

Wirecutter We Bought a Bunch of Used iPhones. Here's What We Learned.

May 12, 2025 By Dave Gershgorn



Dana Davis/NYT Wirecutter; source photos by AdobeStock

Dave Gershgorn is a writer covering monitors, laptops, and tablets. He is a certified display calibrator through the Imaging Science Foundation.

Buying a new smartphone is tempting. It's a device that you rely on every day, for tasks big and small. Many people consider it an investment — one that won't deliver a financial return but will bring peace of mind, much like a brand-new car.

What's \$800 for a device you'll depend on for years?

But whether you're tired of running the upgrade hamster wheel, or concerned about how much [new devices will cost amidst tariffs](#) that seem to shift almost weekly, it's good to reassess whether buying the latest phone is worthwhile. You can often find deals on brand-new, previous-generation models, of course. But if you look at refurbished-electronics sellers, you can find even steeper discounts.

Get today's recommendation

Expert advice. Very good deals. The absolute best (and worst) things we've tested lately. Sent to your inbox daily.

For information about our privacy practices, including how to opt out of marketing emails, see our [Privacy Policy](#). For general questions, [contact us](#) anytime.

Why buy refurbished?

Every year, companies such as Apple and Google announce new smartphones. In doing so, they typically discontinue previous models, which creates a market for old phones that have lost their value. You can snag last year's iPhone for a few hundred dollars less than the newest model, and if you don't mind an even older phone, you pay just a fraction of the price.

It's unclear how much a new phone will cost going forward, given the changing tariff situation between the Trump administration and China. Last week, goods imported from China, where a majority of consumer electronics are made, were taxed at 145%. That rate has been [temporarily lowered to 30%](#) while the two countries begin trade talks. It's unclear what tariffs will be at the end of those talks. Smartphones, laptops, and computer monitors, among other devices, gained an exemption from the tariffs

after a [call from Apple CEO Tim Cook](#). But with all this uncertainty, purchasing from used-device sellers is less likely to involve wild price spikes than buying new.

To better understand the plethora of options within the used marketplace, we tested the major refurbished-phone dealers to see what you get by spending a fraction of the price of a brand-new flagship phone.

How we tested



Dave Gershqorn/NYT Wirecutter

Online refurbished-phone sellers like [Back Market](#), [Gazelle](#), and [Plug](#) claim to inspect, fix up, and certify the functionality of previously owned phones. That guarantee protects against problems arising from aging batteries, fake screens, gunk left from previous owners, or excessive wear and tear. [Swappa](#) is more of a marketplace for independent phone sellers. Unlike the other phone marketplaces, which show only stock images, Swappa displays photos of the actual phone you're buying. (While Apple and third-party retailers such as Best Buy also sell refurbished phones, they have limited stock; when we searched for an iPhone 13 there, none were available to buy.)

We bought an iPhone 13 in certifiably “good” condition from each of these sites to test the buying process and see whether it was worth saving \$10 to \$80 in comparison with buying an “excellent” refurbished phone. (Spoiler: It's not.)

What does it mean to buy refurbished?

The word *refurbished* doesn't mean anything concrete. To refurbish generally means to clean and inspect a product, as well as to replace any faulty parts encountered. But it isn't a standard, there are no rules and no US Bureau of Refurbishment, and nobody is policing what it means. (Except us.)

The services we tested varied widely in how they refurbished (or didn't) the phones we bought. For instance, Gazelle advertises a [55-point functional and cosmetic inspection](#), but the iPhone 13 we bought from the company still had easily removable gunk from the previous owner stuck between the casing and the glass back of the phone. Back Market claims to have a [25-point inspection process](#), but the iPhone 13 we bought from the site had an unauthorized third-party display installed, which prompted an error in the Settings menu. And when we checked the battery health, it was at 84%, just on the verge of needing replacement (Apple recommends

replacement when a battery is at 80% of its original capacity). Both of these phones were technically refurbished.

What you can control, to some extent, is the physical condition of the phone. These services sell phones in “excellent,” “good,” and “fair” condition, depending on the amount of scratches and dents on the exterior of the device. But as with refurbishment, each company decides what a “good” phone looks like versus an “excellent” one. The condition of the “good” phones we bought from Back Market, Gazelle, Plug, and Swappa varied widely. Across all of those sites, the price difference between “good” and “excellent” is only about \$20, and judging from our experience, we recommend spending the extra money for a phone in better condition. It’s like paying someone \$20 to not drop your phone — a relatively small price for a lower chance of damage.

Although the refurbished market doesn’t make it easy for you to know exactly what you’re getting, going to one of these sources is still better than buying a used phone from a person you don’t know off eBay or Facebook Marketplace. Buying refurbished typically comes with some kind of quality guarantee and return window, in case you don’t like the specific phone you receive.

