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technopolis

Cruise the highways and rat runs of Gizmo City with the grand wizard of gadgetology, Jonathan Margolis.

SAMSUNG i600

Some time before last Christmas, Samsung sent over a nice little business phone called the D500, which I really took to because it had a novel flat shape and layout. The only thing that it lacked for me was the new 3.5G technology known as HSDPA, 3G+ and, fittingly, Mobile Broadband. HSDPA is the latest standard for data transmission to mobiles and most networks currently support web use at up to 1.8 Mbps, which in English means a typical 2MB PowerPoint presentation could download to your mobile in 24 seconds. That kind of speed still wouldn't make you jack bauer of 24, who intravenously manages to download this or that in 56.9MB in about half a second. Anyway, when I asked Samsung back then if it had an HSDPA version coming, the answer was yes. In the new year. And here they are.

The Samsung i600 was worth waiting for, and if you're the type of mobile data hound who would still appreciate a phone that looks more like a phone than a tomato block, this could be one for you. It is still squarish (phones, which in my way of saying you would benefit from a couple of hours alone with the Sudoku) thick instruction book. A small irritant is Samsung's insistence on using its own thin-but-awkward charging and headphone sockets.

The innovative QWERTY keyboard is on the cusp of usability for me with my ta-stage fingers. I can only recommend that you try it out in a store and then employ a smidgen of optimism. £125, take-one from www.mpowys.com. See www.samsungmobile.co.uk for more information.

SENNHEISER PXC 450 HEADPHONES

Sometimes I feel as if I'm the only gadget fan on the planet with the right priorities and tastes. Other times, I wonder if I'm just getting a bit odd with the advancing years. But, as regular readers of this column might recall, my desire for a pair of headphones that let you listen to loud music without drawing your isolated tone the real world goes back nearly 30 years – to the day I first saw a Sony Walkman in the window of a photographic shop in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. Baffled as to what such a bizarrely named product might be, I went in to play with this extraordinary novelty. The blue metal machine was little bigger than a cassette. It had no loudspeaker, just an infinitesimally small pair of headphones (which we'd now regard as a bit on the large side). I put these on to listen sceptically to the demo tape which was off, among other things, a marble ramp jet flying from left to right. The Walkman sound simulation, which was then a near-marginal idea of audible illusion, instantly enchanted me, as it did most of the world, and continues to do so in the iPod age.

But I was equally fascinated by another feature of the first Walkman, which was so popular that Sony dropped it almost immediately – never to move it in any form. This Blue Blue little floral tab was a big red button marked "Hotline" which, when pressed, halted the music down and activated a microphone which connected you to the world outside. This lack of attempt to replace or replicate the Hotline has baffled me for decades. Last year, Shure sort of revived it in its E500PTH sound isolating model (these pellet-in-ear headphones have a "modular control pod" set into the lead which acts as a talk-through device, interrupting, but not quite a clip). Anyway, one of the blue-eyed have suddenly come those handsome-if-hefty high, noise-reducing headphones from Sennheiser which, if you are serious about your travelling comfort and entertainment, are absolutely to share. Without any great PR blurb – maybe they just doesn't realise how big a thing it is, so long has it been since the Hotline – the PXC 450 headphones have a "talk-through" function.

There you are, your ears and soul consumed in noise-cancelled delight, your music sweeping gently. And when the nice lady hands over you to ask if you're having the chicken or the beef, you just touch a convenient button on your right ear and are able to conduct a brilliant conversation with her. You can also remove the headphone lead and wear them on your head just to keep noise down. I've jacked up the PXC 450 on six eight flights back around the US, and I recommend them (almost) without reservation. (Qualifier? They are big and the noise-reduction feature isn't quite as fierce as that on the excellent Bose Quiet Comfort 3 pair I have previously reviewed. But, of course, you've got the talk-through things, which is a joy.

Typical retail price £300. See www.sennheiser.co.uk or call 0845 00 10 10 for information and stockists.

EPSON PERFECTION 4990 PHOTO SCANNER

Is film still better than digital photography? In order to answer this to my own satisfaction, I've been doing some experiments lately.

To this end, I went on holiday and bought a 1959 Rolleicord medium format camera for £100. I then went to an Amazon and bought a modest stock of black and white film. I also bought a film developing tank and chemicals. If you're going retro, I say, make it properly retro. Well, OK, up to a point. Building a darkroom and buying an enlarger and associated gadgets would be taking it too far, so I procured from Epson its finest photo scanner for home use that comes with all the gear to scan negatives of different sizes. This is the Epson Perfection 4990. In combination with my Epson Stylus Photo R800 printer, I'm confident I would be able to operate from my negatives prints as good as anything I could get by buying a heap of darkroom equipment.

So, you ask, what are the pictures like? Well, the fill of seeing your negatives as they come out of the film is as potent as ever. The irritation of seeing the dust and scratches they pick up is as annoying as ever. And the photos... (Show people's minds) – even these with no appreciation of photography, is fun, but worth it. Typical web price £750. See www.epson.co.uk for more information and stockists.

PLAYAWAY DIGITAL AUDIOBOOKS

I wouldn't live to say the book as a concept is dead, and I wouldn't like to speak up for the environmental credentials of this groundbreaking product by Findaway World from the US, but it's certainly become ubiquitous in airport bookstores in the US over the past few months. The Playaway book uses flash technology similar to MP3 formats pre-loaded with an audio book – a new player for each book. This makes it the ultimate on the-go airport buy. It's a pretty cheap player but there's currently no way to recharge it with another audiobook, although you can put a new battery into the unit when it runs out.

So I recommend Playaway books, as long as you are assiduous about passing them on when you have listened to them. The idea of people throwing them away is just too nasty.

A great idea, though, and beautifully packaged and presented. From £20 to £55. From www.playawaygiftcard.co.uk.

SILLY STREET

I bought this (£40) entertaining novelty item – an Oriental rug in the form of a fitness mat – at the metropolitan museum of art shop in Kennedy Airport the other day. Partly because the Metropolitan is just pretty because I like it, I was expecting universal acclaim when I got home for my taste in last-minute presents to myself.

Imagine my surprise, then, when everyone, with a few exceptions, hated it, even when they discovered its illustrious provenance. I still love it and so might you. Hysterics, which has imported it in a couple of designs, absolutely does too. So there.

Mexico rugs, £1,245. From www.hysterics.com.