Review: Sony Xperia Ion
Bulky design, outdated software overpowers design

By Ryan Kamphuis
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It was with great excitement that I got a hold of the Sony Xperia Ion to review. For years Sony has released cell phones as Sony Ericsson, a joint venture between Sony and Swedish telecom Ericsson. The Xperia Ion is one of the first smartphones produced by Sony after buying out Ericsson's stake in the company and going out on its own.

Billed as Sony's first LTE device and the perfect device for HD content, the Xperia Ion is sold as a top-tier smartphone to compete with the likes of the HTC One and the Samsung Galaxy S III. On the hardware side of things, the Xperia Ion is a sleek, black phone with a 4.6" HD display, a 12-megapixel camera, and a front-facing camera. The Xperia Ion's display is drop-dead gorgeous; it is amazingly clear and detailed, and the colors it produces are vivid and vibrant. When I compared the Xperia Ion's screen with that of the Galaxy S III, the Xperia Ion won out.

The camera on the Xperia Ion was also very good, snapping photos that looked just as good as those taken by an iPhone 4, which is widely regarded to be the best cell phone camera available. The 12-megapixel camera also has a cool panorama mode that allows the user to take panorama pictures simply by sweeping the camera through the air. Despite the excellent screen and camera, the rest of the Xperia Ion's hardware doesn't measure up.

The design of the phone is quite awkward, which makes the phone very uncomfortable to hold. I found that if I held the phone for any longer than 15 minutes, it began to hurt my hand. This became extremely annoying when I needed to respond to many emails, or when I wanted to watch a TV show or movie on Netflix. The location of the headphone port on the Xperia Ion is also very awkward—it is located on top of the phone, exactly in the middle of the device. This makes holding the phone in the landscape orientation unbearably uncomfortable if you have headphones plugged in.

Let's move onto the software on the Xperia Ion.   The Xperia Ion runs a Sony-customized version of Android 2.3 Gingerbread. The customizations that Sony has put onto Android work to boost Android's media offerings and make Android look more HD. Most of the additions that Sony adds are pretty cool. They add an interesting Social Network aggregator, several services for obtaining music and movies, and an application that allows you to view all of your media on an HDTV using a micro HDMI port on the phone. Despite these cool additions and the standard features given by Android, I still found myself extremely underwhelmed by the software experience on the Xperia Ion. The fact of the matter is that Android 4.0 Ice Cream Sandwich is now the standard for Android devices, and it is simply unacceptable for top-tier smartphones to be released based on Android 2.3 Gingerbread. The added features and performance boost provided by Android 4.0 are amazing; in fact, many of the features that Sony added to Android 2.3, such as the panorama camera mode, became standard features in Android 4.0. It really amazes me that when HTC and Samsung are releasing phones with Android 4.0 on them, and when Android 4.0 has been available to OEMs for over 8 months, that Sony would still release a phone with Android 2.3. Frankly, it comes off as very lazy. They are deliberately weakening their phone by releasing it with Android 2.3 on it, making it impossible to compete with the likes of the HTC One X and the Samsung Galaxy III. The software experience on the Xperia Ion is not particularly bad; it just pales in comparison to that provided by other phones that run Android 4.0.

There's a lot to like about the Sony

Xperia Ion; it has a gorgeous screen and an excellent camera, but between hardware and software missteps, it doesn't even come close to its competition. At this point in time, buying a phone still running Android 2.3 is about the worst thing you can do, making the Xperia Ion an extremely tough sell. It becomes an even tougher sell when you consider that it costs $99.99 from AT&T on a two-year contract. That same price can net you a HTC One X or a Motorola Atrix HD, both of which run Android 4.0 and are guaranteed to give you a far better software experience because of it. The fact of the matter is that I feel guilty recommending any phone with Android 2.3; Android 4.0 is here, and buying a phone running anything else is just locking yourself in the past. If Sony wants to compete with the big boys like HTC, Motorola, and Samsung, they're going to have to realize that they can't power their top-tier devices on a version of Android that is out of date.

Review: Plantronics BackBeat Go Headphones
Quality practical use, improvements needed

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While Bluetooth headsets have become very popular in past years, stereo Bluetooth headsets–their music playing brethren–have never been able to catch on quite as well. Plantronics plans to change this with the release of their new BackBeat Go earbuds.

The BackBeat Go is comprised of two fairly large black earbuds connected by a flat wire with an in-line microphone and control unit. The design of the BackBeat Go is both fantastic and annoying. On one hand, the earbuds look good and are very comfortable to wear, on the other hand, connecting the two earbuds with a flat wire kind of makes these things pointless. The whole reason to buy a pair of stereo Bluetooth headphones is to cut cables, and these earbuds have one that is almost more annoying than a standard cable. Almost every time the cable connecting these earbuds rubs against something like your shirt or your skin, that rubbing sound is easily heard by the wearer. The cable is also needlessly long, making it uncomfortable. I wish Plantronics had either found a way to make the earbuds wireless from each other or had connected them using solid plastic, turning them into a pair of headphones.

Utilizing Bluetooth technology, the Backbeat Go earbuds allow the user to connect to their phone or tablet to make phone calls or listen to music. Audio quality is very good during calls. Calls are crisp, with almost no static or background noise. It can be a little interesting listening to phone calls in static, but this is a very minor complaint.

When I asked people I was talking to how I sounded, they said that I came in clear, that my voice sounded a little bit like I was talking on a speaker phone, but that it wasn't a detriment to our conversation. When listening to music, the sound quality is passable. While the music comes through very clear, the music's treble and bass are very weak. This doesn't really have anything to do with the earbuds themselves, but with stereo Bluetooth technology. Stereo Bluetooth just doesn't have enough bandwidth to allow for the kind of data transfer necessary for exceptional sound quality.

In the end, the Plantronics BackBeat Go does its job well. You can make phone calls and listen to media with them, and the sound quality while doing this is pretty good compared to other stereo Bluetooth headsets. Really, the only caveat to the BackBeat Go is the cable connecting the earbuds; I can't express how strongly I despise this cable. It is the only thing holding me back from calling these earbuds perfect. The cable is just too long, annoying, and detrimental to the overall experience provided by these earbuds.

Hopefully, Plantronics realizes this and finds a new way to connect the BackBeat Go's earbuds and releases an updated product soon–they'd have a real winner on their hands if they did. The Plantronics BackBeat Go earbuds are available at many electronics stores and wireless retailers across the country and retail for $99.99.