

Z{DOCKS} AV{DOCK} iPod & iPhone Audio-Video Dock Review



This Audio-Video Dock from the aptly named Z{DOCKS} company combines form and function with this feature rich and good looking docking station for Apple's media players (iPods) and phones (iPhones).

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Introduction

Today we take a closer look at a useful gadget for Apple mobile device owners, Australian based Z{DOCKS} send us their latest product which allows you to easily play back audio and video from your Apple device to your TV and/or Hifi.

The aptly named AV{DOCK} is shipped in a shock proof cardboard box , after travelling across a few thousand miles the AV{DOCK} arrived in good condition on our doorstep.

On the front and back of the box you can see all the features, we've listed them below for your convenience.



Product Features

- Infra-red remote control, functions: Play/Pause, Skip forward, skip back, Fwd/Rwd, On/Off – applies to current mode on iPod; Music, Video, Photo slide show
- `Clean-Path` signal PCB layout, optimised design reduces interference and degradation to audio and video performance
- Utilises iPod's 30-pin dock connector, the cleanest way to transfer signals from the device
- Gold plated RCA rear facing discreet Audio Out Left and Right connectors for easy access
- Gold plated RCA rear facing discreet Component Video Out connector for easy access
- S-video 7-Pin socket rear facing for easy access
- Discreet USB 2.0 connector, located underneath with rear facing cable guidance detail
- Fast charge (via mains USB plug and cable), USB trickle charge provided when connected (via the USB cable supplied) to a compatible PC/Mac
- Soft non-marking anti-slip rubber feet to provide a stable base for your iPod
- Ergonomically derived viewing angle (15 degrees from vertical)
- Durable painted finish on casting and specific plastic components □ □

Box Contents

Inside the box you'll find a truckload of plastic plates as these allow the different models to fit nicely inside the AV{DOCK}.



- Base unit
- Remote control with lithium battery, (remove Battery isolation tag to operate)
- USB 2.0 cable, male connectors: 1.6 metre USB A (connect to PC/Mac) to USB 2.0 (connect to iDock)
- USB mains wall plug (power adaptor), Australia plug type
- Adapter plates for the following devices:
 - iPhone 3G & 3GS 8GB 16GB 32GB
 - iPod nano 1st generation 1GB 2GB 4GB
 - iPod 5th generation (video) 30GB
 - iPod 5th generation (video) 60GB 80GB
 - iPod nano 2nd generation (aluminium) 2GB 4GB 8GB
 - iPod nano 3rd generation 4GB 8GB
 - iPod nano 4th 8GB 16GB
 - iPod Classic 160GB
 - iPod Classic 80GB 120GB
 - iPod Touch 8GB 16GB 32GB

- Adapter plate removal tool
- User guide

A Closer Look

The AV{DOCK} is not a lightweight docking, it won't move/slide around easily thanks to its weight and anti-slip rubber at the bottom.



Above the "SIEBEN technology" logo you can see the IR receiver.

At the bottom there's a connection for USB charger cable, gold plated composite video/audio connectors as well as s-video out.



The remote control is quite small as there only a few functions available, the most essential ones for audio playback: next/previous, play & pause:



There's nothing much further to it visually wise, the device is easy to install, after hooking up your audio and video cables you are good to go.

Testing Gear & Plugging In Your iPod/iPhone

For our tests we had access to two Apple products:

iPod Classic 160GB and iPhone 3G 8Gb



Apple products are pretty good looking, to keep them somewhat scratch free we use snap on cases, either from hard plastic or soft rubber:

iPod Classic 160GB with soft rubber case cover and iPhone 3G 8Gb with hard plastic case cover



This is where a small annoyance roars its head, with the case covers applied you can't get them to fit into the AV{DOCK}, this is not the first accessory to exhibit this issue, as there are plenty of hands-free car kit and other docks which build to fit the exact Apple product and not a millimeter bigger in size.



Once you remove the cover the problem goes away instantly; depending on how easily your case cover is applied this hurdle is a small or big one. With our choice of covers we found the rubber cover to be more resilient to being removed/installed, the plastic cover started to show some usage signs after several removals/installations.



