

Faster Than a Speeding Desktop

This 100MHz subnotebook is sensational, except for an eye-straining single-scan color screen.

BY ERIC GREVSTAD

Would you stuff a huge hot-rod engine into a subcompact car, then drive it with a dirty windshield? Zeos' Meridian 400C is a handsome 4-pound subnotebook with a first-class keyboard, ample storage and expansion potential, and the outrageous performance of a DX4/100 processor in the version we tested. But this otherwise irresistible mix is spoiled by a dim, single-scan passive-matrix color display.

Like Dell, Zeos is a direct-market leader that let its portable line sag, but is now making a comeback in the mobile market. In Zeos' case, the comeback is courtesy of Sanyo, which designed the Minnesota marketer's well-liked 286 and 386SX notebooks years ago and has renewed the alliance under the Meridian brand. The Meridian 400 subnotebooks take the place of Zeos' monochrome, PCMCIA-slotless Contenda; the Meridian 800C is a normal-sized notebook with a dual-scan passive-matrix color screen.

Both big and little Meridians are available with your choice of three CPUs—the thrifty 486SX/33, middling-quick 486DX2/50, and rip-snorting DX4/100—in Zeos' usual variety of bundled packages. We tested a 400C loaded with the 100MHz processor, 8MB of RAM, a 350MB hard drive, and an external 1.44MB floppy drive, along with a spare nickel-metal-hydride battery pack, a roomy carrying case, MS-DOS 6.22, Windows for Workgroups 3.11, and Lotus Organizer. Total cost was \$3,095; stepping down to a DX2/50 would have subtracted \$300, while opting for an active-matrix Meridian 400A would have added \$700.

The DX2/50 is probably a better buy, offering more-than-adequate performance for on-the-road

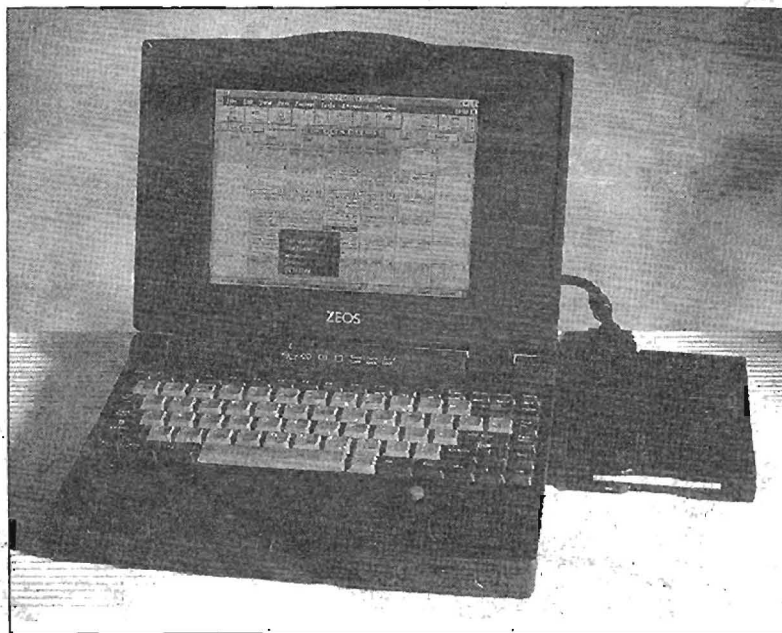
Windows work, but we confess that we're captivated by the sheer excess of a 100MHz subnotebook. Imagine a howitzer the size of a derringer, and you'll get an idea of the DX4 Meridian's appeal—its benchmark results blew away other subnotebooks, matching or beating our Texas Instruments TravelMate DX4/75 laptop (though the latter's ultra-fast memory architecture gave it an edge in some processing tests).

The 400C tore through spreadsheet and word processing jobs like

a nonskid matte-black finish. The external floppy drive is the same 11-ounce, coat-pocket-sized unit used by Gateway 2000's HandBook. Only the AC adapter, a conventional 1.2-pound brick with a long cord at either end, is a bit ungainly.

The Zeos' 84-key keyboard ranks with the Toshiba Portégé's as the best in the subnotebook class. It's not spacious—the span from Caps Lock to Enter is about two inches shy of a desktop keyboard's—but it feels comfortable within minutes rather than hours of practice, helped by a wide palmrest, a smooth typing feel, and a faultless layout (including cursor arrows in an inverted T rather than the Contenda's hapless horizontal row).

