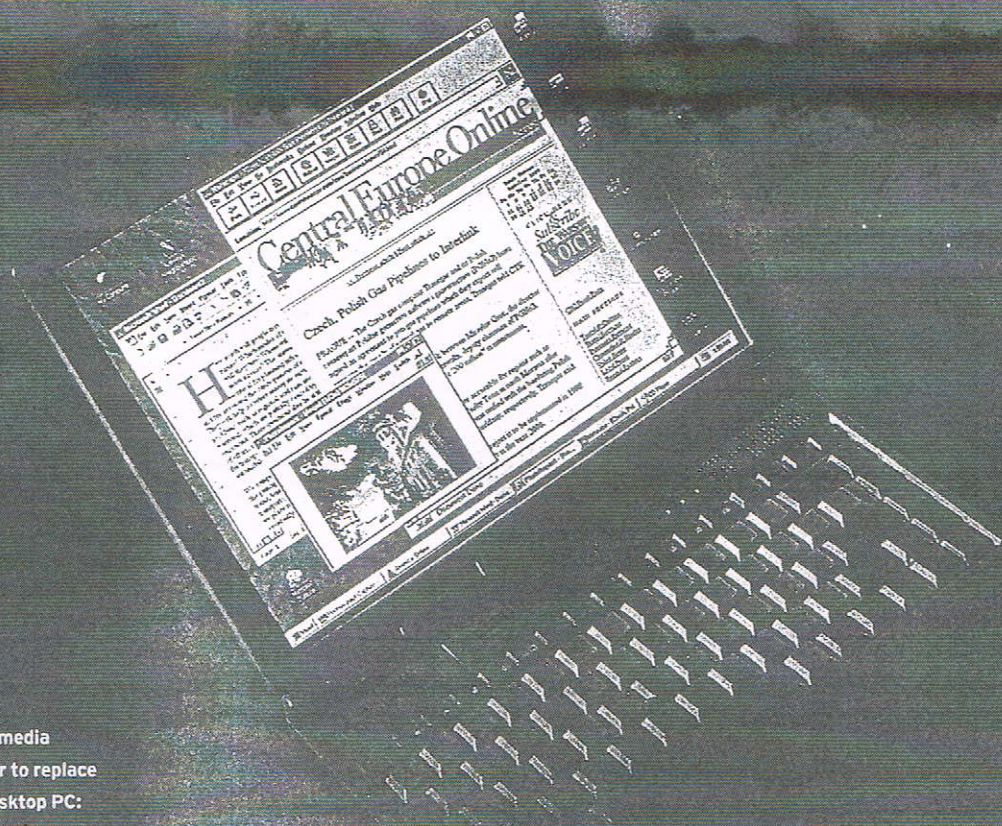


Different Notes *for* Different Folks

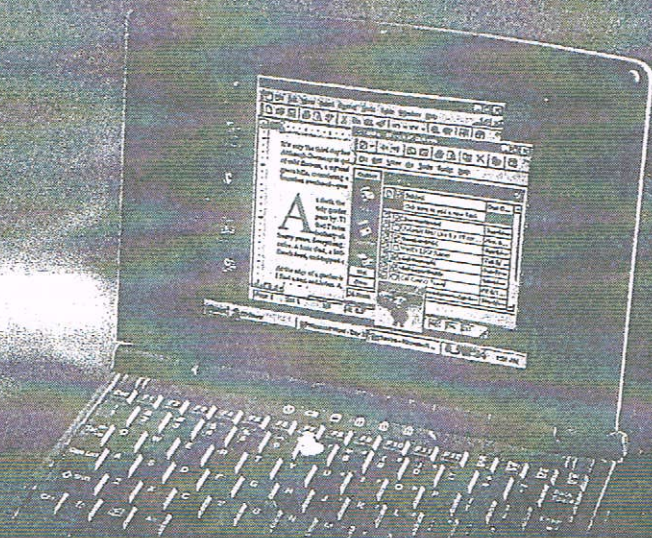
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK BUTLER



A multimedia
monster to replace
your desktop PC:
Toshiba's Tecra
780DVD.

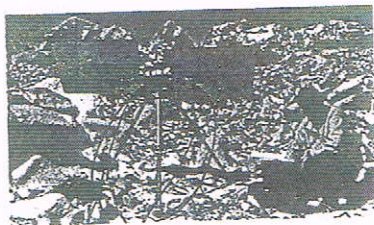
Not all





An ultralight
travelmate that's kind
to your shoulder:
Mitsubishi's Amity CN.

