

Light in Weight, Heavy in Power

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It's a scene repeated in airports all over the world: a harried executive, rushing to make a connecting flight, lugging a suitcase and a cumbersome laptop through security lines and onto the aircraft.

The overloaded traveler may become a sight of the past, like airport passengers talking on pay phones, because of the growing trend toward flyweight laptops. Increasingly, consumers are opting to buy cheap, lightweight and compact portable computers known as netbooks. These new computers are powerful enough to grab e-mails, surf the Web, handle a document or peruse a spreadsheet. But netbooks are unlikely to replace a desktop or full-sized laptop computer – there is no running Oracle or Photoshop on these sleek machines. But where netbooks excel is in portability, connectivity and familiarity, because most of the best-selling units weigh less than five pounds, have wireless cards and run the ubiquitous Windows XP operating system.

"When I'm on the road I use a netbook because it's small; you want to do tasks but not necessarily create things," says R. Marcelo Claire, CEO of the wireless distribution company, Brightstar Corp.

Claire, a self-described road warrior who has logged hundreds of hours of global travel, keeps careful track of mobile device trends for his Miami-based business. He believes netbooks are poised to become as commonplace as mobile telephones during the next 10 years. That's because major mobile carriers in Europe are

already subsidizing the cost of netbooks by bundling them with multi-year wireless plans. And their counterparts in the United States and Latin America are now following suit.

What does Claire use his netbook for? Primarily to send and receive e-mail, listen to music, check travel maps; watch movies or television shows he downloads, and social networking through Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. "It's a level up from an iPhone," says the Brightstar CEO.

But there are drawbacks. "The keyboard is small, there is also limited hard disk space and memory, and a lot of them don't have DVD capability," Claire said. "But if your main goal is entertainment or social connectivity or e-mail, then a netbook will work for you."

Latin Trade took two netbooks through their paces to see how they performed at work and on the road.

The first, Sony's VAIO P Series Lifestyle PC, wins the prize for compactness, weighing a scant two pounds. At first glance you can hardly believe it's a fully functioning computer since it's only 10 inches by five inches – hardly larger than the keyboard. Sony did not scrimp on features though, packing the VAIO P with Bluetooth, Wi-Fi and mobile broadband connectivity, as well as a built-in webcam.

In comparison, the HP Mini 2140 was a bit chunkier, weighing almost three pounds, with a similar complement of connectivity sans mobile broadband, which can be added through a USB modem.

The two units have very different designs, but performance is comparable. The HP Mini has a slightly faster processor. It is hard to beat the VAIO in terms of size. The screen is amazingly sharp and the battery life (aided by a solid-state hard drive that sparingly draws battery power) allows more than an hour between charges. But the VAIO loses points for the quirky, rubber-covered button it uses instead of a trackpad. And compared to the VAIO, the HP Mini machine feels rock-solid, with a larger keyboard and well-designed trackpad. The VAIO retails for around US\$900 while the HP Mini can be had for around US\$500.