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Dell Inspiron 5100

Dell's first model in its revamped consumer notebook range, the mainstream Inspiron 5100, is different both inside and out. Gone is the buttoned-down grey case, to be replaced by a two-tone 'Venice blue and moonlight silver' design -- no, we're not making this up. Things are different under the lid as well, with a new keyboard and touchpad configuration. Inside, you'll find cutting-edge, dual-band wireless antennae, a fast Pentium 4 processor, and an enormous battery. These specifications made for excellent performance and reasonable battery life in our performance tests. Must cost a pretty penny, right? Wrong. The Inspiron 5100 range starts at £801 (ex. VAT). For the home user, the Inspiron 5100 is faster, longer lasting, and lower priced (in some configurations) than other mainstream notebooks, making it an Editors' Choices in this category.

Written by **Stephanie Bruzzese** and **Charles McLellan** on **March 3, 2003**





8.0 Dell Inspiron 5100

Excellent

Like

- Excellent performance
- reasonable battery life
- attractive price
- big display
- integrated dual-band 802.11a/b wireless antennae.

Don't Like

- Big and heavy
- media bay is fixed rather than modular.

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Design

The mainstream Inspiron 5100 series shows off a refreshing new colour scheme for Dell. The blue-and-silver case also has blue accents on the lid, the touchpad, the two standard mouse buttons and the strip above the keyboard. The case, which measures 33.5cm by 27.5cm by 4.65cm, has changed in another significant way: it now weighs a hefty 3.5kg. The blame lies primarily with its big 15in. display and giant 6,450mAh battery. Why such a big battery? Dell had to compensate for the 5100's power-hungry, desktop Pentium 4 processor, which lacks the battery-conserving capabilities of mobile CPUs. You can keep weight (and cost) down a bit by specifying a 14.1in. display instead. Dell has also reworked the keyboard. The new layout is less familiar but is comfortable nevertheless. There's a single programmable button above the keyboard, but another cool Dell trademark, the dual touchpad/pointing-stick option, is gone -- the 5100 comes with a touchpad only. Floppies take another step toward oblivion in the new Inspiron range, as Dell omits them as a standard feature, although you can add an external USB floppy drive. Secondary storage now comes solely in optical form, with your choice of CD-RW, DVD or DVD/CD-RW drives filling the single internal bay. Unfortunately, the bay is fixed -- meaning you can't swap out a drive to insert another module such as a second battery or hard drive. Also, the primary battery bay only accepts batteries and doesn't take any other media drives. This big mainstream notebook offers all the right ports and slots. The left edge sports headphone and microphone ports, one Type II PC Card slot and your choice of integrated secondary optical storage drive (our review system shipped with a DVD/CD-RW combo drive). The right edge includes a 56Kbps modem jack, while the rear edge provides S-Video out, VGA, FireWire, Ethernet, two fast USB 2.0 ports and the grill for a big fan that keeps all of the components cool.

Features

Dell provides a long list of options for the Inspiron 5100 so you can configure it to suit your budget. The desktop Pentium 4 processors come in speeds ranging from 2.4GHz to 2.8GHz. Fast, 266MHz DDR SDRAM is available from 128MB up to 1GB. The ATI Mobility Radeon 7500 graphics chips come with either 16MB or 32MB of dedicated video memory. Hard drive choices consist of 30GB and 40GB units. Display options range 14.1in. with a native resolution of 1,024 by 768 pixels, to 15in. at a graphics-friendly 1,400 by 1,050 pixels. You can choose among CD-RW, DVD and DVD/CD-RW drives to fill the system's internal fixed bay. The system we tested included a 2.8GHz Pentium 4, 512MB of RAM, a 32MB ATI Mobility Radeon 7500 graphics chip and a 40GB hard drive spinning at 5,400rpm. One unusual feature of the Inspiron 5100 is its built-in, dual-band (2.4GHz and 5GHz) wireless antennae, which should optimise signal reception. Although Dell currently offers only an 802.11b wireless option for the 5100, the antennae will support nascent 802.11g technology when Dell begins selling it in the future. All 5100s ship with the antennae regardless of whether you configure your system with mini-PCI wireless when you buy. You can conveniently add a mini-PCI card yourself at a later date by flipping open the small plastic 'door' underneath the system. The Inspiron 5100 is stocked with all of the software you need for work or play. Two operating systems are available: Windows XP Home and Windows XP Professional. Office suite choices include Microsoft Works and Microsoft Office XP (Small Business or Professional). Third-party applications include InterVideo's WinDVD for DVD playback, and Roxio's Easy CD Creator for CD burning.

Performance & battery life

The 2.8GHz Inspiron 5100 showed impressive speed in our performance tests, while battery life was reasonable considering the power of this system's desktop CPU. The Inspiron 5100 delivered record-breaking scores of 59.5 and 42.4 respectively under the application-based Business Winstone 2001 and

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