Zeos calls its imitation of IBM's TrackPoint pointing stick the True-Point. It's a shallow red nub of a joystick mounted in the palmrest well right of center. It feels skittish at first—and its front-edge-mounted mouse buttons are awkward when the traveler in front of you reclines



The new Meridian 400C subnotebook from Zeos features a good-looking case, a comfortable keyboard, and a fast DX4/100 processor.

tissue paper. Plugged into Zenith Data Systems' Z-Player sound and CD-ROM station, it ran multimedia games more smoothly than our DX2 desktop. The 350MB hard drive is big and fast enough for any application, and system RAM is expandable to 20MB.

This heavyweight computer comes in one of the nicest lightweight packages we've seen: a 4-pound, 7.8x10.2x1.7-inch case with

his or her seat, jamming the Meridian into your lap—but it easily beats the Aero's tiny trackball.

The 400C also surpasses the Aero by using a dedicated connector, rather than a PCMCIA slot, for its external floppy. Two PCMCIA Type II slots are located on opposite sides, which lets you use two cards at once without tangling cables, but puts the left slot's eject button dangerously close to the on/off button.

ISSUE SPECIAL ADVERTISING IN THIS ISSUE

Meridian 400C

Parallel, serial, and VGA ports, and one PS/2 mouse or keyboard port are at the rear; there's no docking station or port replicator available.

The 400C's NiMH battery pack is no match for Toshiba's lithium-ion cell, but it's not bad considering the system's speed: The Zeos ran for an hour and 24 minutes in our worst-case WinDrain battery test, and regularly provided an hour and 35 minutes of real-world work before warning beeps indicated that the end was near. Recharge time is about an hour. A suspend-and-resume button on the Meridian's front (labeled with the international work-break symbol, a coffee cup) puts the system to sleep for a few minutes or hours, though it's

not intended for overnight or weekend naps.

SINGLE-SCAN SCREEN

All of these features add up to a swell subnotebook—except for the single-scan screen. Yes, the 7.8-inch diagonal LCD is brighter and bolder than the passive-matrix color displays you may remember from two years ago; yes, the Zeos' Cirrus Logic chip set, 1MB of video memory, and 256-color Windows drivers give good performance, including simultaneous LCD and CRT viewing for presentations. But compared to the affordable dual-scan screens now delighting notebook buyers, the single-scan 400C looks woefully pale and washed-out.

In bright office lighting, when configured to boot to a DOS prompt

instead of directly into Windows, the 400C was the first portable we've tested in years that actually made us look twice to see whether it was turned on. We used it once for a full eight-hour workday and got a headache that lasted through the next morning. True, the display is no worse than the rival Compaq Contura Aero's (interestingly, the Meridian's constant shimmer was vertical while the Aero's was horizontal). But placed beside any dual-scan or active-matrix laptop, there's no comparison.

In fact, unless a limited budget compels you to choose the 400C, we'd urge a splurge—sight unseen—on the active-matrix Meridian 400A instead. The 400A isn't cheap, but it eliminates its sibling's only real handicap—and it makes Zeos, in every area except battery life, a threat to Toshiba and its premium Portégé for top rank in the subnotebook market. ▼

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BENCHMARKS

Meridian 400C

	Zeos Meridian 400C	Benchmark System: TI TravelMate 4000M/75
ZD PC Bench 9.0		
CPUmark 16	74.9	85.9
16-Bit Protected Mode Large Mix	21.1	24.2
Floating-Point Emulation	1,799.8	1,552.8
Math Coprocessor	28,518.3	21,785.1
DOS VGA Video Score	3,467.6	2,765.7
DOS Disk Score	422.9	380.4
ZD WinBench 95		
Graphics WinMark 95		
16 Colors @ 640x480	4.1	3.5
256 Colors @ 640x480	4.0	3.1
Disk WinMark 95	396.0	284.0
WinDrain 1.0		
Battery Life (Hrs:Min)	1:24	3:27

Winstone 95

Zeos Meridian 400C	49.0
TI TravelMate 4000M/75	44.6

DOSMark

Zeos Meridian 400C	496.3
TI TravelMate 4000M/75	499.9

Zeos International Ltd.
 1301 Industrial Blvd. Minneapolis, MN 55413; 1-800-423-5891
 Support: 1-800-228-5390, 24 hours daily; BBS: (612) 362-1219;
 one-year parts-and-labor warranty; 30-day MBG
Direct Price: \$3,095
System as Tested: 100MHz Intel DX4 with 16K internal RAM cache;
 8MB RAM; 350MB hard drive; 1.44MB external floppy drive; backlit
 single-scan passive-matrix color VGA LCD; two PCMCIA Type II slots;
 84-key keyboard with palmrest and TruePoint cursor controller;
 parallel, serial, VGA, mouse, floppy drive ports; two NiMH
 battery packs; AC adapter; carrying case; MSDOS 6.22; Windows
 for Workgroups 3.11; Lotus Organizer.

HIGHER NUMBERS ARE BETTER FOR ALL RESULTS