

New MP3 Players: Music to Your Ears

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MP3

If you've been hankering after a portable MP3 player, but want choices beyond the pioneering Rio PMP 300, Creative Labs' Creative Nomad and Pine's D'music could be what you've been waiting for. But as usual with products on the bleeding edge of a new technology, these devices are expensive forerunners of cheaper things to come. I looked at shipping versions of both products.

Creative Labs' Nomad looks sleek and has a built-in FM radio. The smooth, matte-silver, magnesium-cased Creative Nomad (\$250) is very small--not much bigger than a pager. It looks so future-cool, I wanted to make excuses for its poorly designed controls--small, identical nubs that I found impossible to operate by touch alone.

The Nomad connects to your PC while resting in a convenient charging and docking station (rechargeable batteries are included). I occasionally had trouble convincing my PC that the Nomad was hooked up, but always succeeded eventually. Once the device does connect, you can download tunes with a Nomad-customized version of MusicMatch's capable jukebox software, which also lets you organize your music collection and collect audio CD tracks. The Nomad ships with 64MB of RAM--32MB built in and another 32MB in an included SmartCard. That's enough for about an hour of MP3 music compressed at an optimal 128 kbps.

I got D'music in me: Pine's D'music player costs less than the Nomad but isn't as slick. The \$188 Pine D'music is both less expensive and less polished. Its case, although not much larger than the Nomad's, feels more clunky--but Pine wins points for its easy-to-use, circular thumbpad-control layout. The D'music's PC connection is spartan: a simple cable that plugs into the parallel port, along with an application for uploading and downloading tunes. The D'music ships with 32MB of RAM built in, enough for only 30 to 35 minutes of 128-kbps MP3 playback.

In contrast to the first Rio (a newer version, the Rio 500, was not yet ready for testing at this writing), both devices include extra, non-MP3 features such as the ability to record through built-in condenser microphones. The Nomad has a digital FM radio, and by the time you read this, Pine Technology expects to be shipping a \$219 D'music that has one too. The sound quality of the devices was what you would expect from a portable audio device--good, but not amazing (assuming that you start out with an MP3 file encoded at a decent bit rate).

But prerecorded MP3 content is scarce, so to get much use from these players, you'd have to devote considerable time to "ripping" tracks off audio CDs and you'd be paying an awfully high price to go to all that trouble.

If you absolutely must have a portable MP3 player, go for the Nomad. It looks great and comes with twice as much capacity as the D'music. Plus, the included docking station is wonderfully convenient, if a bit temperamental.

Creative Nomad Charging station, chic silvery design, FM radio, 64MB of RAM holds an hour of music. Awkward controls, occasional hiccups in PC connection. If you must have your MP3, the Creative Nomad does it in style--for a price. \$250 Creative Labs 408/428-6600 www.nomadworld.com 665 D'music Less expensive than the Nomad, with better controls. No frills, only 32MB of RAM. Still too pricey for serious consideration. \$188 Pine Technology USA 510/668-0378 www.pineusa.com 666

Creative Nomad
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