macOS Sierra vs Mac OS X El Capitan

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Is it worth upgrading your Mac to macOS Sierra? We compare the interface and features of Sierra and Mac OS X El Capitan to help you decide

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Welcome to our macOS Sierra vs Mac OS X El Capitan comparison review, in which we help you decide which is the best Mac OS for you, and whether you should upgrade your system to macOS Sierra.

Apple's current Mac operating system is called macOS Sierra, a slight tweak

in branding from its Mac OS X predecessors to fit in with the typographical style of iOS, tvOS and watchOS. Sierra has been available to download since September 2016, bringing a raft of new features to the Mac, including the Siri voice-control tech from the iPhone & iPad, and a wide range of system and interface tweaks.

Sierra is a free upgrade from El Capitan, the previous OS, so there's no reason not to jump in and grab it, right? Not so fast. You need to check if your Mac is compatible, for one thing, and because it's not easy to go back to an older Mac OS after making the upgrade, it's worth weighing up the changes to your day-to-day user experience.
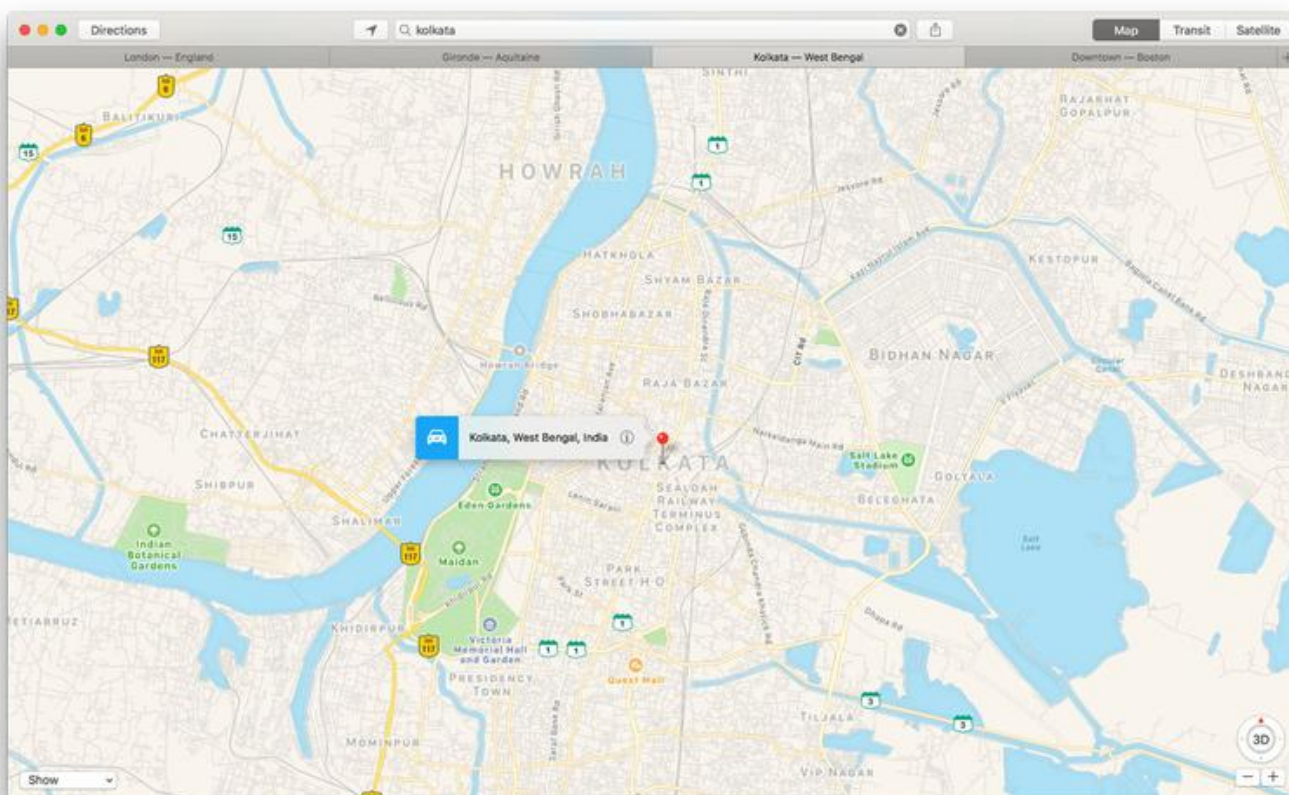
We think you'll want to get Sierra (if so, you'll want to know how to update macOS), but you should always put in some research before making an upgrade like this. So in this article we compare the two products' features, interface and design to help you decide which is a better bet for you. For more information, read our Mac OS X El Capitan review and macOS Sierra review.

