SO SOLID CREW

Solid-state notebooks use electronic memory rather than a disk drive, making them lighter and faster to start up, says **Stuart Andrews**

START-UP TIME: 20SEC
ACER ASPIRE ONE £234

The Acer owes its speedy start in part to its Linux-based operating system, which is far more nimble than Windows. Of course, you won't have access to Windows-compatible software, but the custom-built Linux interface is friendly and you get a full set of office, media and internet applications on its 8GB solid-state drive. The unit feels solid, the 8.9in screen is bright and usable, and the miniature keyboard is surprisingly decent. At only 2lb 2oz, the Aspire One can be carried anywhere, yet it still includes network, monitor and USB sockets, plus slots for all major types of memory card. Its Intel Atom processor won't handle more advanced applications, but the Aspire One still feels nippy. Battery life is the only slight downside — the Acer lasted for just two hours in our workout.

VERDICT: A great value ultra-mobile computer, as long as you're willing to wean yourself off Windows.
www.acer.com/aspireone
★★★★★

BEST BUY

START-UP TIME: 32SEC
APPLE MACBOOK AIR £1,719

The 3lb MacBook Air is incredibly slim and light, yet it still features a gorgeous 13.3in widescreen display and a full-sized keyboard. Crafted from sturdy aluminium, build quality is outstanding, with lovely touches such as a magnetic power cable that simply slips into a recess to recharge the battery. With an Intel Core 2 Duo processor, a 64GB drive and 2GB of Ram, the MacBook Air is fast and powerful. To complement its MacOS X operating system, it comes equipped with Apple's excellent iLife suite of media management and editing programs. Battery life is good at around 2.5 hours of intense use. In fact, the only niggles are the lack of built-in connections — there's only a single USB port and one digital video output. That, and the Ferrari-level price tag — even after its recent £300 price cut.
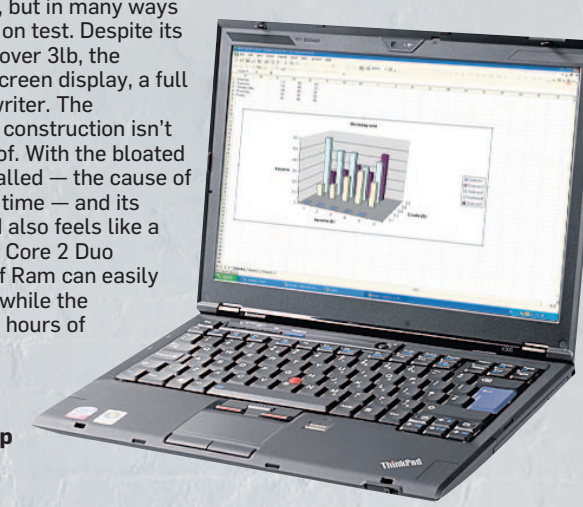
VERDICT: The most desirable laptop known to man, made even faster and more reliable with that solid-state drive.
www.apple.com/uk
★★★★☆

START-UP TIME: 27SEC
ASUS EEEPC 901 £319

The Asus EeePC was the first, revolutionary solid-state, bargain basement laptop. This latest version is the most refined yet. Our review unit ran Windows XP and comes with Microsoft Works and StarOffice pre-installed. However, the version running Linux offers faster start-up speeds and speedier performance — the Intel Atom processor and 1GB of Ram frankly struggles with XP, although the 20GB of memory is generous. Sadly, then, while the Asus was the original, it is no longer the best. The 8.9in screen is slightly crisper than the Acer's, but the 2lb 7oz unit is heavier and the keyboard feels slightly more cramped. Also, connectivity isn't quite as good. Battery life is superb, though: the EeePC lasted for more than four hours of gruelling testing. Still, given the higher price and slower start-up speed, we'd recommend the Acer instead.

VERDICT: An inexpensive and very portable Windows laptop, but the Aspire One is the more usable machine.
uk.asus.com
★★★☆☆

START-UP TIME: 38SEC
ELONEX ONET £TBC

Laptops don't get smaller than the forthcoming Elonex ONEt, an education-focused system the size of a hardback book that weighs a mere 1lb 7oz. Unfortunately, with a launch price likely to be in the region of £130, compromises have been made: the screen is just 8in wide and it has the worst keyboard on test — extremely tight, even if you have small fingers, with a rather rattly action. Like the Acer Aspire One, the ONEt ditches Windows for a custom Linux operating system and a range of built-in applications, although this version of the interface isn't so slick. Build quality is also unimpressive — the Elonex has a toytown feel — and there's less than 1GB of storage available. Creating a portable laptop at this price is an undoubted feat, but unlike the other lower-end machines on test, the ONEt is only suitable for kids.

VERDICT: The ONEt proves that laptops can be too small and too cheap.
www.elonex.co.uk
★★☆☆☆

START-UP TIME: 58SEC
LENOVO THINKPAD X300 £1,743

It's not the fastest off the blocks, but in many ways this is the best solid-state laptop on test. Despite its slim chassis and a weight of just over 3lb, the ThinkPad packs in a 13.3in widescreen display, a full set of connections and a DVD rewriter. The part-carbon fibre, part-fibreglass construction isn't so much shockproof as bombproof. With the bloated Windows Vista Business pre-installed — the cause of that comparatively slow start-up time — and its full-sized keyboard, the ThinkPad also feels like a corporate workhorse. The 1.2Ghz Core 2 Duo processor, 64GB drive and 2GB of Ram can easily handle any business application, while the battery delivered a little over two hours of tough use. If you need a sturdy, hard-working laptop, they don't come any better than this.

