AirDrop review:

At a Glance

Expert's Rating

Pros

- Incredibly easy to set up and use
- clever use of Bluetooth and Wi-Fi
- file sharing makes iOS a much better work tool

Cons

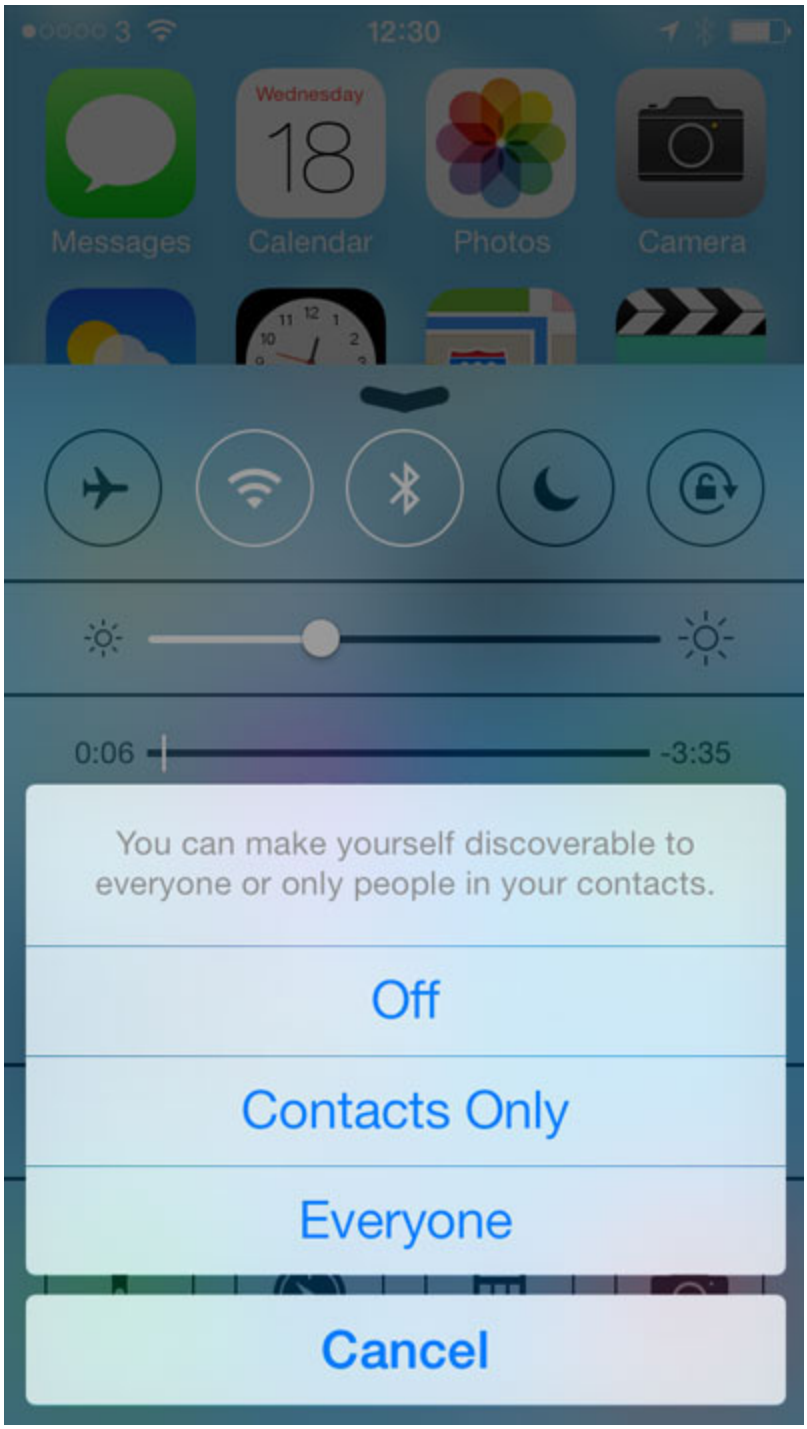
- Can’t share music or video files
- limited to apps that support it
- Mac OS X integration waiting upon Mavericks
- limited to more recent iOS devices

Our Verdict

AirDrop is part of the iOS 7 update so you’ll probably already have it on your iPhone, iPad or iPod touch. It’s well worth using on a regular basis though for sharing files between your devices and with other people. It’s a great solution for bouncing files around the local vicinity, although we’d still keep using services like Dropbox and Google Drive for storing files in the cloud and sharing them globally.

AirDrop is Apple’s new technology for sharing files and documents wirelessly between devices. First introduced with Mac OS X 10.7 Lion it has now made it to the iPhone, iPad and iPod touch as part of the iOS 7 update.

AirDrop sits alongside AirPlay as your new go-to feature for bouncing a file from one place to another. If you have multiple iOS devices you can use it to move a file from one device to the other, and you can share files with friends in the same location as you.



