

Google Chromecast (2015) | **Media streamer** | €39

This great performance is down to good casting

When Google Chromecast first arrived on the scene a couple of years back, it landed right in the thick of the media streamer boom instigated by the likes of Roku, Sky, Amazon and Apple. It was (indeed still is) a time of streaming sticks and boxes galore.

But in came Google pitching a different kind of beast, and quickly won the hearts of a streaming-savvy audience looking for simplicity, affordability and vast support.

Instead of offering its own batch of on-demand content, the Chromecast simply 'casts' (ie streams) content from a smartphone, tablet or PC/laptop over wi-fi. Your device of choice acts purely as a remote control.

A lesson in simplicity

It couldn't be easier to use. Go into any Cast-enabled app on your device (we'll get to that later), choose what you want to watch, press the Chromecast icon and it'll ping up on your TV screen. You're not actually sending content directly from your device to the screen; instead, the Chromecast plucks it from the internet and feeds it to your TV.

Two years on, the second-gen Chromecast (officially just 'Chromecast' as opposed to 'Chromecast 2') has arrived with speedier operation, improved software and a performance boost.

It's more of a makeover than a new business model, but it does look radically different. While the original Chromecast resembled an oversized memory stick, it's now a round disc the size of a yo-yo (available in black, yellow or red) with an HDMI cable sticking out of it. Apparently the new shape is to accommodate the bigger multi-directional antennae inside.

It remains powered by microUSB, so you'll need to stick the USB-end into a TV port or, if there isn't a one free, use the supplied mains adapter. Google has made the cable end magnetic so that the main circular body will cling to it instead of dangle down and be an OCD-sufferer's worst nightmare. As ingenious as it sounds, it's not always as good in practice. We plugged it into a Sony KD65X9005C and the TV port's surroundings got in the way.

Expanding content

The new Chromecast takes on more than just a new form. For starters, the number of Cast-enabled apps has steadily grown since the original Chromecast's debut so there's something for everyone from movie buffs and sport fanatics to music fans. BBC iPlayer, Netflix, Blinkbox, YouTube and NowTV will sort out your Sunday binge, while sport services BT Sport and Eurosport Player will cover your Saturday one. Music

services Spotify and Deezer, and Internet radio apps TuneIn Radio and Rdio are also cast-compatible. The bad news is that Amazon Instant Video, ITV Player, 4OD and Demand5 are yet to make an appearance but, with apps sprouting up all the time, hopefully it's just a matter of time before they do.

While the Chromecast app used to be a go-to for purely sorting out wi-fi settings, it now has a greater purpose with one particularly useful thing in mind: content discovery.

The app's interface is split into three tabs. One displays your already-installed Cast-enabled apps, while another is a shop window for all the compatible apps available to you. Google has done the legwork, so thankfully it's no longer a case of just guessing what apps can be cast. It's an inviting window at that, with apps helpfully divided into categories: 'Apps for Movie Lovers' and 'Apps to Start Your Day' for example or, our favourite, 'Couch Potato Pleasures'.

Add the personal touch

The last tab lets you customise your connected Chromecast or Chromecast Audio devices. While the old Chromecast used random photos as screensavers, you can now add and loop photos from Flickr or Facebook.

Whether you're using an LG G4 or Apple iPhone 6S Plus, the app experience is equally intuitive and utterly responsive. With playback and volume controls, communication between your device and TV is almost instant. The downside for Apple users is that the iOS version can't cast - essentially mirror - your device's screen onto the TV's as is possible with Android. And you'll have to download the iOS version of the Google Play Music app to cast local music files from your iPhone or iPad.

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Gone is the familiar memory-stick look, replaced by a disc with attached HDMI cable

Last but not least, performance has been given a boost. The Chromecast now uses dual-band 2.4 or 5GHz 802.11ac wi-fi and 'adaptive antenna'. That promises a faster, more stable internet connection.

Typically, loading content and skipping forwards and backwards through programmes is a good two or three seconds quicker than with the old version. That may be down to the new Fast Play feature, which aims to eliminate buffering by pre-loading the first few seconds of content so it's never forced to play catch-up. Whatever it is, we like it.

The new Chromecast also outputs a cleaner, crisper 1080p picture. Whether we're casting *The Great British Bake Off*

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Masterclass on BBC iPlayer or *About Time* on Netflix, colours are more grounded and refined, making them seem notably gaudy through the old stick. Paul Hollywood doesn't look quite as orange and Mary Berry's blazers aren't so luminous.

And where the picture was prone to the odd motion judder before, it's now more stable. Just bear in mind that you'll need a good, strong wi-fi connection to get the best results. Camera pans across the top of Madeira cakes and around the *Bake Off* tent are buttery smooth and blip-free. The only drawback is a hint of motion blur around the edges of objects.

Across-the-board improvements

The new Chromecast is quite the upgrade. It's taken the winning recipe of neat, simple and efficient streaming and refined the dish in almost every way, from build to use to performance. Very tasty.

So what's the damage for this new-and-improved disc? That's probably the best part. The fact that it sticks with its predecessor's €39 price tag means it doesn't ask a penny more for the significant progress it's made. If that's not enough to win you over, we don't know what will be.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Faster operation than before; more compatible apps; cleaner, more refined picture; user-friendly app; same price

AGAINST Not completely catch-up compatible

VERDICT Speedier operation and even greater refinement have made a good product great