VERDICT: It's the perfect laptop for the jet-set corporate class.
www.lenovo.co.uk
★★★★☆

SOLID-STATE EXPLAINED

The pros and cons of the technology behind the new breed of slimline, lightweight laptops

Improved speed: A hard disk is a spinning, magnetic platter that needs to be read by sensitive drive heads when you store or retrieve data. Solid-state drives, however, work in a similar way to the flash memory found in memory cards and MP3 players. This makes them faster — a machine with solid-state memory will start up and load programs and documents more rapidly, contingent on the efficiency of its operating system.

Improved reliability: Solid-state memory is less likely to fail. With no moving parts, a solid-state drive is better able to take the knocks of life on the road.

Longer battery life: The lower energy demands of solid-state memory and the typically small size of the notebooks it is being built into mean battery life is extended.

Higher cost: While solid-state memory is getting cheaper, high-capacity drives (32GB and above) are expensive, which is why they're only found in the two high-end laptops — the Apple and the Lenovo — on test. As the cost of solid-state memory comes down we should soon see them in more middle-of-the-road laptops and even some desktop machines. Meanwhile, in the pipeline are technologies based on optical or even holographic storage systems that promise even greater speeds. But for now, solid-state is the key to building the thinnest, lightest, fastest laptops on the block.

Prices shown are the best found online. Pic by Photolibrary.com

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E-MAIL FROM AMERICA

Mark Harris
IN SEATTLE — NEW TECH CITY

Renting is second nature here in America — I recently hired a car for a week for about the same price as filling its tank, and time-poor urbanites can even pay to borrow man's best friend for a weekend (www.flexpetz.com). Letting, rather than buying, a house makes sense when times are hard.

Microsoft has a contribution of its own to the new austerity chic: for the first time it's offering its bestselling Office software (a suite of programs that includes Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote) for rental. Instead of having to find $150 (£75) for the full package, customers at Circuit City electronics stores will soon be able to rent the packages, renamed Microsoft Equipt, for $70 (£35) a year. Renters will get the same support and updates as owners and will enjoy a free upgrade when the next version of Office is issued. Stop paying, and the software stops working. What's happening here is likely to reach you in Britain next.
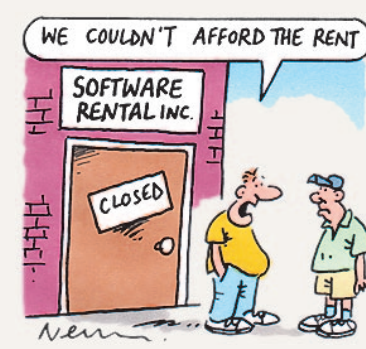
Renting may be cheaper than buying, but squatting for nothing is cheaper still. For the past year I've spurned Bill Gates's software in favour of the free OpenOffice suite (www.openoffice.org). Its open-source word processor has a spellchecker; the spreadsheet can read all my files; and I don't miss the fancier features found in the latest, bloated version of Office.

If I do need to work on the go or share documents with colleagues around the world, I can sign up to Zoho (www.zoho.com), which lets me work on and store files online — again without spending a dime.

Equipt is a sensible step forward for Microsoft, although I think it has underestimated the economic crisis ahead. When the SUV is stranded on the driveway, the bank is demanding the mortgage and even Fido is getting repo'd, I suspect the last thing the average American will spend money on is software that's free elsewhere.

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WE COULDN'T AFFORD THE RENT
SOFTWARE RENTAL INC.
CLOSED

GADGETS OF THE WEEK

SUUNTO CORE STEEL
€499 (£396), www.finnishdesignshop.com

WHAT IS IT? An "ABC" watch from Finnish manufacturer Suunto — that's altimeter, barometer and compass. Accurate to 30,000ft, the one-touch height display records your climbing data for later analysis. A barometer shows the atmospheric pressure for up to the past six hours, and sounds a storm warning when it senses an ominous drop. Point the watch at your destination and the Core's digital compass will read out a constant heading; feed in your location and it will display sunrise and sunset hours; the thermometer ranges from -20C to 60C. And yes, it tells the time.

SHOULD I BUY IT? If you need your survival gear to pull double-duty après ski, then yes — other versions of the Core look too DayGlo to wear off the mountain, but as seen here in stainless steel it's one classy timekeeper.

FATMAN RED-i
£399, www.henleydesigns.co.uk

WHAT IS IT? A new, more powerful version of Fatman's novel valve-driven iPod dock. The Red-i now handles a substantial 25 watts per channel, taking the digital signal from an iPod or other MP3 player and converting it into the smooth, mellow, analogue sound that is characteristic of valve amplification and beloved by audiophiles. Extra shielding around its sensitive electronics also makes the Red-i a good partner for an iPhone, as it's claimed it eliminates "TDMA" noise — the unwanted interference generated by mobile phones when they communicate with their networks.

SHOULD I BUY IT? Frankly, you'll need sensitive ears and digital music files saved at high bit-rates to hear the difference over systems costing a quarter the price. But with its naked valves and use of classic hi-fi technology, the Red-i's appeal is undeniable. Look for it towards the end of the summer.

Matthew Bingham