

# Venom Blackbook Zero 14 laptop review

An ultraportable that competes with the big boys by focusing on what's important to a notebook



**Nick Ross**  
PC World  
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16/02/17

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## Expert Rating

4.50 / 5

### Pros

- Stylish
- Solid and well built
- Fast in 2D applications
- Good battery
- Matte screen

### Cons

- Not ideal for multimedia

### Bottom Line

Venom removes all the bells and whistles leaving you with a fast, reliable, 14-inch laptop that you can work on all day.

### Would you buy this?



Yes 49

No 14

### Price

\$ 1,699.00 (AUD)

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## PCW Evaluation Team



**Azadeh Williri**



Venom is the unusual Australian-based system integrator that sells computers globally to an enthusiastic, brand-loyal audience. The company is a bit like BMW's *M* Division in that it takes away the frills and bloat of the modern computer market and leaves behind a focused machine, with high-quality parts, that does its specified job well, fast and reliably. The Blackbook Zero 14 (Zero references the lack of graphics and the focus on general, work-related productivity) is another of its monolithic laptops but it's thin, very robust and good-looking. The specs are reasonable and, uncommonly, we're looking on a 14-inch laptop as an ultraportable.

## Key Specs

14.1-inch, matte screen, 1920 x 1080, non-touchscreen IPS LCD; 1.2-3.3GHz Intel Core i5-7Y54 processor; 8GB RAM; 240GB M.2 SSD; Intel HD Graphics 615; 41Wh battery; 1.4KG. SKU: L13303. [Full specs here.](#)

## Ports

On the left reside two, standard USB 2 ports while on the right are all of the others: USB-C (which supports charging and external video), a USB 3.0 port, micro HDMI, 3.5mm headset jack and a microSD card reader.

## Design and Build

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The chassis is listed as a Sand Blasted Alloy composite which sounds about right. It's basically a solid, black metal unibody but with a removable base that allows access to the removable battery and hard drive. The black is matte and uniform but on the edges and around ports we did notice scratches appearing revealing a silver metal beneath. While the whole chassis and lid (which has hardly any flex in it) feels very robust indeed, the paint job is less so. It should also be noted that the matte finish is one heck of a fingerprint magnet. Don't leave it at a crime scene.

In terms of styling, monochrome and monolithic are the best descriptors. But we also found it very cool from a multitude of angles as our pre-review [slideshow](#) demonstrates. If it wasn't for the blue Intel sticker at the front there'd be no colour here at all. It's all very Henry Ford, but in a good way. The finish gives it a quality feel, as do the flush-fitting ports.



You can access the basics by removing a multitude of small screws from the back.



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The IPS screen is crisp and clear but not the most colourful. We've been testing TVs using the excellent [Costa Rica 4K 60fps demo on YouTube](#) over the past year and are used to colours popping off the screen, but they're more muted and neutral here. They are. However, accurate and motion blur was minimal.

The resolution is 1920 x 1080. Some may lament the lack of Ultra High Definition but lettering gets very small in those circumstances. For a laptop that's set up for predominantly typing-based workloads the resolution fits the 14.1-inch screen size very well and it's comfortable to work on for long periods. The viewing angles experience some image degradation from the side, but then with work-oriented notebooks like this, you don't really want people sitting beside you having a crystal clear view of what you're working on. This is also an increasingly-rare breed of laptop that has a matte-screen with minimal reflections – a boon worth the sacrifice of glossy, vibrant colours to many people.

We liked it when the Windows 10 Professional image started up and had Chrome and Firefox already installed. That was a nice touch.

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## Input

The keyboard is a scrabble tile affair but feels different to many we've used in the past. The keys have a an-ever-so-slightly-rougher surface than competitors and are substantially stiffer than seen elsewhere. All but the top row are full-sized though and this, combined with the spacing, stiffness and coating meant it was one of the most accurate keyboards we'd used in a while - but that doesn't go for the Space Bar whose stiffness takes some getting used to. Indeed, if you're typing all day long you could experience finger fatigue. All in all, though, we were impressed - it feels like a high quality unit.

