

Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra review: the Swiss army knife of phones, now with AI

Publication Date: 2024-02-05

Author: Samuel Gibbs

Section: Technology

Tags: Samsung, Smartphones, Android, Artificial intelligence (AI), Mobile phones, Google, Software, reviews

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/feb/05/samsung-galaxy-s24-ultra-review-the-swiss-army-knife-of-phones-now-with-ai>



Samsung's latest smartphone packs a plethora of the latest flashy AI tools in an attempt to improve text, images, video and search – with both hits and misses. The new Galaxy S24 Ultra comes equipped with a combination of Samsung and Google's latest AI layered on top of one of the most capable phones on the market, filled to the brim with competition-beating specs. All this capability comes at a steep £1,249 (€1,469/\$1,299.99/A\$2,199), which is the same price as its predecessor in the UK but more expensive in the US and other regions. The overall design differs only iteratively from predecessors, with a fully flat rather than curved screen and new titanium sides, similar to the iPhone 15 Pro Max, which gives it a gripper finish and in theory makes it stronger and more durable. The screen has Corning's latest Gorilla Armor glass that is more scratch-resistant and much less reflective, significantly reducing glare which, combined with the super-bright screen, makes using it outdoors as easy as indoors even on the sunniest of days. The S24 Ultra has the latest top-of-the-range chip from Qualcomm, the Snapdragon 8 Gen 3, offering a 20% speed increase, 26% faster graphics and greater power efficiency on previous generations. It is a very fast phone that handles games, demanding apps and multitasking with aplomb, but the extended battery life is more noticeable in day-to-day use. The phone lasts up to 60 hours of general use when taking photos, browsing, messaging and using 5G for a couple of hours with the rest on wifi, making it one of the longest-lasting phones I've tested. High-end gaming or more intensive tasks hit battery life – an hour of Diablo Immortal consumed 18% of the battery. But otherwise I only needed to charge it every third day. Specifications Main screen: 6.8in QHD+ Dynamic AMOLED 2X (500ppi) 120Hz Processor: Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Gen 3 RAM: 12GB Storage: 256, 512GB or 1TB Operating system: One UI 6.1 based on Android 14 Camera: 200MP + 12MP 0.6x + 10MP 3x + 50MP 5x; 12MP front-facing Connectivity: 5G, USB-C, wifi 7, NFC, Bluetooth 5.2, UWB and GNSS Water resistance: IP68 (1.5m for 30 mins) Dimensions: 162.3 x 79 x 8.6mm Weight: 232g Sustainability Samsung does not provide an expected lifespan for the battery but it should last in excess of 500 full charge cycles with at least 80% of its original capacity. The phone is generally repairable. Screen repairs cost about £270, while the battery is replaceable by authorised service centres. Samsung also offers a self-repair programme. The phone contains recycled aluminium, steel, cobalt, glass, plastic and rare earth elements. Samsung offers trade-in and recycling schemes for old devices. The company publishes annual sustainability reports but not impact assessments for individual products. S Pen, seven years of support and AI everywhere The S24 Ultra has Samsung's fan-favourite S Pen stylus that slides neatly into the bottom. It is excellent for quick scribbles, doodles or editing documents. The One UI 6.1 software, based on Android 14, is packed with customisation options and tools across the system and runs well. New for 2024 is the promise of software

and security updates for seven years from release, bringing Samsung up to par with Apple's iPhone and Google's Pixel 8 with only Fairphone offering longer. The flashiest additions are based on generative AI, only some of which are hits and many are simply catching up with the competition. The phone has the same cool AI wallpaper generator as the Pixel 8 Pro. The keyboard has various AI tools built in, including language translation, advanced grammar and spelling, plus the ability to rewrite your messages in various styles such as with a professional, polite or casual tone. It makes you sound a bit generic, but I can see it being useful for those who struggle to write appropriate emails to their boss. The Samsung Notes app can summarise documents, but only those under 8,000 characters (about 1,500 words), which seems a miss. The Samsung Internet browser can also summarise articles, even very long ones, with at least superficially impressive results. The voice recorder app can transcribe to text, but not in real time like Google's version. The phone app can do real-time voice translation, so you can attempt to hold a conversation across languages. It works well enough for more formal things such as making a reservation, but predictably struggles with more casual language and slang. I wouldn't trust any of these features wholeheartedly without thoroughly checking the output, but they are useful in a pinch. Generative Edit in the photo gallery app is Samsung's version of the Google Magic Editor on Pixel phones. It is able to resize, reframe, erase or move objects and other edits, using AI on a server to regenerate the image each time. It is excellent for quick tweaks that would require firing up Photoshop to do properly, but can also make a right mess of things. Any images edited with AI are watermarked with a little symbol in the bottom left corner so that people can tell it's not entirely authentic. One unique feature is the ability to convert any video to slow motion, using AI to generate the additional frames with some pretty great results, as long as you don't look too hard for artefacts. Lastly, Circle to Search is a new Google feature on the S24 and Google's Pixel 8 series. Hold the home button or gesture bar, circle what you're looking for on your screen with your finger or stylus and Google does the rest, showing you information about an actor, searching for a piece of clothing or the highlighted text. It is fast, efficient and quickly became second nature. Technically Google Lens has been able to do something similar, but never in this intuitive and rapid way. Camera There are four cameras on the back of the phone and a good 12-megapixel selfie camera at the top of the screen. Four of the cameras are the same as the S23 Ultra, including the main 200MP camera, the 12MP ultrawide and 10MP 3x telephoto producing equally impressive results. New for the S24 Ultra is a 50MP 5x telephoto camera, replacing the 10MP 10x from its predecessor, which can also perform an in-sensor zoom for 10x magnification. The 5x magnification adds yet another tool to the S24 Ultra's armoury, and in side-by-side comparison it's very difficult to tell the difference at 10x zoom to shots from its predecessor. All in, the S24 Ultra has the most capable and adaptable camera system of any smartphone. Price The Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra costs from £1,249 (€1,469/\$1,299.99/A\$2,199) with 256GB of storage. For comparison, the Galaxy S24 costs £799, the S24+ costs £999, the Z Fold 5 costs £1,749, the Google Pixel 8 Pro costs £999 and the iPhone 15 Pro Max costs £1,199. Verdict The Galaxy S24 Ultra is the Swiss army knife of phones. It is a monolithic slab of premium titanium and glass that can pretty much do everything. Between the powerful software, the stylus, the top chip, long battery life, tremendous screen and the super adaptable camera that out zooms the competition, there's little the S24 can't manage. It can even become a full Android desktop computer plugged into a monitor and keyboard if you want. And with a full seven years of software support you can safely use the phone for longer. The AI features are a bit hit-and-miss. Some are certainly useful, but none of them are a reason to buy this particular phone over a Pixel or others as Google's Circle to Search will come to other Androids soon. Note too that the small print states that all of them are free to use until at least the end of 2025, but some may come with an extra fee after that. It may only be an iterative update on its predecessors and other phones may do certain bits better, but not many can do all that and more. But you do pay a very heavy price both in the wallet and size for the capability. The S24 Ultra is a huge phone and in a world filled with foldable devices, it looks increasingly boring regardless of its stellar performance. Pros: fantastic screen, the most capable camera with 3x, 5x and 10x optical zoom, new AI tools, good software with seven years support, S Pen stylus, top performance, very long battery life, contains recycled materials. Cons: massive, heavy, extremely expensive, S Pen may be superfluous feature for many, AI features not a reason to buy.