What we found



It turns out that buying a certified “good” refurbished phone is a bit of a crapshoot, because each company has a different definition of what is considered “good.” Although we paid less, about \$20, than we would have for a certified “excellent” phone, it wasn’t enough savings to be worth the considerable trade-offs.

Of the four refurbished-phone resellers, **Plug** offered the best

The iPhone 13 from Plug arrived in great condition, with no major scratches. It also had a screen protector preinstalled. Dave Gershgorn/ NYT Wirecutter

experience by far. Plug, an online marketplace for refurbished technology, sells phones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and headphones. It claims to inspect 90-plus points, such as the battery health, camera performance, and screen quality, including dead pixels. We purchased a \$300 (plus tax) iPhone 13 in “good” condition, but to our surprise we received a phone that we’d consider excellent. It had no obvious visible damage, just some light scuffing around the camera lenses, but was otherwise nearly pristine.

Other marketplaces sent phones with considerably more wear, especially around the camera lenses. The iPhone 13 we bought from Plug also had a battery health of 98%, which is excellent for a used phone. In addition, our phone had a screen protector preinstalled, which we hadn't expected, since Plug advertises preinstalled screen protectors only as part of its additional accessory kit. The Plug phone was also the only one updated to the latest version of iOS 18; the others were still running iOS 17.

Plug provided the best packaging of the refurbished-phone sellers, tossing some accessories into the box that we didn't expect, which made the experience feel like opening up a new product. Plug shipped the phone with three chargers, a clear phone case, and an adhesive phone grip (like a knockoff PopSocket). The phone was also well protected, shipped in a smaller box inside the accessory box; some other phones we received were stuffed in a small box in a flat mailer, so this is a clear win for Plug.



Plug also ships its phones with an extra accessory, which can be a case, a phone grip, or extra chargers. Dave Gershgor/NYT Wirecutter

After seeing all these additional accessories, we reached out to Plug to confirm that somebody at the company hadn't deduced it was for a member of the press and added some extras. The company denied any special treatment, but when we compared our unboxing against [others online](#), we noticed that we had received more accessories in our package than others usually do, plus the preinstalled screen protector. We'd say, though, that you can expect a phone case, a phone grip, or some equivalent freebie, rather than a full set of accessories.

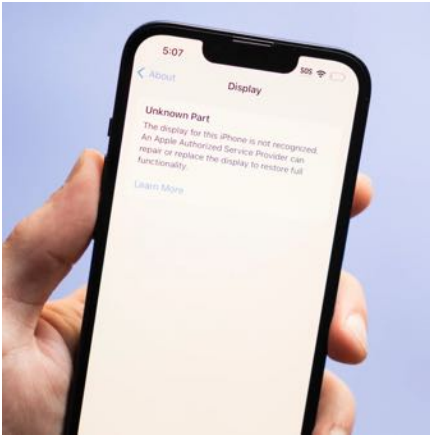
"Good" phones from the other refurbished-electronics resellers weren't as, well, good. The iPhone 13 we purchased from Gazelle, which has been selling refurbished electronics since 2008, was extremely dirty. Gazelle claims to have a 55-point inspection process for phone refurbishment, but we found crud from the

previous owner caked in the bottom speakers, earpiece, and ring/silent switch on the left side of the phone.



The iPhone 13 from Gazelle had scratches around the edges of its cameras, plus gunk stuck in the edges of the phone. Dave Gershgor/NYT Wirecutter

And though the phone came well packed in a simple cardboard box, accompanied by a charger and cable, its battery health was slightly disappointing at 86%. Considering that a new battery for an iPhone 13 costs about \$90, you might as well buy a newer device — or one in better condition.

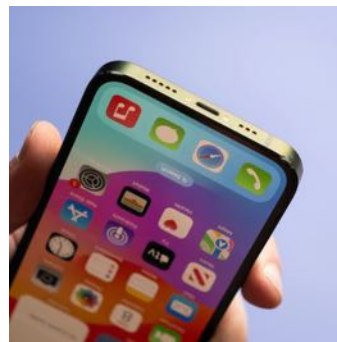


Back Market, another refurbished marketplace, is on a [marketing blitz](#), trying to make buying used tech look as cool as buying new. But the iPhone 13 we purchased, while in good exterior shape, held a few surprises once we booted it up: The battery health was 84%, again on the verge of needing replacement, and more egregiously, it had an unauthorized third-party screen installed, which caused an error to pop up in the Settings menu.

The iPhone 13 we bought from Back Market had an unauthorized screen installed, which caused an error message in the phone's settings. Dave Gershgorn/NYT Wirecutter

We thought we would have better luck with Swappa, which is a marketplace for independent phone-repair shops and tech resellers. Instead of buying a refurbished phone from Swappa itself, you buy one from the business that uses Swappa to sell its refurbished electronics. Swappa makes all of this pretty clear on its website, and when you're searching for phones, you can choose sellers and see photos of the actual phone you're buying.

