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Pantech Crossover review

By Brad Molen 🔊 *posted Jun 7th 2011 12:00PM*

REVIEW 📷 🎞

Time to ditch the pull-ups, because Pantech's a big kid now. It's hard to fathom that the company responsible for hits like the Zoolander-ish C300, Helio Ocean and dual-sliding Duo is only now -- after five long years -- taking a chance at the Android market in the US. Certainly its long-time partnership with AT&T is finally looking to pay off in a big way, as the network introduces the appropriately-named Crossover. The carrier's been starving for a decent physical QWERTY to add to its (fortunately) blooming Android lineup, so seeing Pantech step up to the plate and fill the void should come as a huge relief. Though it's serving up monoliths in Korea that feature 1.5GHz dual-core processors and other outlandish specs, Pantech looks to be starting its stateside tour with a less-risky investment: at $70 with a 2-year agreement, its modest first impression appears targeted toward first-time smartphone buyers. Is it worth dropping a Grant and a Jackson to adopt the Pantech Crossover for the next two years? Read on to find out.
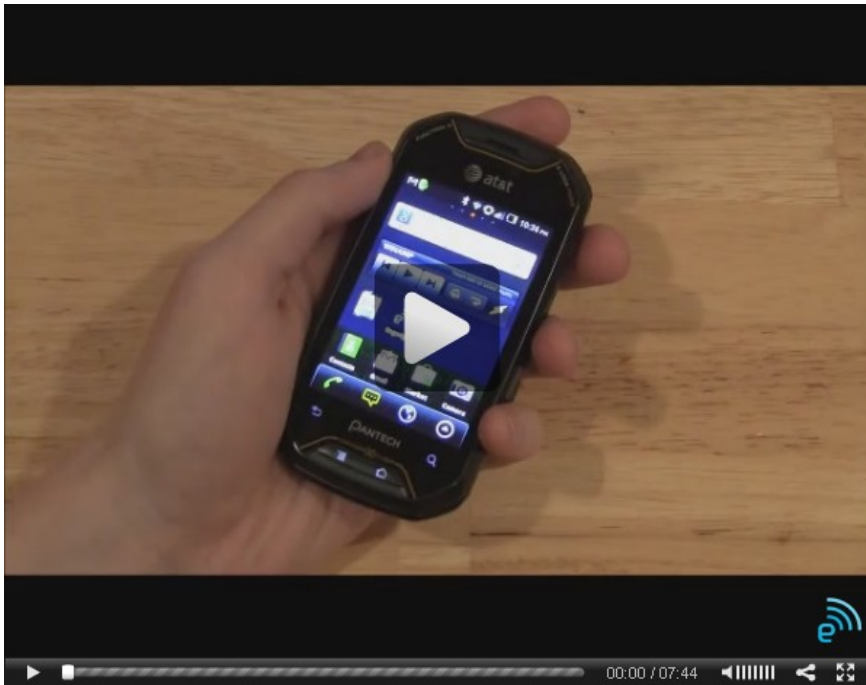
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We're going to give Pantech a little credit here -- the Crossover looks well done for its first US attempt. It opts for a sporty and rugged look instead of sleek and sexy, which is fine; we don't think the company's really wanting to win any beauty pageants right away. Instead, it looks and feels like a fun device to use on an everyday basis. Don't let the "rugged" talk fool you, though, because it's not technically certified or professionally tested. It may be slightly more durable than any other standard smartphone, but this is not one you'll want to throw against the wall in a fit of fury. The rugged nature of the Crossover is due to the extra weight -- at 5.2 ounces, it has a little more heft, a primary side effect of adding a full QWERTY slide -- but aside from some rubberized buttons on the top and a textured battery cover, the remainder of the phone is plastic.

Using a textured battery cover can be a good decision in theory because it ideally adds friction and prevents phones from slipping out of your hand as often as one made out of smooth plastic. When using the Crossover, there wasn't any noticeable improvement in grip, as the cover was still incredibly slick despite being adorned with the texture here. At least the battery cover actually enhances the phone's appearance, making it much more aesthetically pleasing when looking at it as a whole. Besides, we absolutely love that we don't have to worry about leaving behind fingerprints every time we set it down. Pantech chose to go a different route in its design by angling the Crossover's corners, rather than rounding or squaring them off. We discovered that this actually makes a huge difference, offering more places to easily grip the phone. In fact, there is nothing uncomfortable about holding the Crossover at all; at 4.45 x 2.28 x 0.56 inches, it's small enough to feel like it naturally belongs nestled in the palm of your

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Pantech Crossover Review 1

One of the best things about the Crossover's design is the selection -- and positioning -- of the side buttons. Pantech incorporated two of them into the top corners of the phone. The power / lock button is on the top right corner, a perfect place for us to press it without much hassle. It sits close to where your index finger naturally settles when gripping the phone, so it's all the more easy to actuate. On the opposite corner there's a function key that opens up a clever shortcut menu on the phone, and a dedicated camera button.

