

From Computer World, June 1997
Sony VAIO 505G and 505GX notebooks
Price: \$1,999, \$2,699
Sony Electronics
ph: 888-315-SONY
web: <http://sony.com/pc>

Pro: Compact and light; good power management;

Con: Size and weight limits configuration options

Grade: B+
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by Lenny Bailes

Current wisdom among notebook computer manufacturers is that smaller is better. Sony's VAIO 505G and 505GX notebooks are among the first to arrive in the marketplace with a new "SuperSlim" form factor. These notebooks are less than one inch thick, and slightly smaller than a standard sheet of typing paper. They weigh only three pounds (add 1.5 pounds for a detachable port replicator and external floppy drive) and offer most of the features found in more expensive, larger-footprint notebooks.

Sony advertises these units as "ideal for mobile professionals," but the VAIO notebooks are pre-configured to appeal to novice home-users.

[[This is my take. The new "USB" "Internet" iMacs are also purple and gray. A number of "pop" computer journalists raved about how "cool" they looked and how they just had to have one at the press demonstration that Jobs did back in May.]]

When you boot the computer, a set of flashing, Active-X enabled captions dominate the desktop. These read: "Click here to begin," "Club VAIO," "Free Internet Access," "Tools," and so on. When clicked, the flashing desktop objects open various Sony "EZ-Menu" applets to register the computer and advertise its features. Fortunately, an experienced user can turn off Win98's Active Desktop in seconds, banishing these distractions to limbo. Sony's front-end applications may be useful for novices who've never worked in the Windows environment before. Corporate users may appreciate the VAIO's "SOS" feature, which allows a Sony technician to access and modify the computer's configuration settings through a direct modem connection.
((What types of corporate users will like them, if any??))

The SuperSlim VAIOs both include a 10.4" active TFT display and MPEG-accelerated adapter that delivers undistorted, full-screen playback of multimedia video. Both machines include a 56Kflex internal modem, a deal with GTE-Sprint for 50 hours of free Internet time, and a Universal Serial Bus port. The 505G ships with a 200Mhz MMX Pentium CPU. The 505GX has a 266 Mhz MMX CPU and an additional I-link (IEEE 1394 Firewire) port to accommodate Sony's Digital Handycam Camcorder. Otherwise, the two models are identical.

The 505G unit that I worked with performed very well for a machine of its CPU class. It exhibited crisp graphic screen refresh, fast memory read/write, and robust disk access. Norton Utilities 3.0 gave it a benchmark score of 51, from 10 to 15% better than other notebooks with this CPU. ((Need to put this into perspective. Is the performance number good for a 200 notebook? average?)) Sony has gotten the Windows 98 power management features right. The "hibernate to disk" and "suspend to RAM" features seem to work perfectly, snapping the machine out of low-power state with a single key-press. The default battery has an estimated up-time of 1.5 to 2.5 hours. An optional longlife battery can extend this time to a 5 - 6.5 hour range.

The 83-character keyboard is small but functional, with duplicate Shift, Ctrl, Alt, and Fn keys and large Enter and Backspace keys. The 505G and GX both include a special hardware "Programmable Power Key" next to the power switch on the side of the case. ((do you like it?? Not me, I'd rather do it myself, so I can stop things or change my mind, but some people like automation macros, see below)) This hardware button can be configured to launch a variety of user-programmed application functions. By default, the PPK is set up to open the Microsoft Outlook 98 calendar, collect e-mail, or open the Internet Explorer web browser. Various combinations of Ctrl + PPK, Shift + PPK, and so on, can be used to schedule other system events or applications. This feature may be appreciated by users who like the idea of a one-button cruise-control on their computers.

The VAIO notebooks are loaded with popular "home-user" applications and system utilities, including ((need full company names here...)) Microsoft Works, Microsoft Money, Intuit, Inc.'s Quicken Basic, Microsoft Plus for Windows 98, Adobe Systems Photo Deluxe, Cybermedia, Inc.'s First Aid 98 and Oil Change, and Dr. Solomon's Software Antivirus. They also include Sony's superior music-movie player and Picturegear Digital Photo Manager.

The chief virtue of these machines is their portability, but this is also their principal limitation ((expand just a bit. I can guess what you mean, but let's not make the reader speculate)). The floppy drive is an external plug-in unit. An optional 14X external CD-ROM drive may be purchased separately. It uses the system's only PC Card slot, and must be plugged into a separate AC adapter. So you won't be using it on airplane flights. In order to print, or gain access to external serial, keyboard and mouse ports, you must plug in the included port replicator attachment. Currently, only 2.1GB hard disk configurations are supported with Sony's SuperSlim form factor. This may limit these machines' effectiveness as professional design tools, but should be no impediment to their use in creating business presentations and displaying MPEG-1 multimedia. These units should be a good buy for mobile users of Office 97 who need to shed weight and space in their travel bags. Sony offers a 64MB RAM configuration for both machines, with an upgrade to 96MB to be available in 3rd Quarter, 1998.