Lenovo ThinkPad R500 Review

★★★★☆ Reviews By Jamie Bsales published August 20, 2008

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Laptop Mag Verdict ★★★★☆

Speedy performance, extra-long battery life, and top-notch ergonomics and build quality make the R500 an excellent bang-for-your-buck business notebook.

Pros

+ Good performance
+ Long battery life
+ Comfortable keyboard
+ IT-friendly extras
+ Built-in Wireless USB

Cons

- Bulky, plastic chassis
- Tiny touchpad
- Mediocre Wi-Fi range

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Built for business users who roam the office halls more than they roam through airports, the Lenovo ThinkPad R500 delivers everything we like about the ThinkPad line, just in a larger package than we're used to. The big screen and standout keyboard mean that desk jockeys won't have to switch to dock-connected replacements if they don't want to, and the $1,237 price is very reasonable for the performance and features our tested configuration delivered.

Lenovo ThinkPad R500 Design

As expected, the R500 sports the familiar and classic black casing. Unlike the more expensiveThinkPad X200andX300, which feature a grip-friendly rubberized matte coating on their mag-alloy shells, the R500's pebbled chassis is decidedly plastic-feeling, as if polymer beads destined for the Lenovo-branded side of the factory made their way into the ThinkPad hopper by mistake. The lid is also particularly chunky, adding to the visual heft. Lenovo could have done a little more to pare the 6.6-pound R500's 14.1 x 10.2 x 1.4-inch dimensions, but buyers who care more about portability could just as easily opt for the 1.2-inch-thin ThinkPad T500, which also features a 15.4-inch display.

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Pop the latch on the right (sorry, lefties) and lift the angular lid, and you'll find the always-welcome ThinkPad keyboard, which features a near-flawless feel and the handy ThinkLight LED illuminator (now in amber) for added visibility in dark rooms. While we appreciate the dual pointing devices (both touchpad and TrackPoint pointing stick) that are the norm on corporate models, we again bemoan that the extra mouse buttons force the touchpad and its mouse buttons to be smaller than they should. Lenovo has included dedicated volume and mute buttons, too.

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Display and Sound

The R500 comes with a 15.4-inch matte widescreen available in 1280 x 800-pixel (as on our test unit) or 1680 x 1050-pixel resolutions. The latter gives you more pixels to display large documents or multiple windows, though by the time you up the zoom level in your app to read the text comfortably, you might be better off with the lower-res panel. We found the 1280 x 800 screen very readable, though the antiglare coating did rob some pop and color vibrancy. The panel offered decent off-axis viewing, though, with just a slight brightness shift when viewed from the side; the R500 could certainly serve as your presentation device for a small group. In DVD playback on the included multiformat DVD burner (a Blu-ray burner is an option for an extra $400), the panel exhibited natural color reproduction, though motion blur was evident. The up-firing stereo speakers deliver enough volume and good quality, though we'd appreciate more bass punch.

Webcam

Our build included the optional 1.3-megapixel webcam. The Lenovo Camera Center icon leads you to a download link for Skype (for videoconferencing and video calls), or to the preloaded Roxio Media Ir utility for capturing stills and video. The camera's low-light performan was impressive: In a dark room, all that was needed was the light fron screen to see the subject clearly. Unfortunately, that sensitivity transla into poor color saturation and blown-out highlights under normal ligh conditions, and tweaking the gain, brightness, contrast, and other sett in the camera utility had little impact.

Other Features

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connector (which, unfortunately for Lenovo, is losing ground to the more popular HDMI standard for high-def video connectivity). There's an ExpressCard/54 slot and another spot for a SmartCard or PC Card reader, as well as a memory card reader. The bottom dock connection accepts the Lenovo Advanced Mini Dock solution (for an additional $175). To augment the standard Bluetooth 2.0 wireless connectivity, Lenovo even makes available built-in wireless USB.