Not all laptops are created equal. These 14 portables—desktop wannabes, outdoors survivalists, svelte traveling companions, and superlight tagalongs—will tackle any task. EDITED BY VINCE BIELSKI



UNDER A GLORIOUSLY blue afternoon sky, Jim Bruton waited anxiously at a rock-strewn base camp on Mount Everest. The documentary producer had been toiling in the thin air at 18,000 feet for two months in preparation for this moment. Now he was about to make history using his notebook computer.

At the top of Everest, where a team of climbers equipped with video cameras had just arrived, a Sherpa guide pointed his camera down the mountain and panned the surrounding peaks. The signal bounced off a satellite dish on a nearby mountain before the panoramic view materialized on Bruton's FieldWorks notebook, which then relayed the signal to its final destination, a Web site in Malaysia. "It was like seeing the first pictures from the moon," recalls Bruton about the first live video Internet broadcast from the summit of Mount Everest, which happened last year. ▶

It wouldn't have happened without the \$8595 FieldWorks FW7666P. While other climbers' IBM ThinkPads succumbed to altitude sickness, the impervious FieldWorks stayed healthy. Even a soaking one night didn't hurt it. "When I woke up," recalls Bruton, "there was my computer sheathed in ice. I said, 'Oh my God, it won't work,' but it was fine."

THE NOTEBOOK BAZAAR

YOU MAY NEVER NEED an astronomically priced notebook that works at below-zero temperatures, but the existence of ruggedized portables like the FieldWorks speaks well of the wide variety of laptops available today. Product niches created for the sake of making a buck drive some of this diversification, but manufacturers are also wising up to the fact that one style of laptop doesn't fit all, says Ken Dulaney, a notebook analyst at Gartner Group. "These days most people have already owned a notebook for several years," he says, "and they have a good idea of what they want in their next one."

To help you find the best notebook for your particular needs, we divided the universe of portables into four categories: desktop alternatives, thin and light travel models, subnotebooks, and ruggedized units. We asked a wide variety of vendors to give us their best shot and send us a notebook that could win in one of our divisions. Once the entrants had rolled in, we used scoring criteria appropriate to each specific category, rather than our *Top 10 Notebooks* rating system.

DESKTOP KILLERS

FOR YEARS, notebook manufacturers have been claiming to have built a true desktop alternative—a portable PC with enough speed, keyboard, screen, and features to replace your office system. Truth is, notebook processors and screens have come close to matching those on desktop models, but you'll have to pay at least \$3299—the price of the Pentium II-powered Quantex H 1331, our desktop alternative Best Buy—for a laptop and port replicator that provides most of the comforts of a full-size \$2000 desktop.

You say you travel a lot? Your best bet may be one of the new thin and light notebooks. The older versions of these

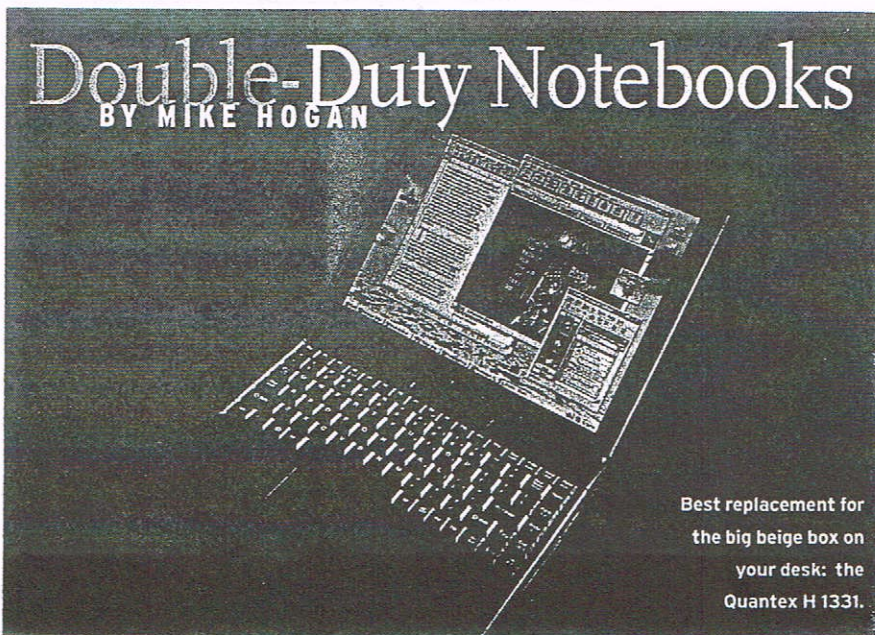
models lacked internal CD-ROM and floppy drives, but now you can buy a notebook that's only 1.5 inches thick, weighs 6.5 pounds, and comes with a modular drive bay. The best travel notebook we tested is the \$3199 Gateway Solo 5100 LS.

