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Lodge Outdoor

Solar Speaker 4 Outdoor Speaker

Ever heard of Lodge Outdoor? Prior to CES, I'd never heard of them before, but the company's PR team snatched my attention with an email subject line saying, "Meetup with the ultimate outdoor audio speaker at CES." And then in the body of the email, they hyped the speaker further by saying this is "the first self-charging, weatherproof, premium wireless speaker for the outdoors." I mean, how could I resist that?

Unfortunately, CES being what it is, I wasn't able to meet with the company at the show, but I followed up after, got some more information, and then decided this speaker was interesting enough to bring in for a closer look.

In a nutshell, the Solar Speaker 4 is a fully contained audio system that is meant to be simple to use and is designed to live outside year-round. And beyond its impressive 20-plus-hour battery runtime, the speaker's sides, rear, and top are covered with 180 square inches of solar panels, meaning it can run indefinitely. And beyond just having a single speaker, you can link an unlimited number of them together to have a backyard-filling jam sesh. All this in a package that starts at \$449

per speaker, but that can go down to \$399/each when purchased in multiples. It is worth checking out for sure.

First Impressions

One of my favorite things is when a company takes constructive feedback, adopts suggestions, and produces a better product. It not only shows they care and listen to their community, but it also demonstrates they are thinking about the product and customer experience.

This is the Gen 2 of the Solar Speaker 4. According to the company, "We decided to launch the original Lodge Solar Speaker 4 on Kickstarter and IndieGogo because we wanted to leverage the community of backers to provide us feedback on the design and functionality of the product. We believed in the product and knew that the crowdfunding community of tech enthusiasts, early adopters, and music lovers would help us to get the product ready for retail."

Based on that feedback, they made a variety of changes, including ways to increase battery life, improvements to the fit and finish, and enhanced weatherproofing, along with firmware updates to

deliver new/requested features.

The speaker arrives in a box with a series of bullet points printed on the back that extol its main benefits, like wireless, solar-powered, waterproof, 100-plus-foot Bluetooth range, 15-hour battery, etc.

Inside the box is a USB-C cable, a two-piece in-ground speaker stake, a metal plate for attaching the speaker, and a welcome card with a setup QR code and this message:

"The Lodge Solar Speaker 4 is designed to deliver premium, audiophile-quality sound to your outdoor space without the cost and hassle of installing wired speakers. Lodge is easy to set up, low maintenance, and made to withstand all types of weather conditions, giving you peace of mind and years of premium sound enjoyment in your outdoor oasis. Lodge Outdoor is an American company based in Michigan. The company is made up of audiophiles, music lovers, and outdoor enthusiasts who are dedicated to creating products that match their passions."

Pulling it out of the box, it was difficult not to draw comparisons to the Sonos Move portable speaker, as they are going after similar solutions. Whereas the Move is round and curved with a

By John Sciacca

LodgeSound.com

KUDOS

Battery life and charging live up to promise; simple to use; impressive sound

CONCERNS

No remote backlight

PRODUCT SPECS

- Wireless outdoor speaker with built-in solar charging
- 4-inch calibrated mid-bass driver, 3/4-inch tuned dome tweeter, 4-inch top-mounted passive radiator; driven by 50-watt amplifier
- 10,000mAH internal Li-ion battery delivers 20-30 hours depending on volume
- IP66 water and dust rating
- Bluetooth 5.3 chipset with up to 100-foot range for single speaker
- Two speakers can be paired in true stereo; an unlimited number of speakers can be paired in hub-and-spoke configuration
- Dimensions: 10.5 x 6 x 7-inches (HxWxD); Weight: 7.5 pounds

nice, rubberized bottom, the Lodge is very square and also noticeably larger and heavier. Like the Move, the Lodge has an integrated carry handle built into the back, which is great for moving it around.

The speaker's color is a version of "landscape brown," but not really. [Lodge says the color is Pantone-4191C.] The top, sides, and back of the speaker have kind of a blueish shimmer at angles because of the 180 square inches of solar cells built into them, said to give the speaker 2-3 hours of playtime for every hour of sunlight. Part of the speaker's weight is also owed to its large, 10,000 mAH internal Li-ion battery, which is said to deliver between 20-30 hours, depending on volume levels.

