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# Galaxy Nexus HSPA+ review

By Myriam Joire posted Nov 24th 2011 12:40PM

REVIEW



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Each year, several dozen smartphones land on our collective desks. They come in different shapes and sizes, boast different features and sell at different price points. We take each of them for a spin and review most of them, but only a handful really stand out. This is especially true with Android handsets, where incremental updates appear to be the *modus operandi*. Every now and then a device comes along that we really look forward to getting our hands on. Google's line of Nexus smartphones falls into this category, setting the new standard for Android each year.

In early 2010, the **Nexus One** became the yardstick for all future Android handsets and, later that year, the launch vehicle for FroYo. A year ago, the **Nexus S** introduced us to Gingerbread on the popular Galaxy S platform. Now, a few weeks after being unveiled with much fanfare, we're finally able to sink our teeth into Ice Cream Sandwich with the **Galaxy Nexus**, arguably the latest addition to Samsung's critically acclaimed **Galaxy S II** family. So, does this highly anticipated device live up to our expectations? Is the Galaxy Nexus the smartphone to beat? Most importantly, is Ice Cream Sandwich ready to take Android to the next level? In a word, yes. Read on for our full review.

## MORE INFO

[Ice Cream Sandwich supports USB mass storage after all, Galaxy Nexus does not](#)

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SAMSUNG

**Galaxy Nexus**  
\$750+ (no contract)

### PROS

- Satisfying look and feel
- Stunning display
- Impressive performance
- Excellent battery life

### CONS

- Underwhelming camera
- Average build quality and materials

### BOTTOMLINE

The Galaxy Nexus is definitely the best Android phone available today -- it's possibly even the best phone available today, period.

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### Galaxy Nexus review







## Hardware

There's absolutely no doubt that the Galaxy Nexus is a big phone. Sure, it's not [Galaxy Note large](#), but it's a smidgen taller (and narrower) than the [HTC Titan](#). As such it dwarfs its predecessor, the Nexus S. While this could be an issue for some folks, we didn't have any trouble fitting the handset in our pockets. Despite its size, the Galaxy Nexus manages to be quite thin (8.94mm / 0.35in) and light (135g / 4.76oz). As a result, it feels wonderful in hand. Design-wise, the Galaxy Nexus looks like what we imagine would happen if we stacked a Nexus S and a Galaxy S II and flattened them with a rolling pin. Last year's shiny black lacquer gives way to a satiny gunmetal gray finish that manages to be at once more refined and more understated. Build quality is typical Samsung – the plastic construction is durable but looks and feels cheap for such a flagship device.

In front, the Galaxy Nexus is almost identical to the Nexus S, with a sheet of "reinforced" curved glass hiding sensors and a 1.3 megapixel front-facing camera to the right of the earpiece. Notably absent are the familiar capacitive buttons, which have been replaced with three softkeys in Ice Cream Sandwich. There's also a notification light just below the display, something we'd like to see on all phones. The back blends the curves from the Nexus S with a textured battery cover and oval camera pod reminiscent of the [Epic 4G Touch](#). While the battery door uses the same snap-on design as most Galaxy S II variants, we found it harder to snap shut. The camera pod is home to a five megapixel autofocus shooter and single LED flash. A microphone is cleverly hidden in the seam of the battery cover, above and to the right of the camera pod, and the speaker is located on the signature chin at the bottom of the device. Google and Samsung's logos are stenciled on the battery door.

**The Galaxy Nexus looks like what we imagine would happen if we stacked a Nexus S and a Galaxy S II and flattened them with a rolling pin.**



All the controls and ports follow the exact same layout as on the Nexus S. You'll find the headphone jack, micro-USB connector and main microphone along the bottom edge of the handset, the volume rocker on the left side, the power / lock key up along the right side and nothing on the top edge. There's a series of



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the left side, the power / lock key up along the right side and nothing on the top edge. There's a series of three gold contacts below the power / lock button, presumably for an optional charging dock -- something that Nexus One owners will be familiar with. Under the battery cover, this unlocked HSPA+ version is home to a 1,750mAh NFC-enabled battery and a standard SIM slot nestled to the right of the camera pod. Sadly, there's no removable storage on the Galaxy Nexus.

