigating through favourites and scrolling up and down the page is incredibly simple and intuitive. If you want you can also pinch, zoom and drag the screen like an iPhone (it's almost as responsive too) and be prepared to start using Internet Explorer again, as it's well-optimised for touch.

Sony still includes a great deal of third-party and its own software. Controlling the webcam is ArcSoft Webcam Companion, which offers enhanced features like a security monitor. Adobe's excellent Photoshop and Premiere Elements are included for photo and video editing. There are sticky note applications and some fun touch-based games. VAIO Media Gallery is a good way to organise and view music, movies and pictures easily: it steps on Media Center's toes but works even better with touch — allowing you to drag pictures around and rotate them with your fingers. It also makes quick movies out of your photos and videos while using your own background music.

Our review unit was very much an engineering sample so we couldn't run benchmarks. The Core 2 processor managed well, but it did struggle to keep up on occasion — we'd prefer a Nehalem-based processor. Also, the Nvidia graphics are fine for video decoding, but don't expect to play anything beyond the oldest games.

Peripherals include a stylish Bluetooth mouse and scrabble-tile keyboard (which feels a bit plastic) plus a Media Center remote.

Our main gripes are that the fan isn't the quietest (it's not distracting though) and that an HDMI input that features on overseas models isn't available here. A volume button would have been handy too.

For people determined to have an ultra-simple, highly functional computer in their home, and who may have been considering an iMac, look this way instead. Windows 7 with touch completely owns the iMac in terms of ease of use and functionality. We're looking forward to seeing HP's latest TouchSmart rival, but quite simply, anyone would want this Sony.

Nick Ross

It's almost time to ditch the keyboard, now that Win 7 has arrived with its Touch function.