HUAWEI P8 & B2 TALKBAND

Product Review
1.1 First Impressions

The Huawei Talkband B2 is well-presented. While you’re never going to mistake the B2 for anything other than technology, the look is sleek and less cartoonish than its predecessor. In all the time I’ve spent wearing it, I’ve not felt self-conscious about it once the initial feeling of ‘wow, new technology!’ wore off. It may almost have got me used to a (loose fitting) watch again. I had the black model to review, which is the more plastic version of the product, but didn’t feel it was out of place at home or at work. A formal dinner might have been a different matter, however.

Figure 1.1: Huawei B2 Talkband Designs

Source: Huawei

The P8 is minimalist and metallic, taking definite design cues from the iPhone. While I was fairly sceptical about how much difference a thinner phone makes, the comfort factor compared to my usual (slightly chunkier) Lumia 630 is noticeable, while having a reassuringly hefty weight. This feels like quite a tall phablet, with its dimensions well-suited for browsing and reading. The camera is mounted flush at the top of the phone’s back, and is the only reason I can see for the plasticky band at the top of the phone. It’s not totally out of place, just a little jarring in what is otherwise a sleek metallic design.

Figure 1.2: Huawei P8 Smartphone

Source: Huawei

1.2 User Interface

The OS is fairly stock Android Lollipop, with the bright themed overlay of Huawei’s Emotion UI. There are a default of 6 skins to choose from, which are mostly variations on a theme of ‘bright’, with little else to choose, although there is a grey metallic interface too. Each theme customises the various preloaded app icons into a style that matches the overall theme, although installing third-party apps does throw this out somewhat.
Huawei want you to notice the media capabilities on this phone, with a media player and camera both prominently displayed on the front-page, set up alongside a Google services shortcut. However, this is about the only nod to Mountain View that is obvious in the phone; outside Google’s services, there is precious little evidence of Google’s Material Design interface.

One of the new features of the P8 is the ability to take screenshots by rapping on the phone with a knuckle. While a quirky feature, I couldn’t particularly find a use for this and couldn’t get the resizing feature to work before the phone seized the image off me and returned to the previous screen.

There is also a one-handed mode, as is becoming common in phablets, but I never really had much of an occasion to use it. The tall-but-thin feel of the device seems to lose too much real estate when the UI is shrunk down and I habitually use both hands when typing on a smartphone. For those that want one-handed typing, though, it should be useful. However, the swiping gesture needed to activate it was often misconstrued by the phone for a misplaced button press and it would take practice to get it down to a smooth action. I don’t have the patience of this and I’m not sure how many others will.

The B2 is minimalistic, displaying time, date and basic fitness metrics (steps, calories burned, time slept etc), all in the swipeable interface I found more convenient than the button-presses I’ve had on fitness trackers before. However, I did find that on occasion the band came loose, so the fastenings could use a little work. The main unit of the band also doubles as a Bluetooth headset for the truly lazy, allowing you to answer the call on the band, take the unit out of its cradle and slip the unit into your ear. A nice feature, but not something that is more convenient than taking the phone out of a bag or pocket. Probably quite useful if the phone’s in another room but still Bluetooth-connected, but that situation hasn’t come up for me yet.

### 1.3 Fitness Tracking

This review is coming some weeks after the B2 release and there have clearly been updates in the B2 experience since it was launched, which have improved accuracy somewhat. When I first opened the device I could easily walk around my living room and up and down the stairs three times without the band realising I’d taken a step. As things have updated, this has become less of a problem, although as with most fitness trackers, movement is the measure of everything else. In a day that
included 45 minutes of mostly anaerobic exercise (weights, sit-ups, press-ups etc), the band believed I’d burned around 200 calories.

While the band’s accompanying app does support various modes of travel (walking, running, biking and what I assume is hiking) and tracks them automatically, the algorithms for working this out aren’t perfect. I’ve logged a few minutes of cycling time despite not going near a bicycle and I’m a little sceptical of the band’s definition of ‘running’.