On the front, the Crossover offers a 3.1-inch display with a meager HVGA 480x320 resolution, which doesn't surprise us much considering its entry-level status. We were pleasantly surprised by how it looked, though; there was only slight pixelation experienced as we moved closer to the screen, and the colors are still bright and deep enough to see normally. It could be difficult to transition to for anyone who's used an HD-quality screen such as qHD or Retina Display before, but first-time smartphone buyers probably won't express much disappointment here. Our only issue with the screen is that the colors get almost completely washed out when viewed in the sunlight. Our ability to do anything on the screen was highly diminished outside because we simply couldn't see it. The capacitive digitizer is responsive enough, but there were occasions in which we had to swipe the screen several times to get our intended result (such as unlocking the screen).

Four standard Android buttons occupy the front and keep the screen from getting lonely. With two small physical keys sandwiched by two larger touch-sensitive ones, it flows nicely with the phone's angular theme. These capacitive touch buttons, back and search, carry a much heavier focus and emphasis than the other two when considering how much more real estate is being taken up by them. Overall, we felt the phone was designed rather solidly on the outside. The keyboard slider was weighted properly, slid out smoothly with only minimal (but not *too* minimal) force, and wasn't loose at all when it was open.

The Crossover is outfitted with a 600MHz ARM v6-compatible processor, par for the course for most entry-level devices on AT&T's Android lineup; we didn't have high expectations for the CPU going into the review, but it was exciting at first when we noticed there was little to no slowing in order to perform normal tasks. However, after a few attempts to push the limits of the phone by throwing processor-intensive tasks at it -- most notably multitasking -- we could tell this tiny CPU just doesn't have the muscle to do more than the simple everyday stuff. Everything slowed to a crawl constantly, and the phone even put up a white flag and rebooted at one point. On two separate occasions, the digitizer froze up entirely for a couple minutes.

Beyond that, the other specs are typical of a less expensive Android phone and don't leave much in the way of surprises: Android 2.2.1, 512MB RAM, 500MB internal memory (with 2GB microSD included), HSPA support at a max of 7.2 Mbps, 1500 mAh battery and 3 megapixel camera. We were also excited to see AT&T following through with its promise of allowing sideloaded apps on its new entries to the Android lineup.

The Crossover's battery life is on the high end of most Android phones. Considering the 1500 mAh battery is a decent size for a smartphone and it's not powering state-of-the-art equipment, it lasts almost the entire day on moderate use. The rated talk time is 5 hours, but we got a lot more; we checked emails, surfed the web, texted, made calls, and even streamed the Engadget Podcast from our dedicated app, and the battery still made it a full 12 hours before it died. Our phone calls were clear with only a small amount of fuzz, and the speakerphone was wonderful to use because of the large grill on the back. Our only gripe was that when listening to the aforementioned podcast or other audio, the music came through great but voices had a tinny or echoey sound.

Keyboard

Pantech Crossover Keyboard

A full QWERTY slider phone lives and dies by its physical keyboard, so having a lousy keyboard would almost certainly be the final nail in the Crossover's coffin. We had a rather pleasant time using the keyboard though, as the keys are reasonably spaced and ever-so-slightly elevated, offering a little give when pressed. As huge fans of these kinds of depressing buttons, we were highly impressed at the ease and speed at which we could type. The only issue we had with mistyping was the 'M' and 'N' keys, mainly because the third row of letters is pushed over to the left to make room for the d-pad. Our typing was slowed whenever searching for the comma, because it's found on the other side of the up arrow rather than snuggling up with the 'M' key.

As with any smaller phone, concessions have to be made. One such sacrifice made on the Crossover is the four-row keyboard. When possible, we like a fifth row on the top that's dedicated to numbers, but in this case it was integrated with the top row of letters in order to leave more space for each individual key. Specialized keys -- the .com, dedicated question mark, and voice search buttons, for instance -- were nowhere to be found on the phone. The debate on whether these buttons should be included could rage on for eons, but suffice to say we'd at least like to see them offered as an ALT selection so they're accessible; on the Crossover, they're just gone.

