NEC Versa S900

PRICE £1,299 (£1,526 inc VAT) DELIVERY £45 (£53 inc VAT)

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VERDICT **Proving that big things can occasionally come in small packages, the Versa S900 packs a huge punch without bumping up the size or price.**

A whole new world has opened up since notebooks were liberated from the Pentium 4-M's stranglehold – a world where performance laptops don't have to double up as weightlifting equipment and small flashy notebooks like the NEC Versa S900 aren't tied down to weedy 933MHz Pentium III-M processors. The Pentium-M has shaken up the whole industry – and it's about time too.

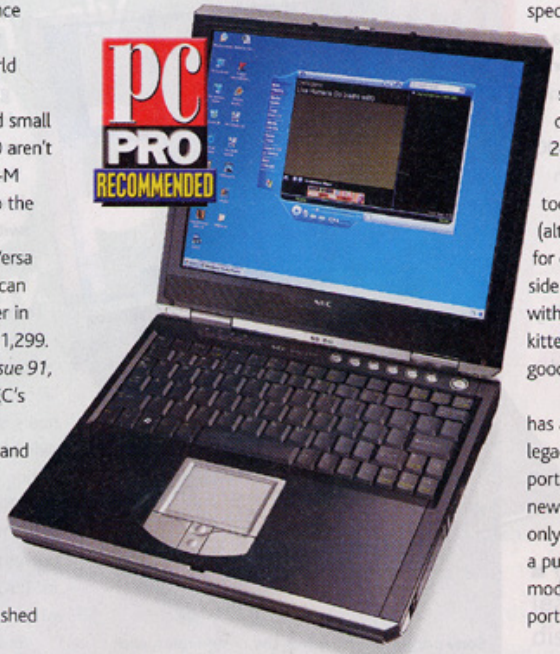
If it weren't for the Pentium-M, the Versa S900 wouldn't even be here. As it is, you can now get one of the fastest notebooks ever in a small shiny package, and it only costs £1,299.

Like the Toshiba Portégé 4000 (*see issue 91, p102*), it's difficult to define the S900. NEC's website boldly claims that it's an ultra portable, but as it measures 34mm thick and weighs 2.25kg it's pushing this definition to the extreme. It's certainly not as luggage-friendly as Dell's Latitude X200 (*see issue 97, p122*) or as desirable.

But that doesn't mean the S900 is necessarily ugly. In fact, with its shiny brushed aluminium lid closed, it looks very flash. However, it's not quite as endearing when you open it up; in terms of styling and build quality, NEC could learn a lot from the Sony VAIO PCG-Z1SP (*see p61*). For a start, the plastic palmrests flex a little more than I'd like, and the keyboard feels light and flimsy too. There's also a huge 17mm bezel on either side of the 12.1in screen, and 38mm underneath it to accommodate the integrated stereo speakers – you almost feel like you've been cheated on screen size.

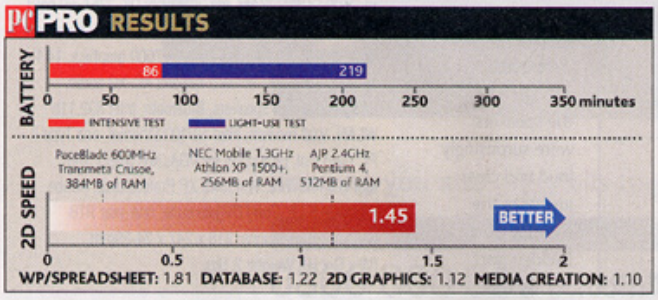
Also, despite being made from metal, there's a lot of give in the lid. Even opening and closing it can cause ripples in the TFT screen. You need to make sure it's got plenty of padding, but if you do that you'll find the S900 a great travel partner, especially if you want to use it away from the mains.

Thanks to the Pentium-M processor and a 4,400mAH lithium ion battery, the Versa S900 lasted for three hours, 39 minutes under light use, although this dropped dramatically to 86 minutes under our intensive test. It's not as outstanding as the five hours, 16 minutes we got from the Toshiba Tecra M1 (*see issue 103, p60*), but it's an impressive achievement for its size nevertheless.



Thanks to Centrino, power notebooks no longer have to double as weightlifting equipment.

But the performance is even more amazing for such a compact notebook. Its overall 2D benchmark score of 1.45 is second only to the Acer TravelMate 800 (*see issue 103, p58*), and only by a negligible margin of 0.01. Even 3D gamers are catered for by a 32MB ATi Radeon Mobility 9000 graphics chip, which offers enough memory for 3D acceleration at the screen's native XGA resolution. The 3DMark2001 SE score of 5,324 wasn't outstanding, but it's still the best we've seen from a notebook of this size, and it offers DirectX 8.1-level Pixel and Vertex Shaders too.



While slightly smaller than I'd like, the screen itself also offers decent enough image quality. My only complaint is that it could do with being brighter – the image quickly disappears if there's sunlight behind it. Plus, the horizontal viewing angles are less than ideal – it's nigh on impossible to get an angle with even brightness across the board, but it's still fine for day-to-day work.

Likewise, the 30GB hard disk is pretty small by modern standards, but offers just enough space for normal work. Otherwise, the specifications are very impressive. The 512MB of PC2100 DDR SDRAM means the supplied Windows XP Professional operating system will run smoothly, and the Panasonic combo drive has a fantastic CD-RW speed of 24x/10x/24x.

There's plenty in terms of connectivity too, with three USB 2 ports on the back (although sadly none are front or side mounted for easy access), a four-pin FireWire port on the side and an infrared port too. Plus, in keeping with the modern Pentium-M theme, NEC has kitted out the S900 with all the Centrino goodies, so you get Intel 802.11b WLAN too.

However, in its vision of the future, NEC has also made the S900 almost completely legacy-free. So there's no parallel port, serial port or even a PS/2 port, which could be bad news for anyone owning older peripherals. The only nods to the past can be found underneath a pull-down flap at the back, which reveals the modem and Ethernet jacks, along with a VGA port and S-Video out.

The S900 is by no means perfect, but you can't complain when it only costs £1,299. Okay, so the build quality and screen aren't as good as they could be, and you only get a minimal one-year collect-and-return warranty, but bear in mind that the price includes the fastest 1.6GHz Pentium-M processor, Radeon Mobility 9000 graphics and 512MB of RAM. It's already a bargain before you even consider the form factor, and once you start adding in the comparatively small dimensions and brushed aluminium lid it's a very tempting package for the money.

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VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★½

SPECIFICATIONS 1.6GHz Pentium-M, 512MB of PC2100 DDR SDRAM, 30GB Hitachi DK23EA-30 hard disk, 8x DVD-ROM and 24x/10x/24x CD-RW Panasonic combo drive, 32MB ATi Radeon Mobility 9000 graphics, 12.1in XGA TFT screen, SoundMAX integrated audio, integrated stereo speakers, V.90 modem, 10/100 Ethernet, Intel PRO/Wireless 802.11b adaptor, two Type II PC Card slots, plus ports for VGA, S-Video out, infrared, four-pin FireWire and three USB 2, Windows XP Professional, Microsoft Word and Money 2002, one-year C&R warranty. Dimensions: 282 x 243 x 34mm (W x D x H). Weight: 2.25kg.