



Apple's Mac mini with M4 can fit into a lot of use cases, especially because of its new, smaller size, and three months later, it's proven to be one of the most versatile [Macs](#) yet.

Redesigns can be fun and eye-catching, but they don't always lead to fundamental changes in what's possible or desired from a platform. The Mac mini with M4 is an exception, as it is now small enough to slot into some unique use cases.

It's not that the previous Mac mini was large by any stretch, and there are certainly smaller desktop-class PCs out there, so a Mac being this small shouldn't be a big deal. Except, portability in Macs is more important than ever thanks to one product in particular — Apple Vision Pro.

In this three-month [review](#), I'll cover the usual stuff like specs and using the Mac mini, but I'm also going to dive deep into how I use it with Apple Vision Pro. It's not the most conventional use case, but I'm not exactly a conventional computer user here with my iPad Pro desk setup — seen here.

That's right. For me, the Mac has become more of an accessory or appliance in my setup. Let's dive into how that works, why I bother working this way, and what I've learned from using a Mac mini as a modular headless desktop.

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M4 Mac mini review: design

Previously, I used the 14-inch MacBook Pro, and for a while, it was my primary machine for work. As Stage Manager improved and Apple Vision Pro was released, the Mac took a back seat in my workflows.



M4 Mac mini review: a tiny square computer that's easily portable with an attached battery

The MacBook Pro sat on a shelf in clamshell for months until the M4 Mac mini arrived. I realized I was wasting that beautiful display and decided to swap for the miniature Mac mini and what it could provide.

Of course, I'm aware that a MacBook with its built-in keyboard, trackpad, and battery might be a better companion to the Apple Vision Pro, but those aren't the components I want to use. I want to bring my own mouse and keyboard since I prefer Apple's Magic Trackpad and a mechanical keyboard, and the display was going to waste either way.

So, enter the Mac mini with M4 and its new, smaller design. It prompted me to try finding a tiny external battery to make it portable and act as a tiny headless Mac I could pair with Apple Vision Pro's virtual display mode.

Shedding a full 2.7 inches on each side and gaining only a squat 0.6 inches of height made the M4 Mac mini much more backpack-friendly. I found a square-ish battery with an AC outlet that lets the Mac mini be portable if needed, though it doesn't have power passthrough, sadly.



M4 Mac mini review: a headless Mac on a shelf

Outside of portability, the Mac mini excels at fitting into tiny little spaces. It now occupies the bookshelf the MacBook Pro previously lived on, but with a lot more space around it.

I'm interested in seeing what kind of accessories companies can make similar to Satechi's Stand & Hub. If a company could include an integrated AC figure-8 cable and a battery that lasted about an hour with pass-through options, it would be the killer Mac mini accessory.

Really, the form factor is perfect on its own. The two front-facing [USB-C](#) ports make connecting accessories easy, and the three Thunderbolt ports allow for incredible expansion.



M4 Mac mini review: power button placement isn't a problem

Oh, and I don't care about the power button placement. I've used it a handful of times without even thinking about it.

M4 Mac mini review: specs

There's not much to say about the Mac mini's performance and specs that haven't already been said. The M4 is yet another incredible piece of Apple Silicon, and while it isn't a gamer's paradise, it allows some interesting use cases.



M4 Mac mini review: good for gaming, but not quite a 'gaming PC'

For reference, the M4 CPU scored 3,899 single and 15,012 multi-core versus the M2 scoring 2,642 single and 9,799 multi-core on Geekbench. The Metal benchmark shows a 57,914 for M4 versus 46,246 for M2.

The M4 is powerful on its own and has additional features like hardware-accelerated ray tracing. It does well with games offered on the App Store and some from Steam, but there's still room for improvement.

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M4 Mac mini

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Since I primarily use the M4 Mac mini from the Apple Vision Pro, I've taken to testing it for gaming through the Virtual Display. This isn't particularly useful for games found on the App Store, but it is incredible for one form of gaming — emulators.

Apple won't approve emulators that require access to just in time compilation (JIT), so Gamecube, PlayStation 2, and others aren't available for iPhone and iPad to run, even if modern [chips](#) can handle them. However, there is no such restriction on Mac where I can download software from the web.



M4 Mac mini review: a full screen emulator inside of Apple Vision Pro using Virtual Display

The Nintendo Gamecube emulator Dolphin allows users to run a game with a lot of upscaling options enabled. The M4 Mac mini did just fine running *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker* at 5K resolution, with features like anti-aliasing turned on.

It gets even more interesting when paired with Apple Vision Pro. By enabling a software hack in Dolphin's settings, it can force the game to render into any aspect ratio.

It can stretch the game's UI, so use it with caution, but it worked great bringing a full-screened experience to my virtual Mac display. There's a hair of latency present, but I'm not a competitive gamer so millisecond-timing on trigger presses isn't necessary. The game audio is perfectly in sync on the Apple Vision Pro speakers, and that latency is barely noticeable.

