

SanDisk Sansa e260 review

Posted Jun 1st 2006 1:44PM by Peter Rojas



A couple of years ago this would have sounded crazy, but [SanDisk](#), which is probably best known for flash drives and memory cards, just put out one of the best MP3 players on the market. Yeah, I know, I'm just as surprised as you are, but after spending a few weeks with the new 4GB Sansa e260, part of SanDisk's new Sansa e200 series, I'm going to be sorry to send this one back. The e260 isn't without its faults, but if you're looking for a solid alternative to the iPod, and haven't been so fired up by the latest models from [Creative](#), [Samsung](#), et al. (or are still in [mourning for Rio](#)), then you should do yourself a favor and check this one out. Or at least keep reading the rest of this review.

Design



Until now SanDisk's Sansa line has aimed squarely for the low-end of the market, with a succession of clunky, uninspired, no-frills flash-based players designed to appeal to budget-conscious consumers. They've still got some cheapies in their line up, but the e200 series signals a new direction for the Sansa line. For starters, SanDisk doesn't deny that they're going straight after the nano with this one. The e260's design reminiscent of the nano, right down to the glossy black finish and the scroll wheel. It's also just about the same length and width as the nano (3.5-inches by 1.74-inches vs. the nano's 3.5-inches by 1.6-inches), but the e260 is nearly twice as thick (0.52-inches vs. 0.27-inches). Hardly a deal killer when you're talking about gadgets that are this small -- unless you absolutely have to have the thinnest player around, that is.

Yes, the players in the e200 series have scroll wheels -- no touch-sensitive pads here -- but this is a mechanical scroll wheel reminiscent of the wheel on the original 1G iPod (which, for whatever reason, still has a lot of fans). The tactility of the mechanical wheel is nice, and it even glows blue when you're using it (which is also a nice, albeit pointless, touch). The wheel itself is plasticky and feels like the only part of the player that won't be able to stand up to a little wear and tear (not that I've experienced any problems with it so far).



The glossy black finish on the front of the player is most definitely a fingerprint magnet, but it also proved to be more resistant to scratching than the casing on the iPod nano (though not completely impervious, I did notice a couple of small scuffs after normal use). The back of the player is made out of Liquidmetal, a special alloy that is said to be harder and more elastic than similar alloys of titanium or aluminum. We don't really have the equipment here at Engadget HQ to evaluate their claims, but the back of the e260 did emerge from two weeks of testing completely unscathed.



There are six buttons on the front of the player, four surrounding the scroll wheel (Up/Play/Pause, Right/Forward, Left/Previous/Rewind, and Down/Submenu), a center Select Button, and a power button which confusingly also doubles as a main menu button (instead of opening a submenu it takes you all the way back the main page of the UI). Having the power button pull double-duty as a menu button is probably a mistake; I know I've been trained to resist pressing any button with the universal power symbol on it unless I want to turn something on or off, and several times I've switched off the player when I actually wanted to exit to the main menu. The Play/Pause button is also awkwardly placed along the top of the scroll wheel where it can be a little difficult to press; SanDisk should have put it on the bottom like with the iPod or made the button larger. There are two additional controls on the player, a Hold switch along the top next to the headphone jack and a dedicated Record button for voice recordings.

Display



The display on the e260 is excellent. It's very bright, crisp, and easy to read, and while it's not very large, it is a smidge bigger than the display found on the nano (1.8-inches vs 1.5-inches). The e260's tiny screen makes you wonder why SanDisk even bothered adding (limited) support for video playback, but I'm not really complaining, since it's nice to have the option.

User Interface



We all know how bad it can get, but the user interface on the e260 is surprisingly good. The main menu is an icon-based list of options (Music, FM Radio, Photo, Settings, Voice, and Video) and navigating sub-menus is fairly straightforward. It takes a little while to catch some of the tricks, but the UI itself is nice and snappy; there's absolutely no sluggishness at all.

Pressing the Submenu button (the one below the scroll wheel) when you're listening to music takes you into menu where you can find options to Repeat, Shuffle, EQ, Rate This Song, Scan Through Song, Add Song to Go List, and Back to Music List. Volume is adjusted by turning the scroll wheel. Pressing the center Select Button while you're listening to a song toggles the display between the amount of time the song has left, a graphic EQ, album art, and a listing for whatever song is next up in the queue.

Sync and File Transfer

Poor software integration has been the downfall of many a promising MP3 player. I was a little nervous about well the e200 would fare going into this review, and the results here are a mixed bag.

First, the good news: the e200 supports USB mass storage, so if you want you can just drag-and-drop your tunes onto the player (for smaller capacity players, drag-and-drop is usually the quickest and easiest way to handle transfers). These transfers were a snap; I was able copy over 100 MP3s (about 400MB) in 2 minutes and 21 seconds.

Here's the not-so-good news: if you want to take advantage of the e200's PlaysForSure support and listen to DRM'd music, including those of subscription-based services like Napster To Go, Yahoo Music Unlimited, and Rhapsody To Go, you're in for some frustration. I tested the e260 with Rhapsody To Go and found that player-software integration still has some kinks to be worked out.

To be fair, most of the time everything worked perfectly fine. I was able to transfer DRM'd Rhapsody To Go tracks over to the player with minimal effort -- the only annoyance was that it would take about seven minutes to transfer 100 tracks over to the player, three times longer than it would during a straight drag-and-drop. That extra time isn't the end of the world, but it took upwards of an hour to fill up a 4GB Sansa e260 with DRM'd music. And the record industry wonders why consumers loathe DRM?

The extra time transfers would take is something I could more or less live with, but I experienced a couple of hiccups during the time I was testing the e200. One day I switched on the player to discover that all of my attempts to play Rhapsody To Go tracks were met with a message telling me that I needed to synchronize the player, something that I had just done the day before, and which in theory I should only need to do every 30 days at most. A second sync solved the problem, but then a few days later the Rhapsody client stopped recognizing the e260 altogether, something which made song transfers completely impossible. Installing the latest build of the Rhapsody client seemed to solve the problem, but its little frustrations like these that hold back services otherwise promising products like Rhapsody To Go and the e260.

Media

These days pretty much every digital audio player with a decently-sized color screen has some sort of digital photo viewer, and the e200-series is no exception. It's also nothing extraordinary, and handles all the usual biz: thumbnails, slideshows, etc. The e260's ability to handle video stands in contrast to the iPod nano, but playback is limited to 15 fps and all videos have to be converted using SanDisk's bundled app before transfer. It's not worth going to a lot of trouble just to watch something on such a miniscule screen, but like I said before, it's sort of a nice frill to have.

Pricing

SanDisk is certainly trying to make it ! an attractive proposition by pricing these things competitively versus the iPod nano, with the 2GB e250 selling for \$179, the 4GB e260 going for \$229, and the 6GB e270 priced at \$279. Don't ask me why they didn't pick names that were more indicative of each player's capacity, like e220, e240, or e260).

Conclusion



It ain't perfect, but the e260 is a solid competitor to the iPod nano, and if forced to choose between the two, I'd pick the Sansa. With a cheaper price, larger screen, integrated FM tuner, better battery life (twenty hours to the nano's fourteen -- plus the e260's battery is more easily replaced), a MicroSD expansion card slot, and a solid user interface, the e260 gets a lot more right than it gets wrong. That isn't to say that there are some issues that need improvement -- the e260's buttons could be a lot better, its startup time could be a little shorter, and its PlaysForSure integration isn't seamless (which isn't entirely SanDisk's fault - surely Microsoft shoulders plenty of blame here as well) -- but overall the e260's finer points outweigh its defects.