And if you're interested in the next version of macOS, take a look at our comparison of the features of Sierra and High Sierra.

Design & interface

Design-wise, El Cap and Sierra are virtually identical. The 'flattened' visuals brought in for Yosemite and retained in El Cap are still present in Sierra. But there are a couple of differences in the user interface of the newer OS.

The first and most noticeable: you can use tabs in a wide range of first- and third-party apps, not just your web browser. Apps featuring tabs include Maps, Mail, TextEdit, all three iWork apps and apparently any third-party app that supports multiple windows.

In Sierra there's now a picture-in-picture viewing mode, similar to the same-named mode in iOS on the iPad. Picture-in-picture "lets you float video from Safari or iTunes in a window over your desktop as you work", in Apple's words, and you can pin this video mini-window to one corner of your screen, where it will stay even if you switch Spaces.

For more on this, read: How to use Mission Control, Expose, Split Screen & Spaces on the Mac
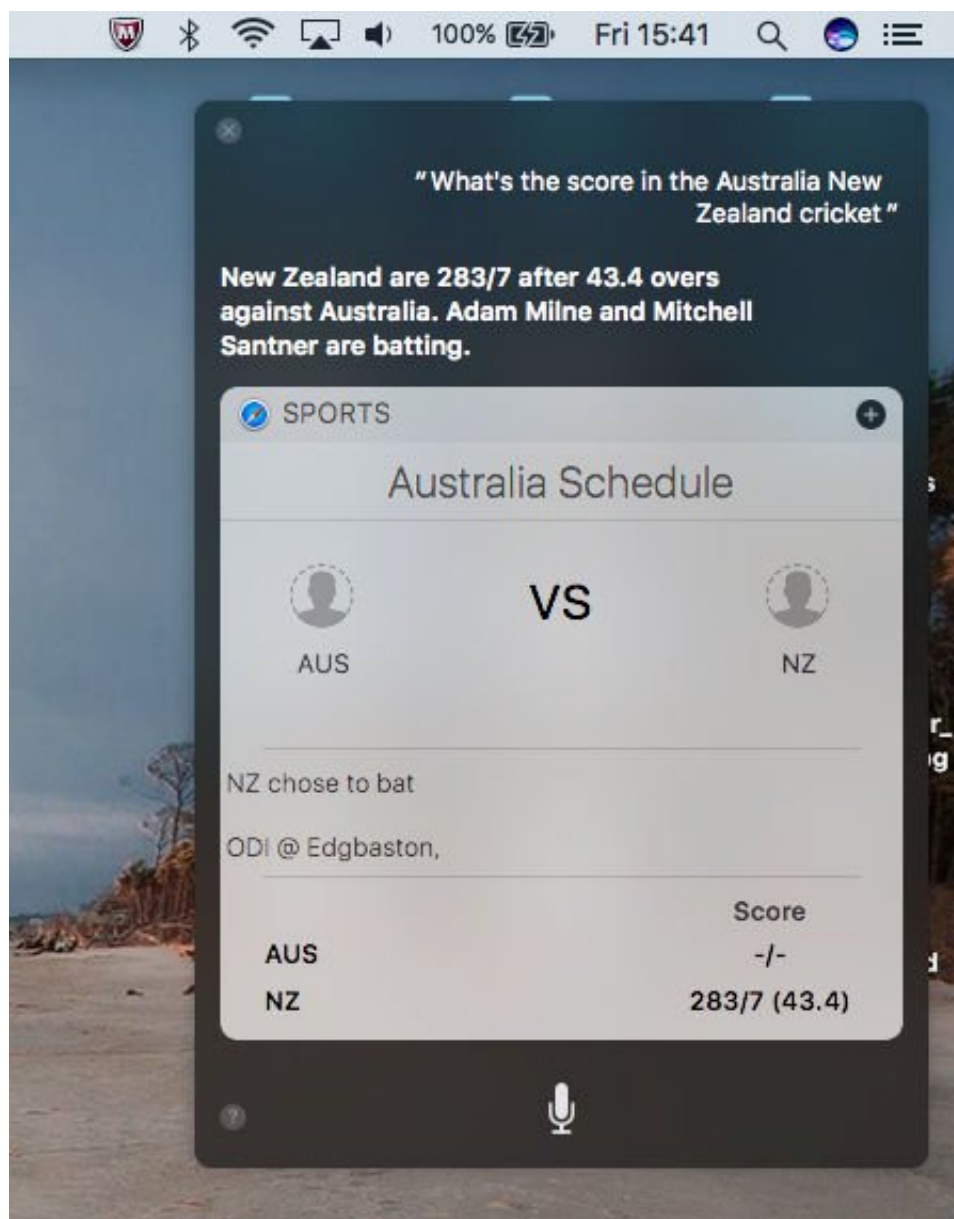
New features