With its clean and rather plain design, the Galaxy Nexus doesn't exactly stand out in a crowd (except, perhaps, for its size), but this all changes the instant you see the screen. The 4.65-inch HD Super AMOLED display (1280 x 720 pixels) is simply beyond par. Gorgeous doesn't even begin to describe this screen -- try amazing, jaw-dropping, mind-boggling. As we mentioned in our [first impressions](#), fonts are crisp, colors are vibrant, blacks are deep and viewing angles are exceptional. Yes, the panel is similar to that of the Galaxy Note, which means it's PenTile, and yes, the [HTC Rezound](#) features a beautiful 4.3-inch 720p TFT display with a proper RGB matrix, but the writing's on the wall: Super AMOLED is brilliant, and it's only getting better.



Considering most Galaxy S II variants are powered by Samsung's in-house Exynos SoC, with some models using Qualcomm's Snapdragon S3 and NVIDIA's Tegra 2, we were surprised to discover that the Galaxy Nexus eschew all of these in favor of TI's OMAP 4460, a dual-core 1.2GHz Cortex A9 CPU with a PowerVR SGX540 GPU, paired here with 1GB of RAM. Our unlocked HSPA+ review unit boasts 16GB of built-in storage (the LTE version comes with 32GB). Unfortunately -- and unlike Gingerbread -- Ice Cream Sandwich only supports USB Mass Storage on removable media, leaving MTP and PTP as the only options to transfer content to / from the phone via USB.

In terms of radios, you'll find WiFi a/b/g/n, Bluetooth 3.0, GPS / AGPS and NFC. Moreover, the Galaxy Nexus is the first Android device with a pentaband 21Mbps HSPA+ radio (that's 2100, 1700 / AWS, 1900, 900, and 850MHz bands), meaning it's compatible with both T-Mobile and AT&T's 3G / "4G" networks in the US. A quadband EDGE radio provides legacy support. Rounding up the spec list is the usual bevy of sensors -- accelerometer, compass, gyroscope, light and proximity -- along with a new kid of the block, known as a barometer. Speaking of sensors, we experienced problems with the auto-brightness setting, which would dim the screen too much in low light, while behaving normally in daylight. Hopefully, this will be fixed in a future software update.

### Performance and battery life



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- Predictably named iPavement puts hotspots into the sidewalk 21







The Galaxy Nexus is definitely one of the fastest Android handsets we've ever played with. Everything feels snappy, everything looks fluid -- Ice Cream Sandwich isn't just a new version of Google's mobile OS, it's what happens when Android hits the gym and becomes lean and mean. That being said, the Galaxy Note, with its dual-core 1.4GHz Exynos processor and optimized build of Samsung's TouchWiz 4.0 UI, still wins in terms of perceived speed. Getting the most performance from Android 4.0 requires a few tweaks. Not all the live wallpapers are fully optimized (for example, Phase Beam is, but Water isn't). Developers have to add a single line of code to their apps to take advantage of 2D hardware acceleration -- you're able to enable this as the default for all apps by checking "Force GPU rendering" in the Developer Options.

### Ice Cream Sandwich is what happens when Android hits the gym and becomes lean and mean.

Looking at our benchmark results, it's clear the Galaxy Nexus is no slouch. We're not going to read too much into the Quadrant score, since we're not even sure the app works properly in Ice Cream Sandwich, but it's close to what we observed on the HTC Rezound. The results for most of the other tests match those from the [Motorola Droid RAZR](#) (similarly powered by TI's OMAP 4430 chip), except for Neocore, which would crash each

time we tried running it. Most impressive is the SunSpider score, which is the lowest we've ever recorded on any phone. In fact, the entire web browser is blazingly fast -- gone is the signature lag that's familiar to anyone who's ever browsed the web on Android.

