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Samsung Gem (U.S. Cellular)

EDITOR RATING: FAIR 0 COMMENTS

REVIEW COMPARE COMMENTS SPECS



MSRP \$29.99

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PROS

Lightweight. Stock Android UI. Smooth video playback. Loud speakerphone.

CONS

Below-average voice quality. Sluggish. Odd screen resolution limits third-party app compatibility. Cramped on-screen keyboard.

BOTTOM LINE

The Samsung Gem loses out to the identically-priced LG Optimus U thanks to the Gem's inferior sound quality, screen, and build quality.

BY JAMIE LENDINO Here's a classic case of a cell phone that would have been an okay choice, were it not for another phone. The Samsung Gem is a budget-priced, entry-level Android cell phone. It's reasonably powerful, but several significant downsides get in the way. The identically-priced, far more powerful LG Optimus U (\$29, 4 stars) is considerably superior, and eliminates any reason to buy the Gem.

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<p>Samsung Gem (U.S. Cellular)</p>  <p>●●●○○</p>	<p>HTC Desire (US Cellular)</p>  <p>●●●●● EC</p>	<p>Samsung Mesmerize (U.S.)</p>  <p>●●●●● EC</p>	<p>LG Apex (U.S. Cellular)</p>  <p>●●●○○</p>
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Design, Call Quality, and Apps

The Gem measures 4.5 by 2.2 by 0.5 inches (HWD) and weighs 3.9 ounces. It looks kind of cheap; the hard, glossy black plastic and chrome-accented plastic buttons don't do the Gem any favors. I suppose the sharp, angled edges will appeal to some. But I've seen several low-end phones before with similar styling, so it does nothing for me. The 3.2-inch plastic capacitive touch screen offers 240-by-400-pixel resolution. That's an odd number of pixels that raises compatibility issues with third-party apps in the Android Market; virtually no other Android phone has this resolution. The pixel count also trails the Optimus U's 320-by-480-pixel, 3.2-inch LCD. Fonts looked fuzzy, and the LCD wasn't bright enough, either. The Gem's Swype keyboard is cramped, mostly thanks to the small screen size.



VIEW ALL 6 PHOTOS IN GALLERY

The Samsung Gem is a dual-band EV-DO Rev 0 (850/1900 MHz) device with 802.11b/g Wi-Fi. The Gem will hit 3G data speeds on U.S. Cellular, but it will be slightly slower than the Optimus U, which uses the faster EVDO Rev A technology. It can also function as a mobile hotspot with the appropriate data plan.

That said, voice quality was below average. Callers sounded okay in the earpiece, with a thin tone, not quite enough gain, but no background hiss. Transmissions through the microphone were staticky, though, and sounded thin and indistinct. Reception wasn't particularly strong, either; back to back comparisons with a Motorola Quantico (\$99.99, 3 stars) showed up the Gem's deficiencies in a hurry. Calls sounded better through an **Aliph Jawbone Icon** Bluetooth headset (\$99, 4 stars). Voice dialing worked fine over Bluetooth, and the speakerphone sounded clear at medium to high volumes. Battery life was good at exactly six hours of talk time.

The Gem runs Android 2.2. Interestingly, it's virtually stock; there are no Samsung TouchWiz-like enhancements to be found. This would be a good reason to choose the Gem, but LG didn't saddle the Optimus U with a heavy UI layer, either. The 800 MHz CPU sounds faster on paper than the 600 MHz chip in the Optimus U. But experience doesn't bear that out; the Gem feels sluggish in operation, and it posted significantly slower numbers than the Optimus U on nearly every benchmark we ran.

Multimedia, Camera, and Conclusions

The microSD card slot is underneath the battery cover; my 32GB SanDisk card worked fine, and Samsung throws in a 4GB microSD card to get you started. There's also 156MB of free internal memory. The standard-size 3.5mm headphone jack is also welcome. Music tracks sounded clear through **Samsung Modus HM6450** Bluetooth headphones (\$99, 4

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stars). The stock music player app displayed large album art thumbnails and was easy to navigate. Standalone MP4, 3GP, and AVI videos played smoothly in full screen mode, though HD videos wouldn't play. I still don't like Android's stock gallery view for videos, which makes it tough to distinguish among a series of 30 blacked-out video thumbnails without names; a list mode would be helpful.

The 3.2-megapixel auto-focus camera has no flash. Test photos looked good, with natural coloring, detail, and light balance, although sunlight-filled windows were slightly overexposed. The phone had no problem snapping indoor or outdoor shots. Shutter speeds were about average; the auto-focus added about a second and a half. Recorded 352-by-288-pixel videos looked bright and played back at roughly 15 frames per second; this trails the Optimus U's VGA camcorder considerably.

Our money (and yours) is still on the LG Optimus U, which offers higher screen resolution, longer battery life, a better camcorder, and nicer build quality, although it's slightly heavier. Even the Optimus U's "slower" CPU tests much faster in the real world. If you'd rather have a real keyboard and much sharper screen resolution, the LG Apex (\$49, 3 stars) is a good choice, and it finally runs Android 2.2, although it's significantly bulkier. Our Editors' Choice smartphone for U.S. Cellular remains the Samsung Mesmerize (\$199, 4.5 stars), which is faster, has a larger screen, and a higher-end camera and camcorder.

Benchmarks

Continuous talk time: 6 hours 0 minutes

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BY JAMIE LENDINO
SENIOR ANALYST, MOBILE

Jamie Lendino is a senior mobile analyst for PCMag.com and has written for the magazine since 2005. He reviews cell phones, GPS devices, and other consumer electronics. Previously, Jamie was the Editor-In-Chief of Smart Device...

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