

Sony Xperia, LG G Flex Smartphones Manage Niche Appeal

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BOSTON (AP) — One of the reasons Android phones have become popular is the choice they offer: Want a big screen? There's a phone for you. Want cheap? There's one for you, too.

New phones from Sony and LG continue that trend. Although I personally find their distinctive features unnecessary, consumers looking for those specific attributes will welcome them.

Sony's Xperia Z1s is a waterproof phone with a high-megapixel camera, while LG's G Flex has a curved screen that offers a better fit for phone calls.

Xperia Z1s, Sony Corp. (\$528, contract-free, through T-Mobile only):

The 5-inch Z1s stands out in two ways: It's waterproof, meaning you can dunk it in water up to 4.5 feet deep for a half-hour. And the camera's 20.7-megapixel resolution is higher than that of most phones, which means sharper photos when blown up or printed.

Sony also packs the phone with several camera apps that can be useful — when they work.

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Published on Wireless Week (<http://www.wirelessweek.com>)



The waterproofing should give you some comfort using the phone in the rain or taking a selfie in the pool, as long as you keep the ports covered with the attached plastic seals.

Just don't expect extensive operations underwater, as the touch screen doesn't work when wet. You can continue video and music you already have going, but you can't start new ones. Same with voice calls. Sound quality through the external speaker suffers.

Fortunately, you can use headphones. Sony's water-resistant Xperia Z phone last summer had a headphone jack that needed to stay covered. There's no need to cover that in the Z1s, so you're protected even when you use headphones. Your headphones might not survive, though.

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The Z1s also fixes a shortcoming with the Z. You can set the volume button to trigger the camera shutter for shots while snorkeling. The Z's touch-only shutter has to stay dry.

The camera's high-megapixel count means more details get stored, which is important for cropping and printing. However, megapixel is just one factor.

At the U.S. figure skating championships in Boston over the weekend, photos of skaters from my nose-bleed seats came out average for a phone. I noticed more details in some of the banners across the arena, but a larger factor was how much my hand was shaking when I snapped. In a few of those shots, colors were completely off.

The camera's Social Live app lets you stream 10-minute video clips live on Facebook. You can choose who can view them, though it doesn't recognize groups you have curated on Facebook, such as "close friends" or "family." If you're willing to click on names one by one, or share with everyone, it's a fun tool for weddings and other shareable moments.

Another app, called Info-eye, gets you more information about a book, wine bottle or landmark after you snap a photo of it.

Results were mixed. It took several tries for the camera to recognize the Empire State Building in New York. Initially, I got weather and nearby restaurants instead. The camera recognized only about half of the books I snapped and needed two tries to recognize my wine label.

The app is also supposed to recognize QR codes, the square patterns that direct you to more information on the Internet. But I got it to work only once out of at least 17 tries at the MIT Museum in Cambridge, Mass. Most of the time, the image came out too blurry, or the phone tried to scan surrounding text instead.

The Z1s catches up to Apple's iPhone 5S in two ways: You can snap up to 10 shots per second in a burst mode, and you can see how an Instagram-like special effect will look before you snap the shot.

There's also a Timeshift Burst app that lets you snap even more shots — 61 in two seconds. It's easy to pick the best shots by scrolling through the images like a flipbook, but the app limits you to two seconds.

There's probably a lot more I haven't discovered yet. The phone hides many of the features in the various settings. Until I started playing with the controls, for instance, the camera was snapping at just 8.3 megapixels. Sony says it uses the extra data to help reduce distortion, but it's not the same as a truly 20.7 megapixel photo.

Most people will stick with the default, automatic settings, meaning the camera's power will be lost to them. Those people will be getting a phone that takes average photos. If you're in that group, it'll come down to whether you want a waterproof

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phone.

G Flex, LG Electronics Inc. (Price not yet announced, available soon through AT&T, Sprint and T-Mobile):



The 6-inch G Flex is much like a bigger version of LG's 5.2-inch G2 phone from last summer. The power button and volume controls are on the back, which LG believes will be easier to access and result in fewer dropped phones.

Where the G Flex differs: The screen has a slight curve inward from top to bottom, giving it a better fit around your head when making calls. It feels a bit like those old flip phones. However, I don't make many calls to begin with, and I haven't noticed much difference in call quality or comfort.

LG hasn't announced U.S. pricing yet, but the phone goes for more than \$900 in South Korea. Part of that high price goes toward the display's size: The G Flex is even larger than Samsung's 5.7-inch Galaxy Note 3 and HTC's 5.9-inch One Max. Samsung also has a curved phone, but hasn't announced U.S. plans yet.

I tested a Korean version of the G Flex ahead of its U.S. release. Text and images on the curved screen look odd. Square photos on Instagram aren't so square, for instance. The distortion is more pronounced when the phone is held sideways, with the curve from left to right.

The G Flex is for people who want to show friends they have something new and are willing to pay. Otherwise, wait for further advancements from LG and Samsung. The

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technology is still in its infancy. A flat phone works fine for me, thank you.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/06/2015 - 11:23pm):

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