

Archos 604 Wifi

by Doug Waters & John Miller
Images by P. Cremins

It's nearly the ULTIMATE in mobile electronics, but still misses the mark. The Archos 604 WiFi comes as close as possible to being a highly coveted 'ultimate' device, but falls short under real world usage. The tiny (think of a thin stack of 3"x5" note cards) device is a superb audio and video player and recorder accommodating MP3 audio and a variety of video formats (including MPEG-2, MPEG-4, protected WMV, DivX, and H.264) as well as functioning as a photo viewer. The 4.3" TFT screen (480X272 pixels, 16 million colors) has excellent color and clarity for a touchscreen. It also has a little touted but highly useful feature of reading/displaying Adobe PDF files.

While the 604 has a very usable incorporation of an 802.11b/g WiFi interface, the one weakness that keeps this from being THE device to have is the Web interface. The inclusion of the Opera browser is a compelling feature, but its inability to execute the Active X and Java as well as render some websites that employ the Adobe Flash plug-in correctly all but killed it for wide use in our company. In a sample test at a shopping center, the 604 WiFi was able to connect to a 'free' WiFi site at a Panera Bread shop but wasn't able to properly load the 'Flash' graphics or 'logon/splash screen that the provider requires passing through. On the other hand, another nearby 'free' WiFi source (Caribou Coffee) had no such 'logon' screen and internet browsing worked seamlessly--the virtual keyboard that pops up when browsing to a text-entry box is ingenious--but really demands use of a stylus rather than a finger for tapping the screen. This inability to connect was repeated when attempting to connect at a paid WiFi provider. ATT WiFi service has hot spots at Barnes and Noble, McDonald's and many other high profile locations. Unfortunately a login screen that couldn't be processed by the Opera browser on the 604 limited its use. We've contacted Archos to inquire about a possible patch/update that cures this limitation, but have not received an answer.

The device itself is well constructed and it's aluminum case feels quite solid. Operation of the 604 is via the buttons on the right side of the device. Each button is actually two buttons, depending on whether you press it on the left side or the right side, but the concept is not exactly intuitive for ease of navigation – it's impossible to activate any control (such as volume up/down) without actually looking at the buttons themselves. This was only a minor hindrance...that is once someone created a 'cheatsheet' and taped it along the side for reminders. The integrated speaker at the bottom of the row of control buttons is only marginally useful. Sound quality is poor and volume is weak, only being audible in the quietest of situations. The 604 is undoubtedly meant for use with headphones (included in the box) or an external speaker arrangement. The 604 uses USB 2.0 for data transfer and moves data in both directions quite rapidly. A USB cable, included with the player, utilizes a proprietary connector on the device side of the cable --a concern if the original gets misplaced.

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The open end of the cable is a USB type B connector and is used for recharging the unit as well as (and concurrent with) data transfer.

The software functions are also solid in operation. The initial GUI home screen consists of two rows of icons, for access to the major features including: Video, Music, Photo, Web, Browser, Resume Playback, TV Scheduler, Video Recorder and Audio Recorder. The icons are large enough to be touch-screen activated using a finger, but some of the finer points of navigation in the GUI demand the use of the included stylus.

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The one point of significant irritation that the review staff found was the inconsistency in the players' ability to play video. The need to spend extra (and significant, at approximately \$40) amount of money to get the MPEG-2 and MPEG-4 video decoder software plug-ins is offensive. The DVR options are equally cost-unpleasant add-ons taking another \$60-\$80 to achieve full functionality, although this was clearly spelled out in the product description whereas the software decoders were not.

None of the test staff found limitations in the other specifications: The 30GB hard drive provided ample space and the (removable) battery life was quite good---approaching 6 hours of mixed use audio, video and Wifi browsing. The processor performance when browsing could be considered sluggish but has to be weighed against the WiFi source and the sheer convince of having Internet access (when it works). The ML1 Media video specialist summarized it best: "That thing would



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be better than the I-Phone (Apple)...if it had a phone...it's too bad the I-Phone doesn't have the features of the Archos 604". Archos has just released the model 605 WiFi lineup, which incorporates a resolution of 800x480 pixels on the same 4.3" screen. The storage options include 30, 80 and 160GB models as well as a version that includes a card slot for a 4GB SD flash card. Oddly, Archos has not chose to combine the SD slot version with a hard drive. More interestingly, ARCHOS claims of full-fledged Web browsing including Flash sites for the 605WiFi line of media devices. Of course there's one small irritating catch. The Web browser is available only as an extra \$30 plug-in. And not so surprisingly, the video decoder plug-ins are still a separate cost item (at \$20.00, each).

Our Features Editor has claimed our 604 WiFi unit. No doubt he will give it a long, steady workout. The 605 WiFi is a model we will evaluate more fully before spending our hard-earned expense account/equipment slush fund dollars.

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