Need something even lighter—say, for e-mail and short bursts of word processing on the road? Four-pound subnotebooks, another niche product that some people prefer to the tiny palmtop devices, are attempting a comeback with faster processors and bigger screens. If your fingers can handle the subnotebooks' tiny keys and you don't mind the small

screens, we recommend the \$1999 Hitachi VisionBook Traveler 3000 for its bright screen and good performance.

Lastly, for those who need to take their office outdoors, a few vendors have introduced what you might call "ruggedized lite," a less heavily armored version of the shockproof and water-resistant portable. At about \$4500, these units cost thousands less than fully ruggedized notebooks like the FieldWorks.

As you will see, specialization does not equal perfection—all of these notebooks have drawbacks. But the proliferation of choices is what we call progress.



Best replacement for the big beige box on your desk: the Quantex H 1331.

IF YOU'RE A BAD GUY hoping to hide a long rap sheet, try to avoid the Williamson County, Illinois, courtroom of Presiding Circuit Judge Ron Eckiss. Ditto for attorneys looking to bend the law. His honor has all that information at his fingertips thanks to a notebook he packs to court.

"My portable makes it easier for me to avoid mistakes," says Judge Eckiss.

Back at his office, a port replicator connected to a monitor, a keyboard, and the court's computer network sits on his desk. By plugging his notebook into the replicator, he gets all the comfort of a desktop PC but none of the inconvenience of swapping files between two computers.

A growing number of professionals who travel occasionally are opting for desktop alternatives, says Ken Dulaney, the Gartner Group analyst. But at what price? A Pentium II-266 notebook and

port replicator, plus an external monitor and keyboard, will cost at least \$4000. Why pay that much if you can get a desktop PC with the same CPU and monitor for \$2000? "Most people who have notebooks work 3 to 5 hours a week more at home and on the road," says Dulaney, "so it's easy to justify the cost of a notebook."

In evaluating desktop alternatives from Compaq, Dell, IBM, Toshiba, and Quantex, we stressed price, performance, storage, screen, and port replicator or docking station. Weight and battery life were given less consideration because these note-

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After testing, we favored the Quantex H 1331. Its 266-MHz Pentium II processor and 4GB of storage make the H 1331 the equal of all but the newest desktops. At \$3299, the Quantex is much cheaper than the other convertible models, and it's the only one in the group that comes with the attractive combination of an extra battery, a carrying case, and a port replicator.

The other desktop alternatives we tested had worthy features but couldn't compete with the Quantex's amazingly low price. (All prices here include docking station or port replicator.) The \$6198 Compaq Armada 7792DMT and \$6848 Toshiba Tecra 780DVD have bigger hard drives, more multimedia features, and more docking options than the Quantex. The \$4323 IBM 380XD, the only portable in this group with fixed CD-ROM and floppy drives, was the sturdiest of the bunch. The \$4348 Dell Latitude CP M233XT had the best battery life and an exceptionally well-balanced docking station.

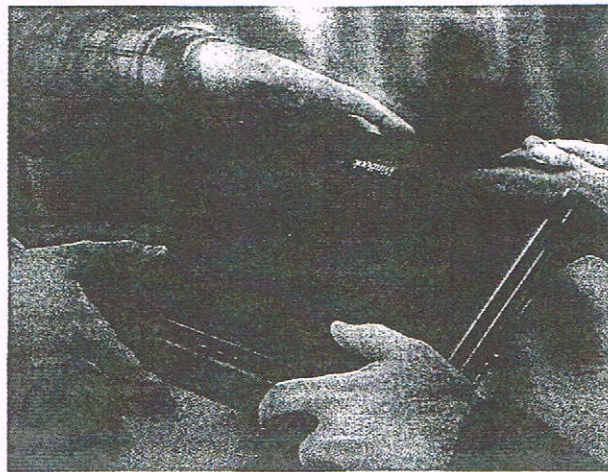
POWER TO GET THE JOB DONE

IF A NOTEBOOK is going to be your one and only, consider a speedster. The fastest mobile CPU today, the Pentium II-266, powers the Quantex, IBM, and Toshiba units. With an average PC WorldBench score of 145, these notebooks are just as fast as PII-266 desktops we've tested.

