

Review: HTC, Nokia Offer Good, Giant Choices

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NEW YORK (AP) — I find giant phones hard to carry and use, but I'm well aware that many people like the bigger images and text they offer.

These so-called phablets, with screens measuring about 6 inches diagonally, are nearly as big as the smallest tablets. Unlike tablets, they can make phone calls over cellular networks.

Two new ones are worth considering. Neither comes with a stylus, a signature feature of Samsung's 5.7-inch Galaxy Note 3, which is one of the most popular phones of its size. But the 5.9-inch HTC One Max and the 6-inch Nokia Lumia 1520 both have larger screens than the Note.

Nokia Lumia 1520 (\$585 without contract, \$199 with contract through AT&T)



The 1520 runs Windows Phone 8, which has a sliver of the smartphone market — and thus fewer software developers making apps for it. But apart from that, the 1520 is a decent phone.

It's also among the first Windows phones of its size.

What I like about Windows' approach to bigger phones is that text and images don't simply get blown up. The software adapts the layout to take advantage of the larger screen.

With big Android phones, including the Max, you see about the same amount of content that you would on a smaller phone, just somewhat enlarged. With larger

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Windows phones, you get a third column of apps on the home screen. You can preview two lines of emails rather than one, and you see more contact information at once for people in your address book.

There's also a new driving mode, which lets you block incoming texts and calls when you're near a Bluetooth device associated with your car. You can set it up to send automated replies to say you're driving.

Windows phones of all sizes come with a free Office app to read and touch up documents. With iPhones and Android phones, the app is available only as part of a \$100-a-year Office 365 subscription. None of these Office apps are meant for heavy-duty work, though.

To me, the iPhone 5S is the best camera phone for everyday shots, but the 1520's camera does a great job in low-light situations. It has the same camera technology as the 4.5-inch Lumia 1020, though a software fix gets rid of the 1020's tendency to make images too yellow.

To keep the camera thin, Nokia dropped the 1020's protruding lens and sacrificed resolution. The 1520 can take photos of up to 19 megapixels, instead of 38 megapixels on the 1020. Still, that's more than most phones. Grabbing and storing all those pixels takes time, so both phones tend to be slower than most cameras in snapping shots.

To keep those photos organized, a Storyteller app automatically groups photos by date and location, if that feature is on when taking shots. I like that as you zoom in on a map, photos split off into smaller groups and are shown down to the street corner or backyard where you took them.

Nokia also has a new Refocus app, which takes up to eight shots with varying focus, so you can decide later whether you'd rather have the foreground or the background come in sharper. You can even have the app blend the shots so that everything's in focus.

Nokia Corp. phones are often overlooked because they don't run one of the dominant operating systems. Besides having a good camera, I find colors on the screen more vibrant than on other phones. Before you buy, check the Windows online store to make sure the apps you want are available. It's getting better, but apps tend to come to iPhones and Android devices first.

HTC One Max (\$600 without contract; with two-year contract: \$250 through Sprint, \$300 through Verizon)

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The Max is largely a giant version of the regular, 4.7-inch HTC One. HTC Corp. expands on Android by offering a home screen with a mosaic of customized content — such as your favorite news sites and content shared by friends on Facebook and Twitter. That can get annoying and clutter up the phone, but you can turn that off if you prefer a traditional home screen experience.

Where the Max differs is in offering a fingerprint scanner for bypassing the security password. Unlike the iPhone 5S, the Max launches a different app depending on which finger you use. That gives you quick access to Facebook, the camera or whatever app you designate. Sadly, unlike the iPhone's sensor, the one on the Max often fails to recognize my prints. The feature is supposed to make one-hand operation easier, but I end up using my other hand anyway to type in the password.

The Max, like the standard One, promises better low-light shots. The camera is 4 megapixels, compared with the minimum 8 megapixels that most high-end phones have. Instead, HTC makes the sensor for individual pixels larger to pick up more light. Night shots don't come out as dark.

However, the sensors sometimes pick up too much light, so lights on store signs and Christmas trees bleed together and wash out colors. And with fewer pixels, images aren't as sharp when blown up.

I like how the One's Gallery app automatically organizes your photos by events, based largely on time and location. Another feature turns selected shots from an event into a short video, with customizable music and special effects. Although the standard One has these features, the Max removes a 30-second cap and lets you choose your own tunes, rather than ones included.

Both Ones come with Zoe, a feature that takes up to 20 shots in three seconds so you can choose the one with the right smile or action.

Samsung's Note 3 is lighter and easier to hold, but the Max is a good choice if you really need an Android phone that's even larger than the Note.

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