The differences between Mac OS X El Capitan and macOS Sierra are largely confined to the features roster - it's what they can do, far more than what they look like.

There are lots of new features to consider - take a look at our roundup of new

Sierra features for a more comprehensive look - but in this section we'll focus on what we think are the highlights.
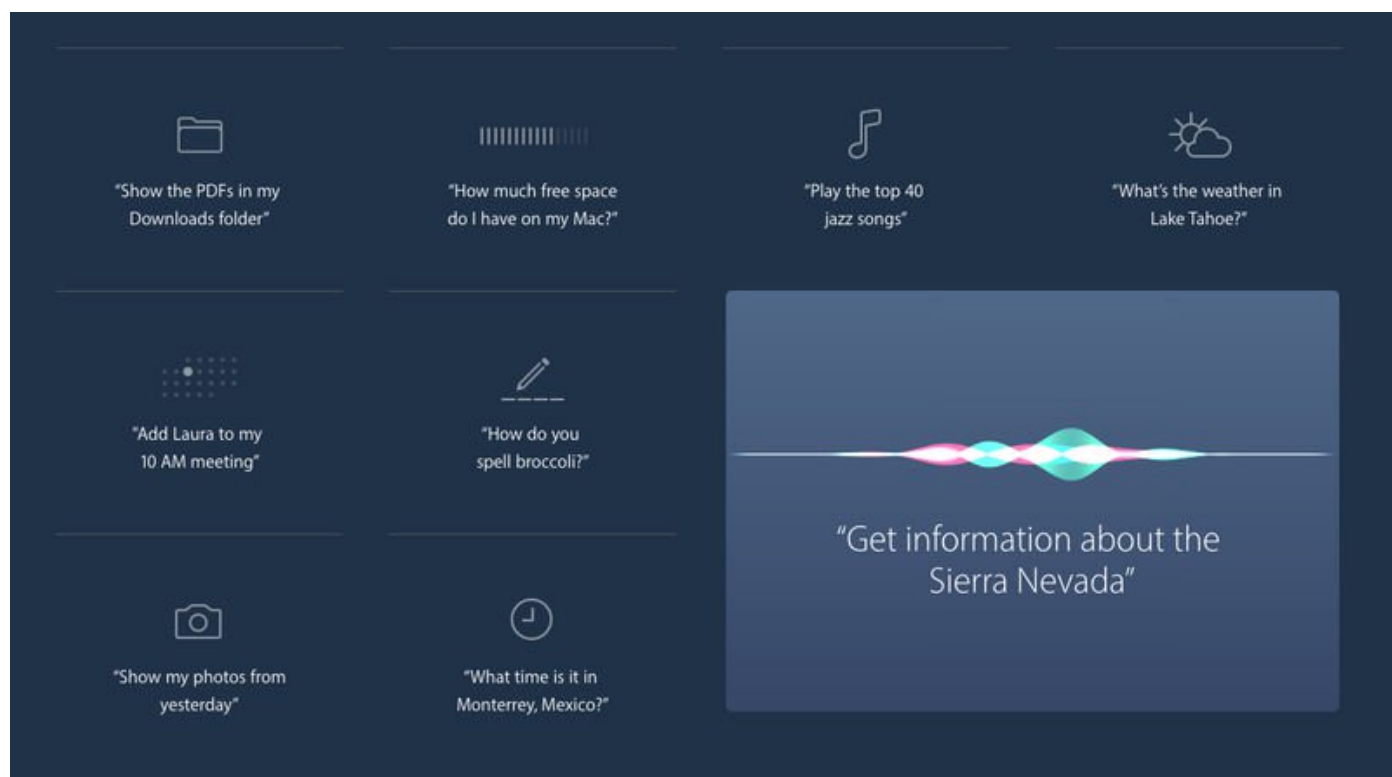
Siri on the Mac