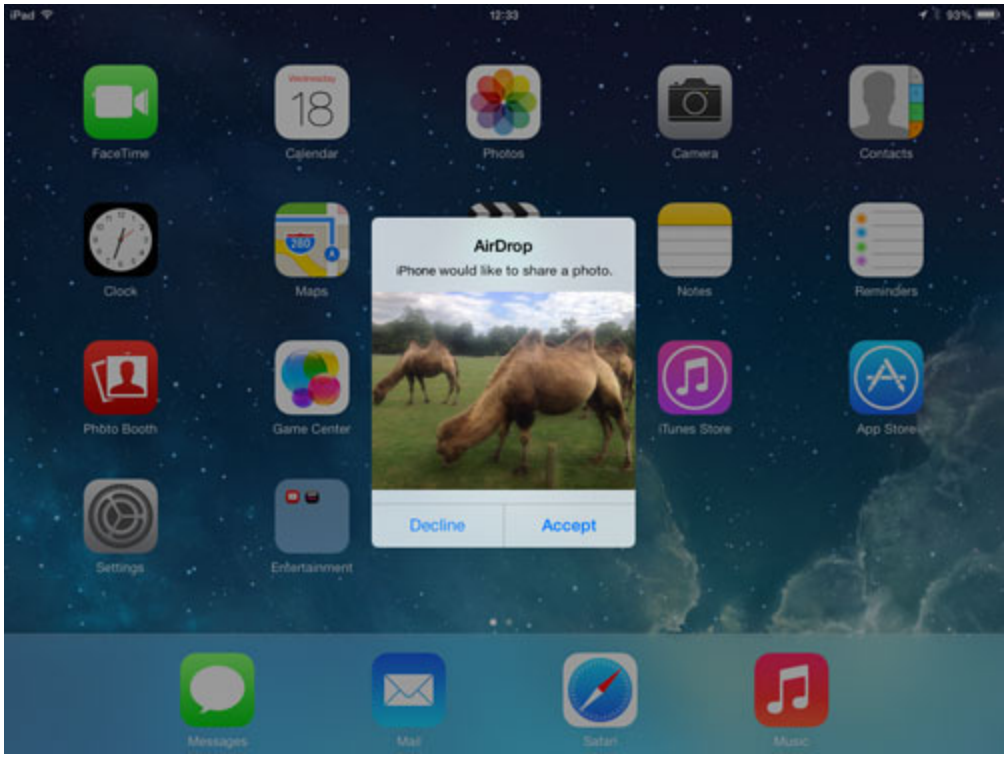
How does AirDrop work

On the technical side of things, AirDrop uses a mixture of Bluetooth 4.0LE and Wi-Fi so you'll need to have both enabled on both devices. AirDrop uses Bluetooth to talk to iOS devices in the local area and then transfers files using Wi-Fi. The files are – according to Apple – transmitted securely (although Apple hasn't confirmed which security system it is using).

From the user side of things AirDrop displays Apple's usual seamless usability. In iOS 7 you Turn on AirDrop using the new Control Centre (slide your finger up from the bottom of the display) and tap AirDrop. Users are given the choice between Off Contacts Only and Everyone. Contacts Only restricts AirDrop files sharing to people in the Contacts list (useful in busy places) or Everyone, which enables anybody within range to share files with you.

With AirDrop switched on you can head into an app like Photos and tap the Share icon. Above the usual Message, Mail, Twitter options you'll now see an AirDrop space. Any users with AirDrop turned on will appear as an icon in this window. Simply tap their icon and they'll get a message saying that you want to share the file with them. They tap okay, and it's bounced over the WiFi network.

It's clever stuff, and an extremely practical way to share files that solves a lot of the problems inherent with using locked-down devices like the iPhone and iPad. With no USB ports or access to the iOS Finder this offers a neat and elegant solution to file sharing. It's going to be particularly useful for people who find cloud services like Dropbox a pain, and sharing by Mail is fiddly and cumbersome.



What files can you share with AirDrop

AirDrop is fairly universally distributed throughout iOS. Here are some of the files we've found compatible with AirDrop:

- Photos
- Contacts
- Camera videos
- Web pages
- Map points and directions
- Evernote notes
- Passbook cards

What files can't you share with AirDrop

- Videos
- Music
- Calendar events
- Reminders
- iWork documents

The notable omission is Pages, Numbers and Keynote documents. Although we are expecting updates to the these apps pretty shortly and don't think they'll be off the sharing list for long. Unless Apple has some other iWork sharing mechanism in mind, which given the lack of collaborative editing in iWork is also on the cards.

Of course, its inability to share video and music files is less surprising, but needs addressing. It's a disappointing move on the part of Apple. We get that file sharing is an issue in these areas, and that Apple has vested interests in guiding people towards the iTunes Store. But even so the block on music and video sharing throws Apple's "walled garden" approach in your face. At least with Music Apple has an iTunes Match services, although this only shares audio files to devices with your own iTunes User ID and costs £21.99 per year.

See: Guide to using iTunes Match

What devices are compatible with AirDrop

AirDrop doesn't work on all iOS devices. You need an iPad 4, iPhone 5, 5S, or 5C, iPad mini or iPod touch 5th generation. The iPad 3 and iPhone 4S are both fairly popular devices excluded from this list, so you might find support limited for a few years while people pick up new iOS devices.

Another rather major omission is Mac OS X, which is currently incompatible with AirDrop. So we can't test how easy it is to transfer files wirelessly from a Mac computer to an iOS device. This feature is set to be introduced in Mac OS X Mavericks, at which point AirDrop will become instantly more useful. You can still transfer files wirelessly by clicking the "Sync this device over Wi-Fi" feature and using File Sharing inside the Apps tab.

What does AirDrop mean for Apple?

On the whole it's worth noting that AirDrop is a fantastic technological implementation of frictionless file sharing. We've never encountered any system that makes it so easy to pass a file from one device to another. There are limits to it, in particular you can't share certain file types, and you can only share files with people in the same location as you. But there are other services like Dropbox, Google Drive and, of course, Mail for sharing over longer distances.

AirDrop is also a big step in the direction of turning iOS devices into a more effective replacement for the laptop. While it still doesn't offer the same level of freedom as a laptop, it's increasingly moving towards being a suitable replacement for most people. AirDrop takes us further down that path. And as we walk along we're starting to see Apple's idea of file storage and sharing come to fruition. There is no more Finder, instead documents are stored locally in apps and shared with iCloud, and can be shared between apps and, now, other people. It's an interesting new vision of the future: but the fact

that Apple restricts it to the kind of documents it wants you to share makes us as wary as we are excited.