It’s been about 4 weeks since I got the Idol 4S with Windows 10, so I wanted to follow up my initial review of the phone with my experiences over the past few weeks.

Lets get the obvious question out of the way “am I still using it as my daily driver?”, or have I switched back to a Lumia or perhaps the Elite X3? Read on to find out.

Has it stayed together?

One of the appeals of this device is the design, it’s beautiful in the hand, well made and after 4 weeks of use has shown no obvious signs of wear or poor build quality. In my opinion it is the best looking Windows 10 Mobile device on the market.

It is slippery being glass on both the front and the back of the device but despite that I still haven’t dropped it and it hasn’t slid off anything either (saying that has probably just jinxed me).

My only complaint is that the Idol 4S is so ‘normal’ looking for a phone nowadays that it doesn’t turn heads nor attract any attention – it looks just like any other non-descript smartphone and that’s a shame! I miss the satisfaction of using a yellow 1020 with the distinctive camera hump or a shiny red 1520. I’m a Windows 10 Mobile user and I want the world to know it! Alcatel if you are reading, I’d love a different color option or perhaps just slap a Microsoft logo on the chin?

Performance

Since my initial review I’ve enrolled the Idol 4S in the fast ring of Windows Insiders and so am running the most current builds. This means I can compare it directly to the 950XL which is also on the same build.

So which is faster? Honestly in daily use it’s impossible to tell. Even with the two devices side by side and testing they are neck and neck at almost every task. So although the 4S comes with the improved Snapdragopn 820, I really haven’t noticed any significant performance increase.

The ‘low-res’ screen

The Idol 4S screen is lower resolution than the 950XL but as I mentioned in my original review there is just something about this screen that I love. The blacks are super black and the colours are really vivid and bright. So much so that when I go back to the 950, the colours (especially the blues) seem washed out and dull. I have even adjusted the 950 colour profile to ‘vivid’, but they still don’t seem to ‘pop’ like the screen on the Idol 4s.

Although the higher resolution on the 950 does mean that some apps show more content, twitter for example fits more on the screen as does my podcast app of choice GroverPro, but in daily use I don’t miss those extra pixels. I don’t even notice when watching Netflix or Youtube. I’ve never noticed any pixilation and in fact I miss the screen when I switch to other devices.

So low-res or not, I love the screen

Speakers

OK let me start by saying I never understood Steve’s fascination with loud speaker quality. I’ve listen to him and other co-hosts on Phone Show Chat talking about loud speaker quality on various phones but I just never understood the issue! To me it is just one of life’s facts; that Smartphones have terrible speakers and they simply vary from really bad to acceptably bad, that’s just the way it is.
Even the mighty HP with Bang & Olfsen’s assistance weren’t able to produce anything dazzling on the X3.
That’s why I never relied on speakerphones. in my car I’m connected with Bluetooth, in the house I either use headphones or connect to an external speaker – that’s just the way things are meant to be!

BUT the Idol 4S has changed my mind. Over the past 4 weeks of use, I find myself using the fabulous dual stereo speakers more and more. Not in the car so much, but around the house, on a conference call, when watching youtube or Netflix – I do all these activities now without headphones or connecting to external speakers – decent loudspeakers on a phone is lifechanging ! Don’t get me wrong they are not to going to blow you away as an audio system – but compared to ‘other’ phones they are superb. Now I’m spoiled, it’s difficult to use a device without decent loudspeakers now.
I thought the 950 was bad before, now I can’t stand it !

Camera

The camera takes ‘good enough’ images. I’m not a very frequent user of the camera on my smartphones but like most Lumia users I’ve been spoiled and have come to expect great camera quality. The Idol 4S is good enough for most casual users. It’s definitely nowhere near Lumia 950 quality but it’s good enough for posting online and viewing on the phone. Viewing photos on a big screen shows up the quality differences but I do that so rarely it’s not a show stopper for me. Do I wish it had a better camera? Yes of course, but it hasn’t stopped me from using the phone as my main device.
However I will admit that if I know I’m going to want to take a good picture (a day skiing with the family for example) I do find myself sneaking another handset into a spare pocket 😊

HDR SPEED

Once thing worth mentioning is that since installing the ‘fast ring’, HDR photos are now so slow as to be almost unusable. The Idol 4S takes around 5 seconds to capture with HDR turned on. This isn’t just processing time like the lumia where snapping multiple HDR images slows the phone down. No on the Idol 4S when you hit the capture button, the screen goes black and doesn’t come back on again for 5 seconds. The most annoying aspect of this is that more often than not it results in blurred images, because I’m never quite sure when it’s actually taking the image.
I tried switching to ProShot as my camera app and while that App does produce super images, HDR mode still seems to take around 5 seconds on the 4S whereas it’s almost instant on the 950 – this wasn’t the case on the original software, so I wonder if a firmware update from Alcatel or a software update from Microsoft could fix it? Whatever the cause HDR is useless now.

Cortana Issues

Some other little glitches I’ve noticed. Cortana used to trigger all the time on the factory OS, so much so that a simple ‘Hey’ would trigger it, you didn’t even need the C word !
This has been greatly improved with the latest Windows 10 Mobile builds. For a while, the phone would stop responding to voice if left for long periods and would require turning off the feature and turning it back on again. But a device reset has cleared that problem up.

USB-C Port

This is a strange one, the USB C port is super fussy and must be plugged in the right way around !
I normally plug the handset into my Microsoft Continuum dock to charge it. I had noticed that occasionally it wouldn’t connect to charge properly. After digging into the issue I confirmed that it was related to way the cable is connected !! Inserting it one way results in the phone charging, but continuum won’t work properly, but when removed and twisted 180 degrees and inserted the other way around it works perfectly. I tried changing cables but got the same result.

I can also re-produce it when plugging the device into a PC too. One way around and the PC won’t detect it as a USB device (even though it will charge), but turning the connector around results in the PC detecting the phone and being able to connect it. Very strange !

VR Experience

I won’t dwell on this because quite honestly VR on a smartphone is a gimmick at best and on the Idol 4S it’s just not even worth wasting your time on.

I’ll summize:
I had trouble getting the Idol 4s to run the VR software the right way up meaning the image would be upside down when inserted into the headset.
The touch controls on the headset are terrible and often fail to respond to touch at all meaning you can’t ‘action’ things within VR.
When it did work, the games were entertaining for a few mins, but quickly get repetitive and Watching movies with a giant plastic viewer strapped to your head is not fun or comfortable. So in short…don’t bother !

Conclusion

I really like the Idol 4S, the screen and speakers are difficult to live without once you get used to them and I appreciate having such a well made device over the terribly cheap feeling Lumia 950s.
I can live with the Camera, the fingerprint reader isn’t ideal but it works (mostly), I don’t miss the glance screen as much as I thought I would, I like the dedicated camera button (but I’d switch that and the power buttons around). 64GB of storage is plenty and I don’t need additional micro sd expansion. The snapdragon 820 is great and I have no performance issues.
 The slowness of HDR mode is a shame and the un-reliability of VR is a letdown. I’m hoping that a future OS update or perhaps a firmware update from Alcatel will resolve these issues.

So overall I still think the Idol 4S with Windows 10 (or Idol 4S Pro as it will be know in Europe) is one of (if not the) best Windows 10 handsets you can get right now. It’s well priced, has good specs, is well made, looks great and performs well. If you are in the market for a W10M device, you can’t go far wrong with this one.