This is the big one. Macs can now be controlled verbally using the Siri voice-recognition engine from the iPad, iPhone, Apple Watch and Apple TV. It was only a matter of time, really - and it's only fair to point out that Windows already has Cortana (and has done since Windows 8.1) - but it's still nice to see.

This is particularly useful for searching through documents; you can use natural language to specify various search parameters, and the results sit afterwards in the Notifications pane from where they can be dragged and dropped into applicable apps.

We also find it a really quick and easy way to perform tasks you would usually need to go through multiple System Preferences windows to perform. Just say 'Turn on Bluetooth' for example rather than fire up System Preferences.

If you want to find out more about what Siri can do on the Mac, read our complete guide to Siri on Mac.

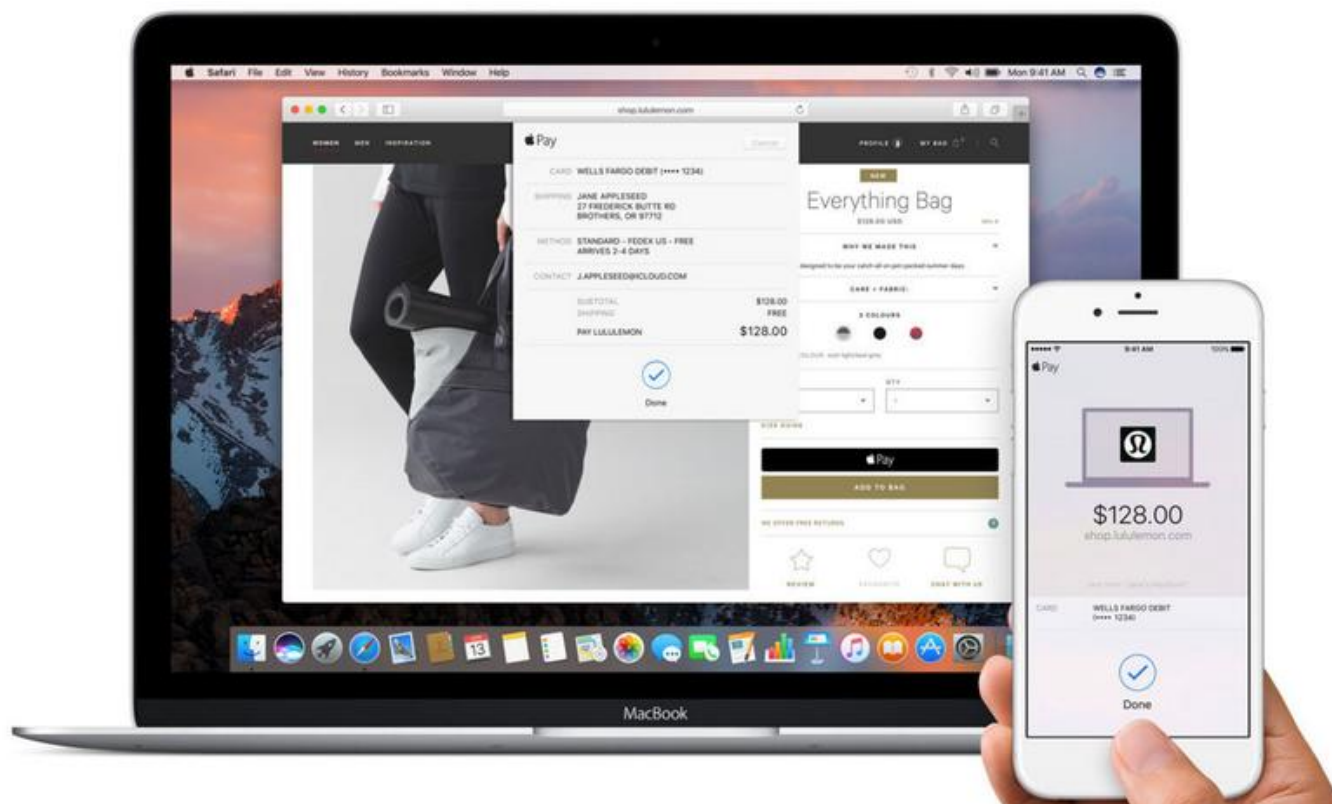**Content continues below**

Apple Pay on the Mac

Apple Pay has jumped from the iOS ecosystem to Mac (via tvOS and watchOS). Most Macs don't have a fingerprint scanner so they can't handle

