

Mercury Elite-AL Pro Mini External Drive From Other World Computing (OWC)

External storage should be a primary concern for any computer user. Backup of our priceless data is a necessity. The sinking feeling when some data has been irretrievably lost is not one that I want to feel again. With Time Machine running, I feel secure in knowing that I have my documents and photos well looked after.

Three questions come to mind when considering an external drive purchase. What is a good size to get? How fast will the files be transferred? How much will it cost? The size of the drive really depends on how much needs to be backed up. From what I have read on the subject, not everything on your machine needs to be backed up. A lot of applications can easily be re-installed from either a DVD or downloaded from the Internet. It is documents and photos and maybe music that needs to be saved as these cannot be found anywhere else. Time Machine allows you to regulate what you want backed up. My computer has 1 TB of storage and I have been using a 500 GB external drive for Time Machine. I have found this to be more than adequate.

The earliest date that is stored in Time Machine goes back seven months. I have also periodically made DVD copies of my most personal files. These I store somewhere other than at home for further peace of mind.

I found the LaCie external drive I was using to be slow for file transfers. It is about three years old now and probably showing its age. So I started searching for a newer model. OWC has a line of drives called the Mercury drive. I was able to obtain the 500 GB and 7200rpm drive to try out for myself. This newer model has three different access ports: a USB, an eSATA and two 800-FireWire slots. All Apple computers have the USB port but the FireWire port does vary with the age of your computer. My old 2006 iMac is 400 and my newer 2009 is 800. I was able to connect the Mercury drive to my

older iMac with a cable I had from another drive using the FW800 port of the drive connected to the FW400 port of my older iMac. Regardless of your machine, the Mercury drive will work with your Apple computer. Since it was the same size as my older drive, the storage question became unimportant.

The drive was listed as spinning at up to 7200RPM but that meant nothing to me. Since it came with three connection cables, I decide to try them out on my computer. I tested my newest iMac running OS 10.6.4 (Snow Leopard) and found transfer to be about 1.3 GB/min with the USB and a whopping 4 GB/min with the 800-FireWire. The improvement of the times indicates that the newer technology does in fact produce faster transfers. I could not use the eSATA port as I have nothing that connects to this type of system. The eSATA is reputed to have the fastest transfer time for this drive. I tried a thumb drive and was able to get only 0.1 GB/min through the USB port. Saving data to a thumb drive is definitely not quick. Thus, a new Mercury drive makes the best use of my iMac's file transfer capabilities.

The actual specs that are listed for this drive tested under ideal conditions are eSATA 3000MB/s, FW800 100MB/s, FW400 50MB/s and USB 2.0 60MB/s. My numbers are not too far off from these.

A few other points should be made about the Mercury drive. It comes with the three cables needed to hook up the drive to your computer, a CD full of extras (more on this later) and a User's Guide. It does not come with a power cable but there is a port on the drive for a DC adapter. It is completely bus powered and will run from the computer. This means that the drive has to be directly connected to the computer through a USB port or FW800. I tried running the USB cable through a hub that had its own power source but found that it worked sporadically. Sometimes it mounted the drive and sometimes it did not. This is normal for bus powered drives. I would suggest that if you need to use the drive and want to conserve the few USB ports on you computer, buy the DC adapter that sells with the drive (\$8.00). I was able to hook up the drive through the FW400 port of my older iMac but I needed to use a cable from another drive. The Mercury drive did not come with a FW400 cable. I was able to piggy back a second external drive using the FW800 slot. Both drives mounted fine and I was able to use them both at the same time without the extra DC adapter.

I found the Mercury drive runs much cooler than my older drive and produces little sound when in operation. The only indication that it is



working is the blue glow from the LED light in the front. The front of the drive has a set of 15 x 8 perforations that enable the drive to keep cool as it runs and look cool when the blue lights shine through it. I was very pleased to see an on/off switch at the back. This allowed me to completely shut it down when not in use.

Most other drives of this type require you to disconnect the cable in order to shut it down completely and save energy. When the Mercury drive is connected, it flashes during the data transfer process, letting you know that it is working fine. Also, as with all new devices, the size keeps getting smaller and smaller. This drive is about ¼ the size of my older, same capacity, LaCie drive. It measures 14 x 10 x 2 cm and easily fits into the palm of my hand. This would make it ideal to take as a travel companion. It would take up so little room and it is very light. The Mercury drive comes formatted for the Mac. If you want to use it with a Windows computer, you will need to reformat it. This will allow both Windows and Apple computers to read the files on it but it will slow down the speed of the transfers. Apple computers can read Windows formatted drives but the reverse is not true for Windows computer. Since I intend to use this machine only with my Apple computer, I am not going to reformat it.

All OWC drives come with a Software Bundle on a DVD. The disk has Carbon Copy Cloner (donationware) and Prosoft's Data Backup 3 (\$59) which are alternatives to Time Machine for keeping your software secure. There is also the Intech SpeedTools Utilities application (\$90 for the full version) which consists of a suite of utilities to optimize your Mac's running speed. Every OWC external drive also comes with 4GB of Freeware and Shareware applications right on the drive. These extras should be taken into account when you consider the price of the drive compared to others of the same size.

I worry about the lifetime of these drives. From what I read, heat is the major source of failure. I like that I can completely turn off the power on this drive. I know that it runs cooler and that heat should not be a problem, but I do feel a bit more reassured with this switch. Time Machine is defaulted to back up every hour. I do not make enough changes to need that many back ups in a day. With the Mercury drive as my Time Machine back up drive, I only turn it on once or twice a day. This should be sufficient for my needs. The initial Time Machine install took about two and a half hours for about 200GB of data. I can't remember the exact amount of time the LaCie drive needed for this task, but I think it was about half a day. I also noticed that the time taken for the daily back ups is a lot faster.

I have certainly been impressed with this drive. It has the look of the newer aluminum-faced Apple computers with all the sides being silver. The quiet running, energy savings, and low running temperature are all related to the aircraft grade aluminum enclosure. This material is an excellent heat conductor and thus the unit doesn't require a fan; it runs cool, and very quietly. This rugged metal structure is a good sturdy enclosure for my precious data. There are over ten models of this drive ranging in speed and storage size. Of course, with all this speed and silence there will be a cost factor. All the OWC drives come with a three year warranty. Comparing what it can do and the energy saving aspect with other similar drives and the extra goodies, I think you will find that they are reasonably priced. And think of the peace of mind you get with this quality machine handling your precious back ups.



To find out more about these excellent drives from OWC go to: http://eshop.macsales.com/shop/firewire/EliteALmini/eSATA_FW800_FW400_USB/.

Submitted by Marcel Dufresne