A few months we bought another dock which is only meant for iPod and only has audio (by default) out; it's less fancy, but the device has no issue fitting iPod with/without case:



Usage

We hooked up the AV{DOCK} to an Onkyo TX-SR308 5.1 Home Theatre Receiver for the audio tests, we compared it to streaming the same audio from a media tank (PopCorn Hour) as well as the iPod connected through the more affordable "headphone" jack dock.

At the end of the day we couldn't really say that one was better than the other, if there were differences, they were too small to really stand out in our listening tests. Depending on your home theatre you might have a different experience; the use of gold plated RCA connectors is definitely a step above the mainstream headphone jack.

For our video tests we hooked up the AV{DOCK} straight to a Panasonic 42" Plasma screen, native resolution is 1024x768, so 720p output should do fine.

Usage with iPhone

When plugging in the iPhone in the dock iOS lets us know the accessory is not "optimized" of the iPhone.



Z{DOCK} recommends that you put your iPhone in "airplane" mode if you plan to use it for extended periods of time in the docking to reduce interference, so we did:



The upscale quality is acceptable for a quick webcast or home movie, feature films and your favorite series should be handled by a HD capable media player to get to the most out of it. The AV{DOCKS} definitely works:



Worth noting here is that the remote control does not work inside the iPod app on the iPhone 3G. We're also limited to outputting video/audio through the iPod app, there's no way to display photos on the large screen with the iPhone (unless you put them in a movie on your PC and then upload to the iPhone in MP4 format to be played back in iPod app, but that's hardly plug and play)

Usage with iPod

The AV{DOCK} seems to be better fitted for use with the iPod, for starters, the remote control works flawlessly to skip tracks and play/pause movies. Upscaling music video works flawlessly, but again the quality is not quite 720p, let alone 420p:



Enabling TV-Out is a simple procedure, you can set it to ON/OFF or ASK every time; you'll get a pop-up like below, choose ON and the image is displayed in large on your TV:



Browsing photos is possible with the iPod, the iPod display also changes, displaying a thumbnail of the photo you're watching on the big screen.



The picture quality is quite good, unfortunately our camera's JPG compression introduces a bit of artifacts here, in person the pictures show up nicely:



Conclusive Thoughts

The iPod and iPhone accessory market is overflowing with addons, gadgets and what not, it's easy to get lost amongst the thousands of different products on the shelves.

Even at apple.com webshop there are plenty of different dockings available, which one to choose?

We tested today a docking from Z{DOCK} which features both audio and video output using high quality RCA connectors; we found audio quality to be top notch and video output to be acceptable (give the video source material). The included remote control worked flawlessly when we put an iPod in the docking, with an iPhone it simply did not work.

So feature wise this product is pretty impressive, the build quality is very high, this brings us to pricing. The product is *listed at \$98* which puts it in the higher end scale of "docking" products. If you are looking for a docking which explicitly support video out, the price is quite acceptable. If you see that they list audio-cables at *\$138* you'll get the idea who the intended target audience is: audiophiles. If you want a classy dock to sit on top of your thousand dollars' worth audio equipment, few products come closer to being a "match made in heaven".



But... if you are somebody who likes music and are satisfied with good sound quality and you have a PC or MAC at home and a local network you might be interested to know the existence of alternative solutions. For \$99 Apple sells this *AirPort Express Base Station* which allows you to output audio from your iTunes library to your Hifi/speakers set in the living room. The Airport Express has an optical and analog audio out so quality wise you should be set. You can even control your iTunes remotely through your iPhone (iPhone Touch w/ wifi) and see covert art on your device while music plays through your speakers.

The difference between these two audio solutions comes down to personal preference, technical know-how, installation options and area of application. If you don't mind spending an hour or so setting up the connection between your iTunes and Airport Express and have the needed gear to do so, going down the \$99 road is definitely an option. If however you don't want to have to turn on your PC/MAC to be able to play music, or don't have one in the area, or want to keep things separated and you're looking for a classy high quality AV Dock to play back some sweet tunes from your iPod, then the AV{DOCK} at \$99 becomes a very attractive solution.

We like to thank Sam from Sieben Technology for allowing us to test their latest products, we hope you found this review useful. Until next time!