the verification process without using your iPhone or iPad. However, if you have a [MacBook Pro with Touch Bar](#) you're in luck.

Apple Pay icons now appear on the buy pages of certain merchants - all you need do is verify your purchases with Touch ID on your iPhone, or using your Apple Watch.

Auto unlock your Mac with your Apple Watch

Some Apple fans were hoping that macOS Sierra would bring for the ability to unlock a Mac using the Touch ID fingerprint scanner on an iPhone. Instead, Apple announced something that's arguably a lot more convenient, albeit targeted at a smaller market: the ability to proximity-[unlock your Mac with your Apple Watch](#).

(This does require that the watch has been unlocked first, however. Of course, it may have been auto-unlocked in turn by its companion iPhone.)

Universal Clipboard

This addition to the Continuity suite of features covering interaction between Mac and iOS devices, is a great way to copy and paste data between devices. Whatever you copy on one of your devices - Mac, say - will be sent wirelessly to the clipboard on your other devices.
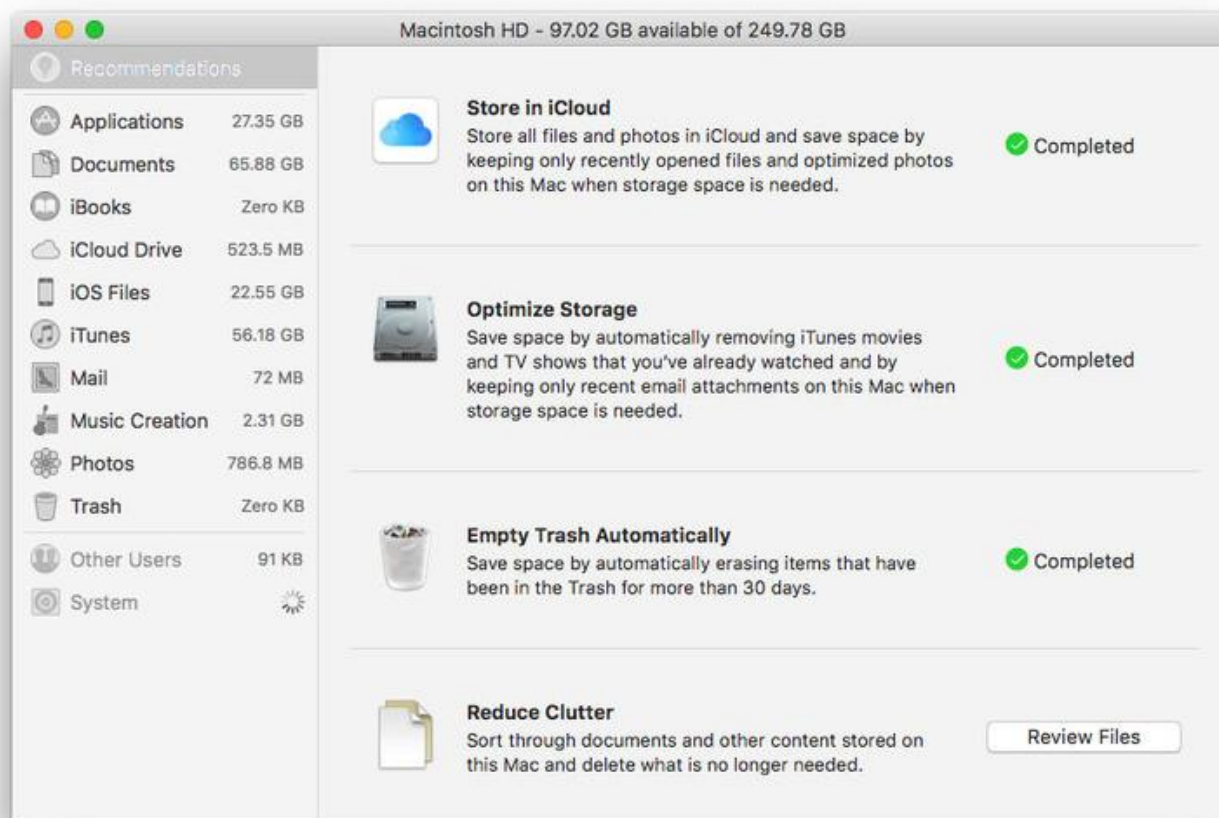
iCloud will sync your Desktop and Documents across all your Macs

