

CF-M31

## A Small-Package Paradox

Upon first seeing the petite Panasonic's CF-M31 Let's Note mini-notebook, the excitement and anticipation of a notebook that seemed built-to-order for editors and on-the-go businesspeople bordered on overwhelming. And over the past few months it's mostly been a treat to use this system. The CF-M31 is one of the smallest, lightest and truly portable Windows 95 computers available on the market today. Tooling around the country with a notebook that weighs less than a carry-on bag and which can retrieve e-mail as well as perform everyday business tasks like using Excel, Word and PowerPoint seemed to be a dream come true.

But as with all dreams, we woke up the next morning and reality set in. It became obvious after several months of continual use that the CF-M31 was a portable paradox. For as much as we truly loved and valued its small size and 3.1-pound travel weight, it quickly became the source of some of the notebook's shortcomings.

First, what we thoroughly enjoyed about the notebook was its ruggedness and easy transportability — a quality we've come to expect from notebooks made by Panasonic. We constantly knocked the CF-M31 around and transported it in less-than-ideal packaging, and the notebook didn't break down at all. The only abuse suffered was a missing pixel that occurred pretty early on. While on the road, besides the constant "oohs" and "aahs" the notebook garnered from onlookers, it proved to be just enough processing power to effectively use most business applications and conduct work productively when away from the office.

### Needs Improvement

However, everyday use of the notebook revealed another story. Although we knew going in that the 8-inch diagonal screen wasn't the biggest on the block, we didn't think it would become as irritating as it ultimately did. Unfortunately, after a while of

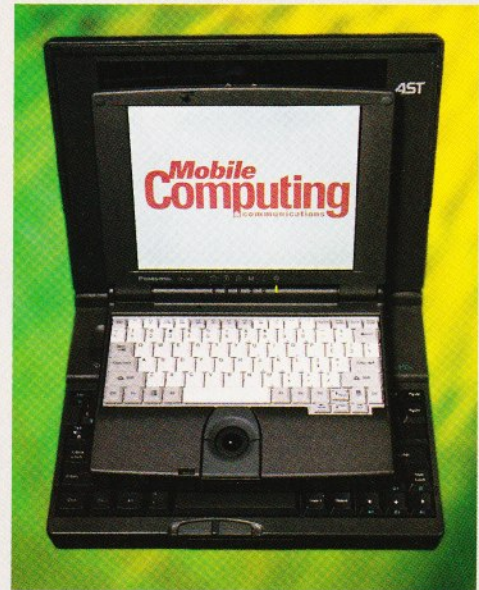
both short- and long-term usage we did discover that the screen made us squint under normal operating conditions. It turned out that in order for type in word-processing documents or spreadsheets to be most legible, we had to enlarge anything being viewed to at least 150 percent. One downfall to this solution is that it greatly limits how much information can be viewed on the screen at once. While this is a livable option, it does become tiring, and you may not want to make the CF-M31 notebook a desktop-replacement system.

### A Few Niggles

Perhaps our biggest gripe about the CF-M31 was the keyboard's minuscule size. Granted, its 14.5mm keys are not as small as those on a Windows CE device, but then again, a CE device doesn't boast being a mininotebook either. Although the keyboard's small size was acceptable enough to occasionally type and edit documents, it wasn't without its share of troubles. Besides the obvious finger cramps that can result from typing too long a time on the tiny keyboard, there were other agitations, like the inadvertent capitalization of a letter in the middle of a word or sentence.

Also, the poor positioning of the arrow keys often had us looking for the cursor in a document and wondering how a sentence that clearly belonged at the end of a story ended up in the middle. It soon became obvious that it wasn't a phantom causing such idiosyncracies; it was the poor keyboard layout. We will say this however, the keys did have decent travel, and they felt nice to the touch.

For one well-connected editor, the CF-M31 also seemed to fall a tad short on plugs. In fact, to connect to just about anything other than a phone line, you need the small port bar. This was an encumbrance when



### LACKING FINGER FLEXIBILITY:

While the lightweight and easy transportability of the CF-M31 makes the notebook seem like a dream come true, the finger cramps caused from the minimal keyboard quickly brings you back to reality.

all you needed to do was move a file onto or off a floppy disk.

What we have come to value about the CF-M31 is its ability to travel well and its decent battery life, which ran at an average of three hours per charge. Couple that with a portable PC Card-based SuperDisk drive and a modem card and, voilà, it becomes an extremely usable notebook on the road that's perfect for most corporate uses. For example, if you carried the port replicator, you could easily give a slide show using PowerPoint simply by connecting the notebook to a larger external monitor.

While you might not want the Panasonic CF-M31 as your everyday notebook, you'd be hard-pressed to find a lighter, more powerful roadside companion. —Joni Blecher

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