

PC Plus



Handspring's Visor Deluxe looks good and has an expansion module called Springboard. Will this be enough to take market share from the current leader Palm?

palmtop

HANDSPRING VISOR DELUXE

Can a different expansion slot make this Palm-compatible a world-beater?

Specifications Palm OS version 3.1H, Motorola Dragonball EZ processor running at 16MHz, 8MB RAM, greyscale display 160 x 160 pixels (approx 60mm wide x 60mm deep), powered by 2x AAA batteries with quoted life of six to eight weeks average use, infra-red port
Other information Supplied with Palm Desktop Organizer software for PC, HotSync cradle and synchronisation software. On-board software includes Date Book, Date Book Plus, Address Book, Mail (e-mail software), To-Do List, Memo Pad, Expense, Calculator, Advanced Calculator, CityTime world clock, Graffiti handwriting recognition software and soft keyboard. Visor (2MB version) around £132 (ex VAT £112). Visor Solo (no docking cradle) around £109 (ex VAT £93)

■ PRICE around £183 ■ EX VAT around £156 ■ SUPPLIER Handspring ■ WWW www.handspring.com

Handspring is the child of ex-Palm employees Donna Dubinsky and Jeff Hawkins. Their first product, the Visor, made its debut in the US last November and has now launched in the UK. Basically, it's a PalmPilot clone. We are looking at the Deluxe model here, but there are two other versions: Standard and Solo. The Standard has 2MB rather than 8MB memory and the Solo also lacks the docking cradle.

Ergonomically, the Visor Deluxe shares the look and feel of the old PalmPilot Professional. It has a similar array of buttons acting as shortcuts to

slot called Springboard. This slot uses a proprietary technology rather than standard Compact Flash and can accommodate an array of add-ons. Handspring is understandably talking Springboard up as something which makes Visor vastly superior to anything in the Palm range. We have already seen a data backup module, a game (Tiger Woods Golf), a digital stills camera and a tiny pocket-sized unit that can store and display contact and diary data for use when the Visor itself is just too big to carry. There is no reason why electronic books, MP3 players, GPS systems, even GSM modules should not appear soon.

Springboard units are designed as plug-and-play. The idea is that they can be inserted while the Visor is switched on, install their own software on the fly, and are ready to use with no intervention from the user. They uninstall

themselves when pulled out of the slot removing unnecessary software that might clutter the system up. Our trials with sample cards managed this effortlessly.

The Visor Deluxe comes with 8MB of RAM and is powered by the Motorola Dragonball processor favoured by Palm. It runs at 16MHz – slower than the latest version used in Palm's Ilc (colour screened model) and Palm Vx but, in our experience, the speed difference does not have any tangible effect in everyday use. The Operating System is PalmOS version 3.1, so Visor does not have all the software enhancements that the new Palm Ilc and Palm Vx carry. However, it does have support for colour images and we captured some images using the Springboard camera which were displayed on the Visor using 4-bit greyscale tones.

Handspring has included some enhancements of its own. Most notable of these is the Date Book's integration of To-Do items and new calendar views, an advanced calculator and a world clock.

The OS duplication means all the third party shareware and other software for the Palm machines should work on the Visor, giving the unit a large, readily accessible software base at launch.

The Visor Deluxe ships with a docking cradle stylishly coloured like the Visor itself. This is a USB device which should make synchronisation operations faster than we are used to seeing with serial connections. Visor supports infra-red data communications. Interestingly, while it has a built-in microphone, you can't actually make voice recordings on the device itself – this feature may be used by Springboard developers. Power comes courtesy of two AAA batteries, which Handspring says should last for six to eight weeks of average use. We have not had a unit for long enough to comment on this but it is not wildly far from what we would expect.

Palm is the undisputed market leader as far as palm-sized devices are concerned. Handspring's 'killer app', the Springboard and its neat take on design might be enough to see it grab some of Palm's market share. The exact UK prices have yet to be confirmed so prices here are based on the American dollar price but are expected to be pretty close to the mark, making the Visor excellent value.

Sandra Vogel

The plastic used to make the coloured cases is **surprisingly sturdy** and the colours themselves should appeal to the more fashion conscious

major applications at the bottom front of the machine, the power and backlight button is on the front bottom left of the case, and the stylus sits in a slot at the back right of the case. Additional buttons on the touch-sensitive screen provide more shortcuts to applications and software tools. These occupy precisely the same slots as they do on the PalmPilot – the only difference being redesigned symbols. A screen protector can be clipped to the front of the device and moved on to the back when not required.

There are two differences between Visor and PalmPilot that make the Visor quite special. One of these is cosmetic. The Visor Deluxe comes in iMac-inspired colours – blue, green, yellow, white and a more sedate slate. The plastic used to make the coloured cases is surprisingly sturdy and the colours themselves should appeal to the more fashion conscious.

It's the other difference that makes Visor special, though. In the back of the device is an expansion

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VERDICT

HANDSPRING VISOR DELUXE

For Good looking, uses the slick Palm OS

Against Expensive Springboard modules could detract from overall appeal. Manual on CD only

Range of features.....	10
Ease of use.....	9
Documentation.....	8
Performance.....	9
Value for money.....	9

9/10