Sadly enough, we went out of our way to not use the on-screen keyboard in portrait mode. It was a polar opposite in terms of how much space is provided for individual keys; in fact, we were constantly typing the wrong letters and hitting delete or return at inopportune times. We understand that not much can be done about this because of the narrow screen, so we turned to Swype instead. Thankfully this was the default keyboard, though the standard Android keyboard was also pre-installed, just in case this is your

preferred input method.

Pictures taken with the included 3 megapixel camera were better than we would have expected for an entry-level device. Everything was clear and crisp, though the colors were a bit more washed out than we'd like. It's nothing to write home about, but unless you're an afficionado of camera sensors, you'll be happy enough with the results here. Pantech wisely included a macro mode on the Crossover, making close-up images much more detailed. Autofocus also made a difference by ensuring the pictures came out crystal clear, though we were saddened by the obligatory three seconds of focus time. That extra amount may not sound like much, but that's all it takes for a child to stop smiling or that cool-looking bird to fly away.

In a move that seems standard on most mid-range phones, Pantech left out the LED flash, crippling the camera in low-light situations. Without it, most pictures taken closer to dusk or dawn are a bit grainier. Besides this, the pictures were pretty decent, but try comparing it side-by-side with a Nokia N8 and then let us know how good they are. Here are a few sample images taken with the Crossover camera:

Pantech Crossover Samples
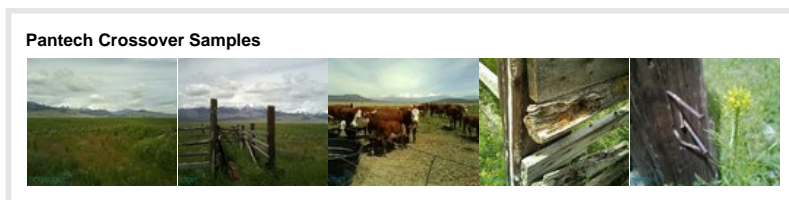
Videos taken on the Crossover were captured with a mediocre 800 x 480 resolution. When perfectly still, the camcorder took smooth videos; it was when panning across and around that we noticed choppiness. We also weren't in love with the audio, since all voices sounded muffled when behind the camera.

Software

Pantech Crossover Software
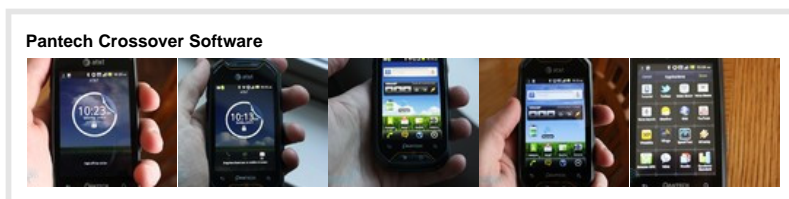
As expected, the Crossover is running a custom version of Android 2.2. Going into the review we weren't sure if we would see a UI similar to Pantech's global phones such as the Vega Racer. As it turns out, it's a whole new creation. The lock screen has a "sticker" circle in the middle that you peel off. A small bar at the bottom of this screen gives you the option to drag a notification -- such as new texts, missed calls, or

voicemails -- into that circle. Doing so will unlock the screen and take you directly into that particular app. We were frustrated to see a row of shortcuts along the bottom of the home screen that cannot be customized. We don't understand why, with countless other personalization options for Android, a feature like this would be front and center and yet cannot be changed. We'd at least like the option of turning it off and going back to the stock Android shortcuts at the bottom of the screen.

As a counter to the frustration, the UI allows us to reorganize everything in the App Menu. Instead of only being able to sort the apps out in a particular way, we were able to actually move the icons around to whatever fits us best. This is a feature we'd like to see available on most Android phones. Additionally, the function button found on the top left corner of the phone is something else not normally seen on other Android phones. Pressing it takes you into a customizable shortcut menu, allowing you to checkmark any apps you want quick access to. This is handy, but it's just a new way (of many) to give the phone your own personal touch.

Wrap-Up

All in all, the Pantech Crossover is exactly what it sets out to be, a simple low-end offering on AT&T's Android lineup. It's doesn't pretend to be a significant flagship phone, nor should it. It was a satisfying experience when we realized that we weren't looking at the next Nexus, Atrix 4G, or anything of the sort, and set our expectations accordingly. The Crossover is the best option AT&T has for an Android with a full physical QWERTY keyboard, which doesn't say much given its void of devices in this category. It performs well as long as it's not pushed too hard, and we had a wonderful time using the keyboard. Aside from that, it's like any entry-level Android device in performance and specs. The Pantech Crossover is a decent choice for its price point, but it's a mighty hard sale if the dollar sign is no obstacle to you.

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