Manageability and Security

The ThinkPad family has IT features that are second to none. The blue button above the keyboard launches Lenovo's ThinkVantage Productivity Center suite of user and IT tools. Menu choices in the list let you find Wi-Fi networks within range (arranged by signal strength) and identify which are secured and unsecured, as well as toggle on or off the machine's built-in radios. Other menu choices include the ability to launch backup, restore, system update, and system maintenance tasks. Best of all, the Productivity Center is customizable by a company's IT department, so an administrator can add or hide tasks or substitute links to a company's own support sites instead of Lenovo's.

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As for security, the R500 includes a fingerprint reader and TPM circuitry to help keep data and corporate networks secure. You can also order the R500 with software encryption for the hard drive that seamlessly (and automatically) encrypts stored data, no user intervention required.

The 160GB hard drive on our test model is on the small side, but other 5,400-rpm models up to 320GB are available, as is a 7,200-rpm 160GB drive. Any one you pick comes with Lenovo's active hard drive protection to protect data if the machine gets dropped. To protect other internal components, the R500 features a plastic chassis reinforced with carbon fiber to improve rigidity.

Performance

The R500 features Intel's latest Centrino 2 platform. The 2.53-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T9400 processor with 6MB of L2 cache and a 1066-MHz FSB, 2GB of RAM (expandable to 4GB), and integrated Intel X4500 graphics delivered above-average productivity performance compared with other mainstream models we've tested.

The R500 scored 3,666 on PCMark Vantage (which tests application performance in Vista). That's about 500 points better than the average this class. The hard drive's internal data transfer rate of 15.7 MBps is g and the R500's one-minute boot time into Windows Vista Business is tolerable. Its relatively low scores of 3,175 on 3DMark03 and 1,037 on 3DMark06 mean you'll have to dial back the resolution and effects set in demanding 3D games if you want to see playable frame rates. However,

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Wireless and Battery Life

Our R500 came with the extended nine-cell battery (a $79.20 add-on when configuring your system online). It protrudes about half an inch out the back of the machine and adds about 5.5ounces to the weight, but the nearly 6 hours of runtime we saw on our LAPTOP Battery Test is worth the bulk. In wireless testing, the 802.11a/g/n-equipped R500 delivered above-average throughput at 15 feet from our access point (18.9 Mbps) but below-average throughput at 50 feet (12.6 Mbps).

Software and Warranty

Beyond the ThinkVantage software, the R500 comes with Adobe Reader, Roxio's OEM CD/DVD media suite, and a 90-day trial for McAfee Anti-Virus. Of course, with corporate notebooks, this is often a moot point, since a corporate IT department will load its own software image on it. Lenovo covers the R500 with a one-year warranty.

Lenovo R500 Verdict

For all the comforts of a desktop in a machine that can travel when duty calls, the Lenovo ThinkPad R500 fills the bill. We wish it were a bit more svelte (and stylish), but we have no quibbles with its performance, endurance, security features, and overall value.

Lenovo ThinkPad R500 Specs

Bluetooth	Bluetooth 2.0
Brand	Lenovo
CPU	2.53-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T9400

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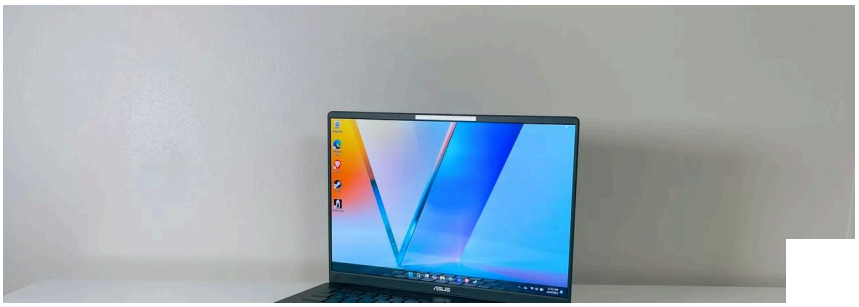