	Samsung Galaxy Nexus	Samsung Galaxy Note	Motorola Droid RAZR	HTC Rezound
Quadrant	2,032	3,998	2,798	2,347
Linpack Single-thread (MFLOPS)	42.85	64.30	50.0	52.0
Linpack Multi-thread (MFLOPS)	69.37	95.66	95.66	60.3
Nenamark 1 (fps)	53.03	56.67	50.34	53.5
Nenamark 2 (fps)	24.26	N/A	27.54	35.8
Neocore (fps)	Would not run	51.77	59.98	59.8
SunSpider 9.1 (ms)	1,985	2,902	2,140	2,961

We didn't experience any issues with network performance. Calls sounded loud and clear on both ends (thanks in part, no doubt, to the dual microphone setup), and data speeds on T-Mobile and AT&T matched our expectations for this type of radio, with results as high as 8Mbps down and 1.7Mbps up. Some European owners have documented [erratic volume problems](#) when connected to 900MHz GSM networks -- something we were unable to reproduce here in the US for lack of compatible bands -- but Google's already promised a fix. Audio quality is fine when listening to music. The Galaxy Nexus is able to drive a variety of headphones and earbuds without trouble, and the speaker is surprisingly decent.

Battery life is excellent. While we only managed to squeeze about five hours and 15 minutes from our battery rundown test (where we play a looped video starting from a full charge), it matches what we saw with the Droid RAZR, which features a similar battery and processor. Note that we switched video players since our usual app misbehaves in Ice Cream Sandwich. The 1,750mAh battery fared significantly better in our battery usage test (where we use the device normally until it shuts down), lasting an impressive 28 hours. Other than watching videos, it's unlikely most people will have to worry about running out of juice with the Galaxy Nexus.

### Camera

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Details 

We're just going to come right out and say it. The five megapixel autofocus camera on the Galaxy Nexus is underwhelming, and to be clear, we're not referring to the specs, but to the actual pictures. In the year since the introduction of the Nexus S, we've witnessed significant improvements in camera performance, first with Samsung's Galaxy S II, then with HTC's [myTouch 4G Slide](#), and more recently, with Apple's [iPhone 4S](#). Each of these handsets combines an eight megapixel backside-illuminated sensor with a fast wide-angle autofocus lens, and takes wonderful shots. It's not clear why Google passed on using Samsung's flagship camera module, but it's a real shame. While the Galaxy Nexus shooter is extremely fast and introduces plenty of new features, it provides little (if any) improvement in picture quality over the Nexus S.

Galaxy Nexus sample shots



The new camera app is incredibly quick and borrows a lot of functionality from existing third-party Android shooters, such as touch-to-focus, continuous autofocus, face tracking, zero shutter lag and panorama. It's easy to take several shots per second by repeatedly tapping the on-screen shutter key. Google clearly put a lot of effort into revamping the camera app. It's simple and intuitive, with three primary modes of operation – video, stills, and panorama. Video recording now supports 1080p capture (720p using the front-facing sensor), real-time effects (think Photo Booth with face tracking) and time lapse (a feature we're particularly fond of). While there's no dedicated two-stage camera button, holding the on-screen shutter key locks focus and exposure, and releasing it snaps the picture. Sadly, the volume rocker doesn't double as a zoom control, but there's an on-screen slider.

**While the Galaxy Nexus shooter is extremely fast, it provides little improvement in picture quality over the Nexus S.**

Most of the time, it's possible to coax the Galaxy Nexus camera into taking reasonably nice shots. Color balance is quite good, but exposure is sometimes off due to the sensor's narrow dynamic range. We also noticed that bright images exhibit some haze. Pictures snapped in low light suffer from significant noise and loss of detail. The Galaxy Nexus captures 1080p video with mono audio (despite the dual microphone setup). While the frame rate maxes out at 24fps, the camera supports continuous autofocus. Ice Cream Sandwich features a comprehensive photo editor within the Gallery app (complete with Instagram-like filters) and a dedicated video editor called Movie Studio.