But many users won't need that much speed—the PMMX-233 Dell and PMMX-266 Compaq can handle most tasks. And the Dell took top honors for battery life because its processor requires about 30 percent less juice than do Pentium IIs.

WANTED: QUICK GETAWAYS

YOU SHOULDN'T have to bend over your desk and mess with a rat's nest of cables every time you want to hook up or disconnect your portable. A port replicator,



Notebook Theft Is Skyrocketing: Here's How to Prevent It

YOU RUSH TO A PAY PHONE at O'Hare and set down your notebook to make an urgent call. Hovering nearby, the *spotter* sees you and signals the *distracter*, who approaches you and asks for change. Then the *pickup* comes up from behind you, grabs your notebook, and hands it off to the *courier* passing by.

Highly choreographed rip-offs occur daily. Ohio-based Safeware, an insurer specializing in computer coverage, says that 309,000 notebook PCs were stolen in 1997—up from 256,000 in 1996—and the upward trend is continuing.

The loss to businesses is not just in the cost of the notebook. The real damage comes from lost work hours and from the possible exposure of a company's business secrets. A 1998 survey by the San Francisco-based Computer Security Institute found that each stolen notebook costs companies an average of \$32,000, not including the value of the lost data.

Most stolen notebooks are taken from offices by people with a reason to be there. "They're lifted by employees, messengers, and catering people," says Joe Mazza, a vice president at Datamation, a computer security company.

or a more full-featured docking station, will save you the trouble.

Need to be networked? All five notebooks allow easy local area network connections. But the similarities end there.

We liked the minimalist approach of the Quantex Mini-Docking Station and IBM's \$299 Enhanced Port Replicator. Each can connect to a monitor, keyboard, and mouse. These egg carton-size devices don't have a docking station's expandability, but the IBM does have PC Card slots.

After you've left the office with your notebook, it remains a target for thieves—particularly at airports, where a tenth of notebook thefts occur. "Where else do you get 30,000 to 40,000 people a day who are hurried, excited, tired, distracted, and loaded with valuables?" says Lieutenant Dennis Luca of the San Jose (California) Police Department's Airport Division. "Talk about a pool of potential victims."

The best way to protect your laptop, experts agree, is simply to pay attention. "You don't leave your wallet or purse on your chair while you go get a cup of coffee, do you?" scolds Richard Bernes, a former FBI agent who now directs the Technology Theft Prevention Foundation in Warren, New Jersey. "But many do lose their portables this way." At phone booths and automated teller machines, as well as in restrooms, you should put your notebook bag between your feet or step through the strap.

A number of security devices can help you hang on to your notebook even when your guard is down. Cabling devices are the first line of defense. A cable attaches the computer, via a built-in security slot, to a stable object like a desk drawer handle, a table leg, or a chair. We recommend Qualtech's Notebook-Kit, an 8-ounce cable-and-lock combination that fits into a pocket-size pouch.

Our favorite alarm is TrackIt. You carry the key-chain transmitter and put the wallet-size receiver—which weighs less than 6 ounces—in your notebook case. When you and your notebook are separated, the alarm in the case goes off. In my test it was certainly loud enough to foil a thief.

—Carla King

•Qualtech Notebook-Kit; \$44; Curtis Computer Products; 800/272-2366; www.pcsecurity.com
READER SERVICE NO. 650

•TrackIt; \$50; TrackIt; 888/487-2251; www.trackitcorp.com
READER SERVICE NO. 651

Both devices can dock and undock only when the notebook is in suspend mode. Each tilts its notebook up at a comfortable typing angle, and both portables come with firm and large-enough keys—no need for an extra keyboard here.

If you need a full-featured docking station, Compaq's \$863 ArmadaStation and Toshiba's \$949 DeskStation V Plus will give you that and more. Besides a full array of ports, the ArmadaStation has a pair of PCI/ISA slots, a Type III PC ►