As for the mouse pad we're slightly-less convinced. It's smooth enough and accurate enough when sliding your fingers across it and gently tapping it, but the 'buttons' are quite stiff and this might be a bit uncomfortable for some.

## Performance

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We respect the choice of Core i5 chips for ultraportables. We've used i7s before and even with Kaby Lake's power efficiencies, they seem to cause problems with heat. This processor however, was very responsive for basic office and media functions, didn't get too hot which means it doesn't toast your unmentionables or have any annoying fans to spin up with that annoying, battery-draining whine. It can get warm at the rear, right-hand side but not enough to be uncomfortable.

There's only 8GB of RAM installed but it's an LPDDR3 Ultra Low Voltage variant which has been specially chosen to work efficiently in conjunction with the processor and M.2 SSD to operate at optimum levels for long periods without overheating or system speed throttling. The amount might limit hardcore photoshoppers and multimedia workers but it flew along for other tasks.

It scored 2415 in PC Mark which is very respectable for 2D applications. In the dedicated Work 2.0 test it scored 2977 which is among the [top scores we've ever seen](#) in this test (which, to be fair, we reserve for ultraportables). For reference, a Microsoft Surface Pro 4 (with a more power-hungry Core i5-6300U processor) scored 2613.

The integrated Intel graphics couldn't handle the modern 3D Mark tests but it did score 3691 in the Cloud Gate test which shows it can still play older 3D games, at least to some extent.

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## Battery Life

The Blackbook Zero 14 played our 1080p video for 6hrs 38mins before shutting down so we'd expect it to last a full working day when performing less-constant, less-power-hungry office tasks. It also ran the intensive PC Mark battery test for an impressive 5hrs 2mins. So you'll be able to use this remotely and unplugged for serious processing for a good few hours.

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Venom also makes the decision to include a second power supply. Apparently it's a frequently-requested accessory and so Venom provides a power cord that could be built-into a home/office environment plus a second to reside in a laptop bag without being forgotten. Sensible.

## Warranty and other features

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There's also a full-restore USB key for if everything goes wrong and requires the whole computer to be reset.

At the top is an HD webcam with dual digital microphones. There are two "Boom Box" speakers in the base. We don't know much about their specs but know that there's very little bass response, treble gets tinny quickly and there's no mid-range – it's a far cry from HP's *Bang & Olufsen*-tuned units. Once again, this is no multimedia machine.

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The Warranty is stated as being One Year "Face 2 Face" (which means you can take it to an authorised retailer) with 120-days technical support. Otherwise it's a standard Pick Up & Return affair. The company is counting on building quality PCs that won't require much support in the first place (a significant hit to their bottom line) so, as a smaller player, it's particularly in their interest not ship out fault-prone equipment. You can extend this warranty to three years (two years technical support) for a not-insubstantial \$399.

## Conclusion

There are far more bells and whistles on competitors' laptops (and even Venom's own, non-Zero range) – not least glossy touchscreens, faster processors, more RAM, 3D cameras, better speakers but what Venom is offering is different. It performs 2D computing tasks fast and reliably and with decent battery life. While we've also seen 13-inch laptops outperform it for performance and battery they tend to come at a significant premium.

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This SKU comes in at \$1,699 (or US\$1,099) though the range stretches from \$1,499 (US\$999) to \$2,549 (US\$1,549) depending on what size hard drive you want married to what speed of processor. That's reasonable for a 14-inch machine. Most competition will be coming from 13-inch models from the likes of [Dell](#), [HP](#) and [Acer](#), all of which cost hundreds of dollars more, albeit with more features and better performance. But on the flip-side, there's less to go wrong, here and it's got it where it matters.

We called this a BMW M Division-like product earlier but it's probably more of a Lotus – hand built locally, taking on the mass-produced, bells-and-whistles big boys by concentrating on a few primary principles and then selling at a lower price. If that sounds attractive to you then Venom will likely prove to be a rewarding brand to buy in to.

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