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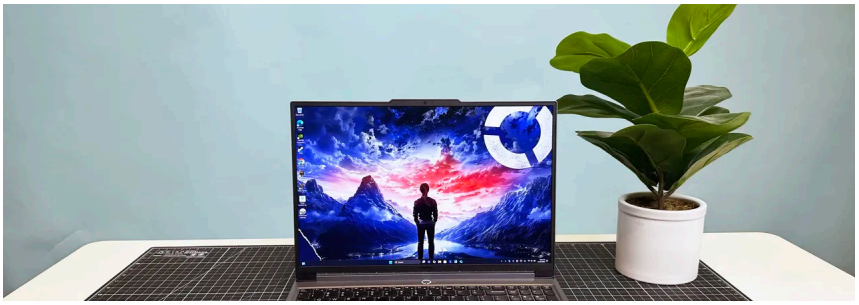

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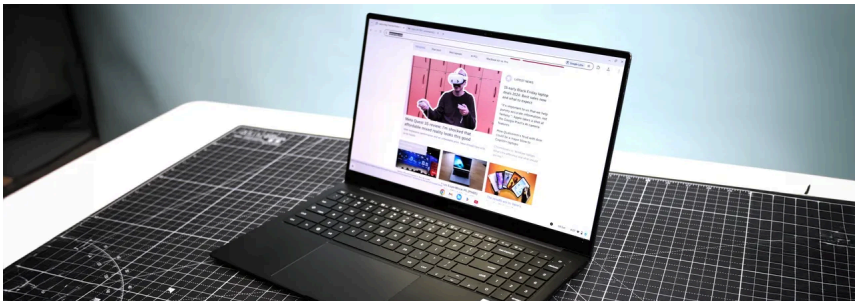

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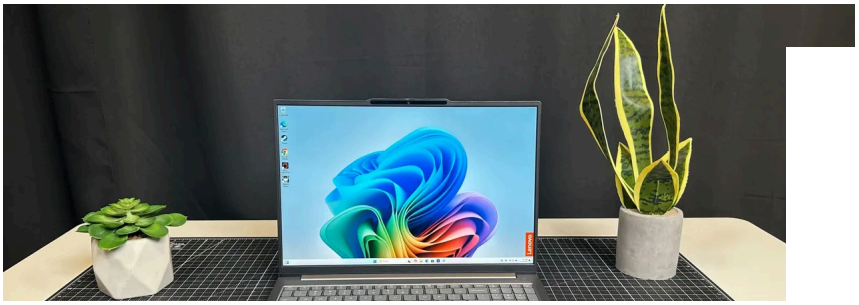

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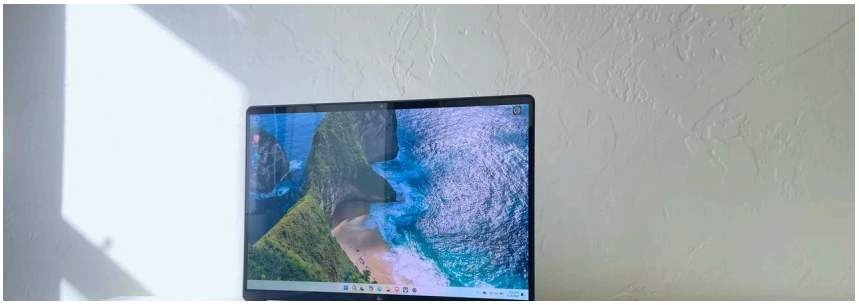

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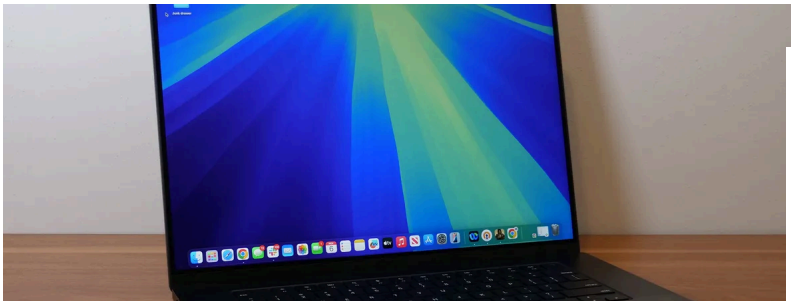

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