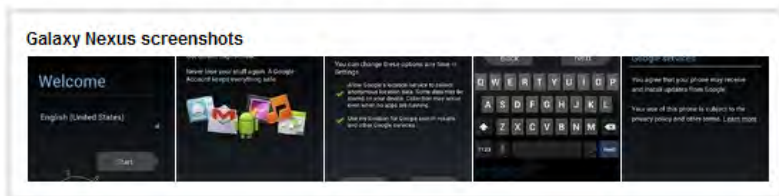
## Software

Sure, the Galaxy Nexus is a beautiful and powerful piece of hardware, but that's only part of the story. More significantly, it's the launch device for Google's highly anticipated new version of Android – Ice Cream Sandwich – the company's most significant mobile OS update yet, with a laundry list of improvements. As such, we approached the new software with lofty expectations, and while we weren't disappointed, we were surprised by the extent of the changes, to the point where we found ourselves having to undo years of old Android habits.

There's a definite learning curve to Ice Cream Sandwich that's ultimately rewarded with a more attractive design and a more coherent user experience. GInøerbread's lime green-on-black color scheme



gives way to a more subtle light blue-on-gray motif, and for the first time, we're getting a better sense for where Android is headed -- a clearer identity, which is fantastic news. That being said, we're not convinced that Android 4.0 will be more intuitive for first-time users -- it still feels geared towards people like us: the nerdy, tech-savvy, geeky and power-hungry set. Let's dive into the details.



## With Ice Cream Sandwich we're getting a better sense for where Android is headed.

After turning the Nexus on for the first time, you're greeted with the familiar Android setup process. New accounts are invited to join Google+ and Google Wallet. There's also a slick tutorial that's sure to lower the learning curve for first-time users and seasoned aficionados alike -- something we initially skipped, but would have eased our transition to Ice Cream Sandwich. We were also pleased to see our settings restored and

all of our apps downloaded and installed after logging into our Google account, something that never appears to work properly on the myriad Android devices we regularly get our hands on.

The first change you're likely to notice is the new lock screen, which shows the time and date using Android's lovely new font, Roboto, and displays album art and audio controls during music playback. Slide the padlock icon to the right and it unlocks the handset, slide it to the left and you're dropped into the camera app (a clear nod to HTC's Sense 3.0 UI). It's now possible to access notifications directly from the lock screen by pulling down the notification tray. Another interesting -- if perhaps somewhat gimmicky -- new feature is face unlock, which unlocks the Galaxy Nexus upon recognizing your face (or a picture of your face, as it turns out). Convenience and novelty are the name of the game here, not security.

More differences come to light when looking at the five home screens. As we already mentioned, the Nexus lacks hardware buttons, which have been replaced with three softkeys at the bottom of the screen -- back, home and recent apps. The latter lists recently accessed apps using thumbnails containing a snapshot of each app. Tapping on an app's thumbnail switches to it, and flicking apps to the side removes them from the list. Unlike a real task manager, there's no proper way of closing apps. Just like in Honeycomb, a virtual menu button (represented here by three vertically stacked dots) appears to the right of the main row of softkeys when running legacy apps. While this usually works, Facebook fails to display this virtual menu button for some reason, forcing us to live with the annoying default notification settings.



Ice Cream Sandwich includes additional persistent items across all five home screens -- the favorites tray just above the softkeys and the search bar just below the notification area. You're able to customize the favorites tray with four apps of your liking, two on either side of the app tray button -- something that's likely familiar to anyone who's used a third party launcher before. For better or for worse, the search bar now takes up a tiny sliver of real estate at the top of each home screen. Strangely, the search bar also lives on as an optional widget.



Speaking of which, the app tray now includes two tabs – one for apps, and one for widgets, along with a button to access the Android Market. Gone is the ability to add widgets and shortcuts by long-pressing anywhere on the home screens, but just like in Honeycomb, many of the stock widgets are now resizable. The app tray no longer scrolls vertically, but consists of multiple pages that are accessed by swiping left or right – complete with a nifty animation. A welcome feature is the ability to drag an app from the app tray on top of an existing app in the home screens to create app folders. While there's no way to create app folders within the app tray itself, it's now possible to uninstall apps without leaving the app tray.

