

webhead

America Second

Why Toshiba won't sell you the coolest laptop around.

By Bill Barnes

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I'm typing this on a Toshiba Libretto L5, a full-function laptop that takes up less space on my desk than a comic book. With built-in wireless networking I can surf the Web anywhere and everywhere in my house. Finally, I can read *Slate* in the bathroom! The laptop is so light that I carry it with me wherever I go. Who needs a PDA with a laptop this small? There's only one problem. Toshiba won't sell you one. Like many of the hottest laptops around, it is sold only in Japan.

Two years ago my wife and I spent an afternoon touring Akihabara, the Tokyo neighborhood devoted to consumer electronics. Everywhere we looked we found devices more advanced than any I'd seen in the United States. The gadgets were smaller, lighter, more feature-packed, and just generally cooler than models sold here. It was frustrating and almost insulting—why don't we deserve the best too? There are several explanations for this phenomenon:

- 1. The Japanese are experts in small.** If you lived in a country as tightly packed as Japan, you'd be an expert in small, too. Because of their living conditions, the Japanese value small, and they're willing to pay for it. Americans think smaller is cooler, but Japanese think smaller is better.
- 2. The Japanese use their home market for market research .** Japanese electronics manufacturers flood the market with dozens of variations on a theme and then cull the most successful products for export. There is some truth to this, but since some of the best sellers in Japan never make it to our shores, it's not the whole story.
- 3. The Japanese are more prone to follow trends .** Many of the devices you can find in Japan but not here reflect some hot trend we haven't caught on to yet (and some that we may not—the electronic equivalents of pet rocks). In Japan, electronics buyers consider trendy features necessary, even if they'll never use them. The technology Bluetooth, which allows laptops to wirelessly upload movies from your camcorder or to connect to the Internet using your cell phone, is much bigger in Japan than here. Same for 802.11b Wi-Fi wireless networks, which are slowly catching on in the United States but have taken off like wildfire in Japan's densely packed urban areas.
- 4. The Japanese are more feature-conscious than price-conscious .** Japanese consumers want the smallest, lightest, most feature-rich laptop they can proudly show off to their friends. Americans are more likely to crow about the great deal they got. Take this test. If you could get a full-featured 3-pound laptop for \$1,999, how much more would you pay for a 2.5-pounder? Or to get it an inch smaller? If your eyes glazed over just thinking about that question, you are in the American majority. If your answer was closer to "anything," break out the sushi. In your soul you are more Japanese than American.

There's some good news for the Japanese-at-heart gear-head who demands the best at any price. Americans can get their hands on the Libretto and on a dozen or so other hot laptops at Dynamism.com, a specialty importer that focuses on Japan-only consumer electronics. (Dynamism lent me the [Libretto](#).) They buy the laptops in Japan, install a U.S. version of Windows, and configure them with the correct hardware drivers (sometimes a nontrivial operation—drivers for Japan-only hardware do not always work on U.S. versions of Windows), then send them to you. They'll even install a U.S. keyboard on some models (mine had one), though the normal Japanese keyboard has English characters and works fine. Their

not-inconsiderable markup (about 30 percent) covers all taxes, duty, and shipping fees. If required, they'll ship your laptop to Japan and back for warranty work, and they'll even send you driver updates for free.

Dynamism's Libretto starts at \$1,999. To get one in Japan you'd pay about \$1,500, including tax and duty (plus travel costs). If a 30 percent markup is too much for you, there's always someone selling a Libretto on eBay. But I wouldn't go that route. International auction purchases are even less reliable than domestic ones, the driver issues can be daunting, and based on the prices I saw on some of the units for sale, I strongly doubt they come with legally licensed software.

The Libretto is not for everyone. The 10-inch 1,280-by-600 screen is amazingly bright and clear, but if you find yourself squinting at a normal laptop display this one will give you eyestrain. The keys are tight compared to a standard keyboard, and even tighter if you're used to an ergonomic keyboard. The Transmeta Crusoe microprocessor (comparable to an Intel Pentium III) runs at 800 mhz. This was fast enough, though it sometimes was too slow to display certain intensive video formats. *[Note: This article was changed on Aug. 28, 2002, to correct an error of fact. The writer confused the Transmeta Crusoe microprocessor with the Intel mobile Pentium.]*

I got three-plus hours out of the built-in battery when doing nothing but typing, but hard-disk-intensive operations like watching movies or listening to music drained it much faster. And don't plan on watching movies on the airplane. You'll need to buy a separate DVD drive that plugs into the standard USB interface or PC-card slot—and that probably means a separate power supply and/or battery. Finally, if you hate the "eraserhead" mouse—substitute then you'll hate this one too.

What makes the Libretto so great is that it takes up very little space. At 10.5 inches wide by 6.6 inches deep, it actually sits between the keyboard and monitor of my desktop, allowing me to check mail on one machine while running Photoshop full-screen on the other. On a plane that advantage is magnified because you can use it even when the bozo in front of you has his seatback fully reclined. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and claim that without advances in speech or handwriting recognition, a laptop's footprint can't get substantially smaller than this and still remain usable. You can't get any smaller without shrinking the keyboard to the point where you can't touch-type.

Based on the number of strangers who have come up to me in cafes and left with Dynamism's URL firmly in hand, Americans will pay for small and light when it is done right. And I have seldom seen products done more right than this. I hope Toshiba changes its mind, because I'm not buying one of these machines if I have to pay the \$500 markup. But that's because I'm more American than Japanese.

Webhead Extra: After spending more time with [file-sharing programs](#), I heartily recommend [LimeWire](#) and heartily disrecommend [Grokster](#). LimeWire is significantly easier to use than Grokster, which is almost a poster child for poorly designed user interfaces. Perhaps one reason is that LimeWire comes in a for-pay "Pro" version and thus can afford to pay its programmers, whereas Grokster relies on income from dozens of "spyware" software makers who pay to be included in the Grokster download. Also, on this subject, many wrote to say that while file-sharing programs may offer more music more easily than the more legitimate services, they often do so with widely varying levels of quality. Quite so.

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