But because there is no standardized refurbishing process, you don't really know what you're going to get, despite that ability to see photos of the device. The iPhone 13 we bought arrived in packaging that smelled a lot like cigarette smoke. The phone was also a bit more beat up than we thought it would be, and we discovered that properly determining a phone's condition by looking at a few pictures is a bit more difficult than you might think. When we booted it up, we discovered that the seller had already done the setup process, which refurbishers typically leave for the buyer after resetting the phone for personalization and security. At least the battery health was 89%, which wouldn't require immediate replacement.



The iPhone 13 from Swappa was a bit beat up and had small dents and dings around the outside edge. Dave Gershgorn/ NYT Wire-cutter

Though this is a peek into the refurbished-phone market, we haven't tested the sellers nearly enough to make a full recommendation. We limited our test by ordering only one phone from each website, and if we had ordered on a different day, we likely would have gotten an entirely different set of phones, and reached different conclusions about the quality of each. Limitations aside, our experiment represents a good snapshot of the buying experience and what you can reasonably expect from each site.

How does an old phone stack up to a new flagship in 2025?



Dave Gershgorn/NYT Wirecutter

The iPhone 13 models we purchased weren't in the best shape, but after testing all four of them, we found that Apple's 2021-era smartphone is still serviceable four years after launch. All of our most-used apps worked just fine. We scrolled social media, took pictures, checked weather maps, and played multiplayer online games like *Call of Duty: Mobile* and *PUBG Mobile*, all without issue. Smartphones do seem to slow down over time, as apps and websites get more complex and feature-rich and naturally require faster processors to work correctly. But the iPhone 13 doesn't feel slower in comparison with an iPhone 16 — yet.

The iPhone 13 is essentially the same phone as the iPhone 14, released in 2022. It's the same size, with a 6.1-inch display, and it has essentially the same processor, the same cameras, a Lightning port, and support for Face ID and 15 W MagSafe charging. The biggest difference is that the iPhone 13 lacks satellite SOS, a feature that lets you send messages when you don't have cellular connectivity, which we think most people don't need.

The iPhone 13 still takes very nice, detailed pictures. This iPhone 13 photo is almost indistinguishable from the iPhone 16 Pro version in the next slide. Dave Gershgorn/ NYT Wirecutter

Compared with the iPhone 15, which Apple still sells for \$700, the iPhone 13 is just a little underwhelming when it comes to the cameras. The biggest difference between the iPhone 13 and newer models like the iPhone 15 or 16 lies in the main camera lens, which gets a big resolution upgrade on the newer models, going from 12 megapixels to 48. A higher amount of megapixels increases the detail that the camera's sensor can capture but also gives the phone more data to work with, whether for blurring the background in Portrait Mode, for instance, or shooting in low light.

We found that the iPhone 13's camera is still very capable, and in that regard it even outperforms the iPhone 16 Pro in certain situations. The iPhone 13 uses a more obvious post-processing to make its images look better, like blurring the backgrounds behind your subject and upping the exposure of low-light images. But when that post-processing doesn't work, the photos can look a bit strange, as if the wrong parts of the photo are blurred. In contrast, the iPhone 16 Pro dynamically chooses which camera to use for different situations, even blending images from two cameras together for better performance. This setup, like the iPhone 13's cameras, works well in some situations and not as well in others.

Otherwise, newer models have a few small design improvements that you don't get in the iPhone 13: The camera notch was replaced with the pill-shaped Dynamic Island cut-out, and, of course, the debut of the iPhone 15 is when Apple switched from Lightning to USB-C charging.

The trade-offs of buying used

But if you've never used an iPhone 15 or 16 and just need a usable iPhone, buying an older refurbished model isn't a bad move. There are downsides: You might get a gunky model, especially if you choose to buy a "good" one instead of an "excellent" one. You also get software and security updates for a shorter stretch than you would if you were to buy new. Apple tends to support its phones for about six years, which means updates for the iPhone 13 will be released only until about 2027. But by 2027, you might be ready for an upgrade anyway.

Phones also get slower with time, as newer versions of apps require more processing power. And you have to [replace the battery](#) sooner than you would with a new phone, which for an iPhone 13 costs \$89 if you take it to an Apple Store for repair. But in this economy, those trade-offs might be worth making.

This article was edited by Caitlin McGarry and Jason Chen.

Meet your guide

I am based in Seattle and responsible for Wirecutter's computer monitor coverage, as well as all our guides to Apple laptops and desktops. I also review higher-powered laptops, such as business laptops and laptops for photo and video editing. Plus, I write our reviews for all-in-one computers, ergonomic keyboards, and home 3D printers. If it has a screen, sits on a desk, and isn't a basic Windows ultrabook, I'm usually the person to try it out.