The notification tray is more polished in Ice Cream Sandwich. It enables quick access to the settings menu (since there's no more hardware menu button) and allows the user to dismiss individual notifications by flicking them to the side. Audio controls have also been added to the notification tray, and only appear while listening to music. The settings menu also benefits from a welcome overhaul, with the controls grouped in three sections – the oft-used wireless settings at the top, the device settings in the middle and the system settings at the bottom. Screenshots are now finally an integral part of Android – just press the power / lock key and the volume down button simultaneously and observe the magic.

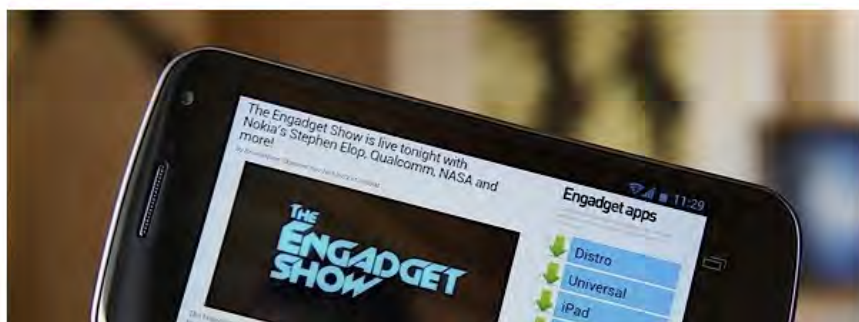


We're happy to report that Android 4.0 provides much improved text input and a consistent, system-wide clipboard. The keyboard is now significantly more accurate, with better word prediction and a spell checker that underlines mistyped words in red – just touch any mistyped word to see a list of suggestions. Continuous voice input is now supported in any input field and displays spoken text in near-real-time. Long-pressing any text selects the current word, and brings up the selection carets along with a clipboard bar with buttons for select all, cut, copy and paste.

Google also fitted Ice Cream Sandwich with a comprehensive and intuitive set of tools to manage data usage. You're able to monitor total data usage and per-app data usage with separate counters for mobile networks and for WiFi. Better yet, it's possible to set a warning threshold as well as a hard limit beyond which the phone will stop using data over mobile networks altogether – something sure to come in handy for anyone with one of those pesky tiered data plans. There's also a way to turn off background data for individual apps, forcing them to use WiFi instead.

Most of Android's core apps have been revamped as well, and feature a more intuitive layout. The Gmail app gains multiple text sizes, the calendar adds a neat pinch-to-zoom feature, and – as we mentioned above – the Web browser is much improved, especially in terms of performance. Expect a [full-blown review](#) of every intricate Ice Cream Sandwich detail in the days ahead.

## Wrap-up







Let's not beat around the bush. The Galaxy Nexus is definitely the best Android phone available today -- it's possibly even the best phone available today, *period*. Sure, it's not perfect -- we're disappointed that the camera doesn't deliver the same wow factor as the rest of the handset. It's an alright shooter, but it's just no match for the state-of-the-art. There's also room for improvement in terms of build and materials quality. Still, there's no denying the satisfying look and feel, the stunning display, the impressive performance, the excellent battery life -- the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Ice Cream Sandwich is phenomenal -- it represents a giant leap forward for Android and brings a whole new level of style and substance to Google's mobile OS. Still, while the design is more refined and the user experience more polished, we're not sure it's intuitive enough for first-time users. At the core, it's clear that Android remains targeted squarely at tech-savvy, power-hungry folks like us. No matter -- the Galaxy Nexus is proof that we can have our Ice Cream Sandwich and eat it too.

Dana Wollman contributed to this report.

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TYPE	OPERATING SYSTEM	SCREEN SIZE	INTERNAL MEMORY
Smartphone	Android (Ice Cream Sandwich [4.0])	4.65 inches	16 GB
CAMERA	DIMENSIONS	WEIGHT	RELEASED
5 megapixels	5.33 x 2.67 x 0.37 in	5.29 oz	2011-11-17

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