Samsung Galaxy S5 Review

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$200 with two-year contract

With a more low-key and decidedly less tone-deaf entrance than its predecessor, Samsung's Galaxy S5 already seems more graceful by default. But expectations are just as high, if not higher considering Samsung's recent slight earnings slips.

Befitting a flagship, the S5 is a great phone, stocked with muscle and refinement. If it's iterative of the Galaxy S4 you can forgive Samsung considering the blockbusting success of that device. And if the S5 seems lacking in marquee innovation, users will easily forgive it considering it's rock-solid in all the categories—power, display and camera—that are hallmarks of all great smartphones.

Hardware

The look and feel of the S5 instantly recalls both the S4 and S3. The pleasant dimpled leather effect on the back of the phone is echoed in patterning on the bezel, which houses the home, back and multitask buttons. As is the case with more and more phones outside the "rugged" descriptor, the S5 is water- and dust-resistant.

But the two biggest exterior hardware additions to the phone are the fingerprint scanner on the front and the heart-rate monitor on the back. The fingerprint scanner works fairly flawlessly for unlocking the device and with its PayPal integration it arrives out of the box as a useful mobile payment tool. The heart-rate monitor only exists to serve up your BPM, a task that factors into the S5's health focus but not much else.

Under the hood, the S5 houses LTE Cat 4, which supports up to 150 Mbps downlink and 2x2 MIMO technology that promises to speed up Wi-Fi connections. Both LTE and Wi-Fi combine to power the Download Booster function, a feature some carriers have opted exclude from their versions. The S5's engine is a screaming-fast 2.5 GHz quad-core Snapdragon 801 put in place to whip through Android 4.4.2 Kitkat and Samsung's UI. With a standard 2 GB of RAM, we had no problem smoothly running any and all applications.

Software

Samsung's tweaked Android OS provides a fairly straightforward experience. The wonky gesture-based controls are still there but easily ignored in favor of truly useful tools like ultra-power saving and one-handed operation modes.

But the big addition that Samsung is touting this time around is the S Health software suite where the heart rate monitor comes into play. S Health is a simple enough way to track activity and diet but without the added hardware, it doesn't do much that other widely available health-monitoring apps don't do already.

Display

The 5.1-inch FHD Super AMOLED display shows off at 1920 x 1080 (432 ppi) and basically does everything a high-end smartphone screen should. Colors are bright, edges are crisp, viewing angles are tremendous. It's big and beautiful.

Camera

From the 13MP sensor on the S4 jumps the S5 with its 16MP camera capable of shooting 4K video (3840x2160). Above all else, this is a fast camera with remarkably speedy launch, auto-focus, and zoom—not to mention, it also takes photos fast, too. Besides the aforementioned 4K—which requires forfeiting most features to use—the camera builds in a nice selection of manual controls, HDR, slow-motion, and fast-motion.

On the relatively small display, it's difficult to discern the difference in quality between regular old HD and 4K video but presumably, if you own a large display that supports 4K, your mind could be blown. Photos on the S5 look good, too. Results will vary in differing light—as is the case with almost every smartphone camera—but in general both indoor and outdoor shots show up bright and clear with nice contrast and good color recreation.

Verdict

Falling short of reinventing the entire smartphone industry is a current criticism that can be leveled at Samsung and basically every other OEM right now. But as long as there's a market for big, bright and powerful smartphones that nimbly perform every job asked of them, then devices like the S5 should do just fine.

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