I'm not much of a Steam gamer, but the same approach could be taken with Steam games. Set up a game to play, put it in the Virtual Display on the Mac natively, or from your PC with a few options we'll be talking about soon, and sit back to game in Apple Vision Pro.



M4 Mac mini review: using an external battery isn't hard as long as it has an AC outlet

Another spec that's not discussed much is the Mac mini's power draw. It can run on a minimum of 4W and peaks at 65W. There was an average of 14W to 22W during regular use — I noted 15W while playing *Windwaker*.

Knowing this information is crucial when finding a suitable external battery pack for making it portable. For comparison, the Intel Mac mini needed a minimum of 20W and maxed out at 122W for a fraction of the computational power.

The battery pack I used for testing had a 100W output, so that left me plenty of overhead from the 65W maximum draw. While the battery itself was a bit of a dud, it made me excited at the prospect of a company building something more bespoke for use with the Mac mini.

M4 Mac mini review: meet Apple Vision Pro

I keep talking about it, but seriously, my Mac mini time would be closer to zero if it weren't for Apple Vision Pro and the occasional monitor review. I like that I can pull an ultra-wide desktop into my immersive view and utilize macOS as needed within the Apple Vision Pro.



M4 Mac mini review: a better Apple Vision Pro companion

My uses for the Mac aren't too far-reaching. The iPad Pro is capable enough to take care of most of my needs, especially when paired with the Studio Display, however, there are some things better left to macOS today.

As I mentioned before, I like using the Mac mini for emulation and select games. Most of my gaming is on a PS5 console, but occasionally nostalgia sets in, and I want to play a Gamecube emulator — something that can't be done on iPad yet.

Work-wise, I'm on the M4 Mac mini for podcast recording. The *AppleInsider Podcast* is recorded with the Apple Vision Pro on and the Mac virtual display in use.

When it comes to the *HomeKit Insider Podcast*, I record using the Continuity Camera feature on my iPhone. I've got a portable display handy to help set up that podcast, but beyond the actual recording, the Mac mini remains on its shelf. An iPad mini is kept nearby for reference to notes.



M4 Mac mini review: small enough to fit in the tiniest places

I worked to make the Mac mini portable with a battery pack so I could easily move it to different locations for use with the Apple Vision Pro. Unlike with Sidecar, you don't need a connected display or spoofing dongle — the Mac mini will just connect to the virtual display as long as it is awake and on the same network.

When not in portable form, I can access the Mac mini from across the office on the shelf by simply waking it with the Magic Mouse on the desk. As long as it hasn't been too long since the last wake, my Apple Watch unlocks the Mac, and I can address it within the Apple Vision Pro without issue.

It lets me use the power of M4 when necessary without having to worry about what chipset is in the Apple Vision Pro. I expect this will become more important going forward.

It's a mini world

Apple's redesigned Mac mini with M4 opens up a lot of potential use cases for the desktop. It's a smaller footprint for the desk, easier to carry in a backpack, and better suited for use in more compact spaces like a shelf or rack.



M4 Mac mini review: a desktop that can fit in anywhere

I have really enjoyed the new Mac mini and the role it has taken as a replacement to my 14-inch MacBook Pro. It's my podcast machine, game emulator, and it is what provides me access to Apple Intelligence while using Apple Vision Pro.

Our managing editor Mike Wuerthele who's doing the long-term review of the M4 Pro Mac mini soon might reconsider my employment here when I say this, but every time I buy a Mac, I wonder if it'll be the last one. This isn't because they are bad, but is because they don't represent much of my workflow.

I believe there will be a point where my iPad or Apple Vision Pro will be enough on their own. That isn't today, though.

The Mac mini with M4 can be the perfect companion to my primary computers for the next few years. Then I'll decide yet again if I can go without a Mac or if it's time for another upgrade.

M4 Mac mini review — pros

- Smaller design makes it more versatile
- M4 efficient enough to run on a portable battery for hours



- A perfect headless companion to Apple Vision Pro
- The best desktop Mac for most people

M4 Mac mini review — cons

- Some people dislike the power button placement
- Value drops quickly with SSD and RAM upgrades

Rating: 4.5 out of 5

A few months into the new Mac mini's life, I believe it is near perfect. I can't help but wish it were a bit smaller or able to be powered by USB-C, but I expect Apple will continue to iterate on this model for years to come.

Where to buy Apple's M4 Mac mini

Every Mac mini configuration is discounted now in our **M4 Mac mini Price Guide**, with instant and exclusive coupon discounts in effect at popular Apple resellers.

With coupon code **APINSIDER**, you can save on both retail and configure-to-order (CTO) models at Apple Authorized Reseller Adorama. A 3-year AppleCare plan is also \$20 off with the APINSIDER code when added to the system at checkout at Adorama.

Those looking for the retail configs can also save up to \$60 at Amazon, although inventory is limited at the time of this review.