

Zonbu Mini PC: Boom or Boo-Boo?



Productive Product: It's tough to say

exactly what the word "Zonbu" implies. Is it: A., the name of a millionaire's estate, B. an unpopular central-African republic, C. some kind of vegetarian dessert, or D., just a made-up word because all the good names for a high-tech company are taken? The correct answer is D, and we're not kidding. Explained a spokesman: "Zonbu does not have any special meaning. It was chosen because it is short and its domain name is available. Many people, including me, asked the same question when they first heard of Zonbu."

With that detail out of the way, the [eponymous Zonbu](#) [1] is actually a low-energy miniature PC currently in "public beta" testing. There's no fan, no hard disk, and no Microsoft Windows. A laptop hard disk can be installed using the internal IDE slot, as can a Bluetooth or WiFi card using the mini-PCI slot (a spot for an external WiFi LED is already marked on the aluminum case.) Also included are a massive internal heat sink, a 4GB Compact Flash card, six USB 2.0 ports, and [Gentoo Linux](#) [2].

Zonbu doesn't disclose the central processor, only saying it's an "Intel-like ultra-low power" device, but the chip is [Via Technologies' C7 model](#) [3]. It is hidden underneath the heat sink; additionally there is a Via video processor. The actual system design [appears outsourced](#) [4], which is no big deal, except that you can buy the same device elsewhere without the subscription fee **[Aug. 24, update: or you can pay \$249 to Zonbu rather than the advertised \$99 price which requires the subscription.]** That would require much more software configuration but it's nice to know the option is available. OpenOffice and Firefox work decently enough, with a shallow learning curve. Oddly though, even with 512MB RAM the computer feels very slow and sluggish after 30 minutes of constant use. I'd rather see them use a faster processor and more memory, and have the computer be slightly less efficient.

I feel the same way as other reviewers: the Zonbu is only [moderately worthwhile](#) [5] because of the mandatory subscription payments. Sure, it saves a lot of energy by eliminating the fan and hard disk, but that would only be truly valuable if the computer were sold in an enterprise edition where the scale matters.

Like many new electronic designs, Zonbu's system is interesting, and I'm looking forward to version 2.0. The energy-saving features [work as advertised](#) [6] but there is too much sacrifice involved. I cannot recommend this device unless Zonbu

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speeds it up, makes it more stable, and lowers the subscription costs when the beta becomes version 1.x. They also need to examine the manufacturing process, as our test unit arrived with numerous loose screws, but it's possible that the betas were built by hand.

What we do like is Zonbu's support for [consumers](#) [7] and [developers](#) [8], plus the easy-to-use [online store](#) [9] (even though it returns a PHP error as of publishing time.)

With some refinement, and if Zonbu receives enough capital, this PC could be a respectable purchase in the enterprise moreso than for consumers -- consider the successes from [Sun Microsystems](#) [10] and [Wyse Technology](#) [11] -- those are thin-clients but, again, the Zonbu device could be a great compromise if properly supported.

Finally, after much Googling, we found that the best independent Zonbu site is the [Mr. Zonbu](#) [12] blog although the author's identity is [not entirely clear](#) [13].

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Links:

[1] <http://www.zonbu.com/home/index.htm>

[2] <http://www.gentoo.org/>

[3] <http://mrzonbu.wordpress.com/2007/08/17/zonbu-the-via-c7-distro/>

[4] <http://mrzonbu.wordpress.com/2007/07/22/hardware-observations-and-alternate-sources/>

[5] <http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB118661730994292374.html>

[6] <http://www.zonbu.com/learn/green.htm>

[7] <http://www.zonbu.com/support/>

[8] <http://www.zonbu.com/company/developer.htm>

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[10]

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[11] <http://www.wyse.com/green/index.asp>

[12] <http://mrzonbu.wordpress.com/>

[13] <http://mrzonbu.wordpress.com/2007/07/22/mr-zonbu-makes-his-entrance/>