The Talkband allows goals to be set and gives you a small fireworks and trophy graphic when you achieve them; by default this is 10,000 steps. You can view your progress either daily or monthly, although it took me a while to find out how to change modes, by which time I was running Microsoft Health alongside it on my phone to keep a yardstick. The two sets of figures appear to be in the same ballpark, although the band picks up more than the phone, to an extent because I’ve not always got my phone in my pocket. This generally amounts to a difference of a few hundred steps a day, which is possibly a little more than just that (particularly when I’ve made an effort to carry my phone around specifically to test this).

The app also only does metrics and goal-setting, without much in the way of advice or feedback. It offers to share data with apps that do (like Jawbone’s UP ecosystem and MyFitnessPal), although comparing the data from Huawei Wear to UP felt a little disconnected, different sleep periods were registered and Jawbone was consistently thinking that it was my first day using the app, despite having several weeks of data on display. This obviously limited the little gems that its ‘insight engine’ could dole out.

Possibly the most annoying factor of the Talkband was its hypersensitivity to Bluetooth connectivity. The band periodically vibrates when out of connectivity range, which would normally just be an easily ignorable bother, but when the phone battery dies in the middle of the night and you get woken by disconnection vibrations from the band at 3am, it’s a little beyond that.

I was also a little paranoid initially about the connection between the app and the band. The upload doesn’t appear to be at particularly regular intervals, and I would frequently find that I would be manually syncing the band and the app in the evening to make sure I didn’t lose data. This should be something that is easily fixed with an update, but is annoying at present, particularly given the band’s hypersensitivity about Bluetooth.

1.4 Multimedia & App Experience

Sound quality is one thing that Huawei have promoted as a key feature of the P8 and it’s well-deserved. I could happily listen to music or a podcast while several metres away from the phone in a noisy kitchen. Ironically, when holding the phone the sound could be marginally worse, as the speakers are small and not especially prominent, so easily covered by a hand unless you’re taking special care to notice them. The images and video playback were sharp, although the resolution is only 1080p rather than QHD. This could make a difference if you’re streaming films via the device, but I generally wasn’t watching high enough quality video for the difference to be noticeable.

The phone ran all the apps I wanted to well, although the octa-core Kirin 930 did heat up noticeably if I left multiple apps running in the background, although I couldn’t see any performance lag as a result.
The browsing and document experience is a little confusing. While the P8 comes with several standard Google tools for this (Drive, Chrome, Photos etc), it also offers a browser, album and calendar functionality of its own, asking the user to choose between them, occasionally when launching things from inside other apps that should be capable of running the function themselves. This left me wondering, which is better? Did I make the optimal choice for this particular smartphone event? This reaction is possibly me being hypersensitive, but the provision of both feels a little belt-and-braces for an Android phone.

The battery is bigger than the Ascend P7, at 2680mAh. This got me through more than a work day quite well, although I found that if I used a lot of apps come the evening it was liable to run down. There are a variety of power-saving tools on offer, mostly to do with auto-closing apps, which is useful if, like me, you’re inclined to forget to close them when you press the home button.

1.5 Overall Verdict

The P8 is a very good quality piece of Android hardware, which sells itself well as a premium media consumption device. It doesn’t have too much to offer to tempt you away from other premium Android devices, as the unique features aren’t particularly useful and the sound quality may not be something that is used too much (headphones render it moot). The default app layout is helpful to heavy Google users, but presents alternatives too.

In terms of overall performance, the phone handles medium levels of media and gaming use well. It may need a little more micromanagement to make heavy use comfortable and not overheat, but should cope. The battery life is still not longer than a day, but given an overnight charge it’s generally not a problem.

The P8 can match the performance of most flagships out there, but without the brand prestige. There may be some small elements that may dissatisfy regular users of flagship phones, but these are minimal and may to attract new buyers at the price tag of under $600. These are however going to have to be sold through MNOs in Huawei’s target markets of Western Europe and North America, as impulse buys at this price without a high level of brand equity are not common.

The B2 is a definite step up from its predecessor in terms of aesthetics, as well as offering a neat phone-free calling solution. However, the algorithms could use some work to improve the accuracy of the fitness tracking, potentially also with a step back to allow (but not rely on) the user to manually set exercise periods. The connectivity with the app could also use some work, although manual syncing isn’t too much bother it could become so over time.