The top of the speaker has a row of buttons for power, play/pause, volume +/-, lodgeLINK (more on that later), and Bluetooth, along with four small LEDs that show the power remaining. Tucked into the rear of the speaker is a USB-C port

for charging in lieu of the sun. (This is supposed to come with a plug to keep it sealed when stored outside, but mine didn't.)

While you don't "dock" the speaker *per se*, I did frequently take it on/off the ground stake and noticed that there's a recessed circular area on the bottom of the speaker with a magnet that gives it a bit of grip to hold it onto the plate. While this likely wouldn't be enough to hold it on during a hurricane, I never had an issue where the speaker fell or blew off the stake. (It also comes with a little set screw that you can use to screw it onto the plate, but because I moved it around so much, I didn't use this.)

Unlike the Move, the Lodge carries an IP66 rating, which means it is fully dust-tight and can withstand high-pressure water jets from any direction, meaning it should be able to live outside year-round, rated to operate in temps from 32-115 degrees Fahrenheit. Having lived in a place that got up to 118 – Bakersfield, Calif. – I can tell you that you won't feel like sitting outside listening to music in that kind of heat anyhow.

The speaker is Bluetooth-only, utilizing the latest 5.3 chipset, which has a variety of benefits including energy savings and improved connectivity. This also lets it use Bluetooth LE Broadcast mode — which Lodge calls "lodgeLINK" — allowing you to connect multiple speakers. With two speakers, you can utilize a true stereo configuration, and numerous speakers (they claim an unlimited number) can be linked together in Party Mode for a backyard-filling sound.

Unfortunately, I only received a single speaker for review, so I wasn't able to test out this feature, but based on my experience, four or more of these in a backyard would provide *plenty* of audio. In multi-speaker mode, they connect in a hub-and-spoke configuration, where the main speaker (the one you connect to first) is the hub, and all of the "spokes" need to be within 30-70 feet.

All in all, my first impressions were pretty favorable; it's a speaker designed to live outside and play indefinitely off of sun power, and it looks and feels like it's up to the task.

While the speaker is sold directly to consumers via Lodge's website, company president Sanjiv Lal told me, "We are happy to connect with dealer partners and distributors to share our distribution plans and discuss partnership opportunities." If you're interested, reach out to Lal at sanjiv@lodge.com.

Setup

Even though the speaker ships with a charge, since I unboxed it at night, I plugged in the USB

cable and topped it off.

Next up, I clicked on the QR code, which took me to the app store to download the Lodge Connect app. Currently, the app is *only* used for updating the speaker to the latest 1.05 firmware. It doesn't even tell you if the speaker *needs* updating, rather just a button that connects and updates. After living with the speaker for even a few days, it's pretty obvious that there are a lot of other beneficial use cases for the app.

Fortunately, Lal agrees. He told me, "We believe that we have an opportunity to provide features such as an equalizer, battery status, etc. to our customers via the app. We are also investigating other features to make the app even more useful in the future, including connection status, etc. Based on our current priorities, we are anticipating making these updates during the second half of 2024."

Next up, I assembled the ground stake and then decided where the speaker would [A] sound the best and [B] get the most sun in my backyard. After that, I jammed the stake into the ground, and then set the speaker onto the top plate and powered it on, and then a voice said, "Welcome!" After pressing the Bluetooth button, it said, "Pairing!" and it showed up as "Lodge Audio" in my iPhone's Bluetooth list, followed by "Connected!" and it was ready to play. The speaker is meant to be easy to set up and use, and I'm not sure it could be any easier.

Performance

Sonically, my first thought was that the 3/4-inch tweeter was detailed and delivered nice and clear highs, but that the bass from the 4-inch driver and 4-inch passive radiator was a bit thin.