One of the features we like is the fact that iCloud now syncs your documents and your desktops across all your Macs. This is brilliant if you work from home as it means that you don't have to remember to move documents into a shared folder - if you leave them on the desktop at work they will be on your desktop at home.

Optimised storage

Another handy feature added in Sierra is optimised storage. This comes into its own if you start running out of space on your Mac.

The new feature deletes some files; it moves others to iCloud where you can download them again if you need to, freeing up local storage. You can also set it to delete the files in your trash after 30 days.

Extra features in Messages

Messages in macOS Sierra (as in [iOS 10](#)) has been given a full-on millennial makeover, with more emphasis than ever before on emoji and similar effects that are likely to divide opinion (most of them seem targeted at a young audience). There's a 'tapback' feature, for instance, which enables you to respond instantly to a message by tapping one of six icons - thumbs up or down, a heart, 'Ha ha', a question mark, or an exclamation mark. Not really our thing, but nice to have the option.

More practically, links pasted into messages will be previewed in the message thread. You can see the headline of the article, main artwork and so on. Read more about Messages here: How to send and receive text messages on a Mac

People, places and event recognition in Photos

Like Messages, the Photos app received twin makeovers in iOS and macOS.

Photos has a new Memories feature, which (in theory) accurately recognises people, places and events, and uses this data to automatically create themed, easily customisable albums for you.

If you want to learn more, read our tips for Photos on Mac.

System requirements

Sierra is more demanding to run that El Cap. If your Mac sits in the band of machines that can run the latter but not the former, your decision may be made for you.

Here are the machines that can run Mac OS X El Capitan:

- MacBook (13-inch aluminium, Late 2008), (13-inch, Early 2009 or later)
- MacBook Air (Late 2008 or later)
- MacBook Pro (13-inch, Mid-2009 or later), (15-inch, Mid/Late 2007 or later), (17-inch, Late 2007 or later)
- Mac Mini (Early 2009 or later)
- Mac Pro (Early 2008 or later)
- iMac (Mid-2007 or later)

And here are the machines that can run macOS Sierra:

- MacBook (Late 2009 or later)
- MacBook Air (2010 or later)
- MacBook Pro (2010 or later)
- Mac mini (2010 or later)
- Mac Pro (2010 or later)
- iMac (Late 2009 or later)

For more information about macOS Sierra's system requirements, see: Will my Mac run macOS Sierra?

You will also need the Mac App Store in order to download Sierra. Since Snow Leopard launched in 2009 the Mac App Store has been available on all Macs, so the chance that you would have a Mac capable of running Sierra, but running software that predates Snow Leopard is unlikely. You can buy Snow Leopard from Apple's online store and then make further updates via the Mac App Store if necessary.

If you never updated to El Capitan you may only have the choice of updating to Sierra as El Capitan is no longer available on the Mac App Store (although if you know someone who had downloaded El Capitan previously, they can access it via the purchased tab in the Mac App Store and if they copy the installation files to an external drive you could install it that way.

For more detail, read our tutorial: How to install macOS Sierra.

Download link: macOS Sierra on the Mac App Store

OUR VERDICT

Sierra may not be a quantum leap forward, but it's still a major upgrade with a couple of attractive headline features (Siri and auto-unlock) and a wide range of smaller useful features (particularly Universal Clipboard and tabs in

non-browser apps). It's more demanding than El Capitan so check your Mac is up to the task, but we reckon this is a solid and useful update.