Fortunately, pressing and holding the Play/Pause button turns a Bass Boost mode on/off, which noticeably gives more low-end presence. Generally, I preferred the way the speaker sounded with the bass boosted; however, if you are playing bassy content at a high volume, you can hear the speaker start to strain when this is engaged. (To be fair, Lodge says this is "designed to enhance bass frequencies at low volume listening," so a definite improvement would be a more traditional loudness mode that uses the Fletcher Munson curve to adjust levels as volume changes.)

Still, this isn't a speaker that is going to hit you in the chest with bass drops. One of my favorite bass tests is "High Roller" by The Crystal Method, and the big drop is totally missing, making the song sound a lot thinner than it should.

I've also been on a bit of a Hans Zimmer kick lately, and you can really hear the speaker's low-end limitations in the middle of "Why So Serious?"

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from *The Dark Knight* soundtrack. At about the 3:30 mark, you'll just hear some huffs and puffs as the speaker tries to plumb bass notes it just can't play. However, it does a great job with the frantic strings.

The very opening of the *Dune: Part Two* soundtrack begins with some massive bass notes in "Beginnings Are Such Delicate Times," and while you get a sense of the big bass drums, you don't experience them. Also, the sudden drum attack at about 3:15 into "Eclipse" just doesn't have nearly as much weight and power.

The Solar Speaker's sonic wheelhouse is in the upper-bass register, where it is able to deliver a really satisfying presentation. Albums like *Between The Sheets* from Fourplay sounded full and rich. "Why I Am" by Dave Matthews Band had really crisp and sharp cymbal strikes, clarity of Dave's vocals, and a solid bass and drumline.

As I said before, it was tough to not want to compare this with the Sonos Move, so I set them up side-by-side and measured and listened, and it was really a case where the graphs didn't tell the story.

On paper, the Move is a far better performer; playing virtually flat down to about 40 Hz, and test tones proved its capabilities at this frequency. With Bass Boost off, the Solar Speaker's bass starts tapering off at 80 Hz, where it is down 15 dB at 50 Hz and not playing much below 45 Hz. With Bass Boost on, the bass is noticeably louder through 120 Hz, but flatter down to 55 Hz, and down 11 dB at 40 Hz.

However, *subjectively* the Solar Speaker sounded better to everyone that I played it for. The highs were far more detailed and present, and the speaker seemed to have more height to it. While the Sonos *might* have been playing lower, it wasn't noticeable. (To be fair, I was using the Move in Bluetooth mode for measuring and listening and didn't make any adjustments to its audio settings.)

What this test left me with is that this is the

outdoor speaker that Sonos should have made. Stick an external Wi-Fi antenna on it, add in the Sonos chipset, and you've got the outdoor speaker that people have been asking for.

Lodge claims you can connect to a single speaker from up to 100 feet away, and I was definitely able to wander around my backyard and showroom without any dropouts.

Operationally, I didn't like that after the speaker powers off, it resets. This means if you prefer to have Bass Boost on or if you have a group of speakers linked together, you'll need to re-enable those settings each time, which is kind of a hassle.

Lodge said, "Depending on the need or situation, the customer might look to use just one speaker, two speakers in stereo mode, or two (and more) speakers connected in party mode. To allow for that, the Lodge speaker always resets when the power is turned off. This way, when the customer wants to listen to the speaker next time, they can configure the speakers to the experience they desire."

While that may be, it would be nice to have the option to have the speaker save its previous settings/state if you want.

The solar cells worked as promised, and after my initial charge — which I may or may not have even needed to do — the speaker ran solely off sun power. Even when I'd bring it into work for several full-day listening sessions, I'd just occasionally put it outside for a bit and it would re-energize.

The Lodge Solar Speaker 4 lives up to all its promises. Considering the low-end limitations of a 4-inch driver, the speaker sounds great, it can power itself indefinitely via the sun and play for up to 30 hours on its battery, and it is simple to operate. If you have a client looking for a quick-and-simple way to add set-and-forget audio to the backyard, that can be easily expanded by adding more speakers as needed, the Lodge speaker is a compelling offering. **Res**