

Kobo Aura H₂O

Water baby **Graham Morrison** thinks he's found the perfect partner to the new EPUB edition of Linux Voice.

DATA

Web
www.kobo.com
Developer
Kobo Inc.
Price
£139.99

SPECIFICATIONS

CPU Freescale i.MX507 at 1GHZ
RAM 512MB
Screen 6.8-inch Carta
Resolution 143x1080, 265 dpi.
Storage 4GB
Connections Micro SD and USB
Network Wi-Fi 802.11 b/g/n
Size 129 x 179 x 9.7 mm
Weight 233g

Micro USB and Micro SD ports are hidden behind a waterproof door.

In case you've missed the news, we now provide our subscribers with both a DRM-free PDF of each issue and an EPUB version. EPUB is short for electronic publication, and rather than locking you to the static layout of a PDF file (albeit a layout we've injected a lot of love into), an EPUB is more like viewing HTML. In particular, an EPUB reader will focus purely on the text, allowing the content to merrily reflow into whatever form factor you've arranged for your reader. Layout and images are always a secondary concern. But the best thing about EPUB is that it's the perfect format for an ebook reader because ebook readers are good for only one thing – reading words. Rather than the pixel-driven, backlight, power-hungry screens on our phones, tablets and laptops, the 'e-ink' displays of an e-reader have similar properties to those of a paper book; they're light and portable, you read by reflected light and the effective organic resolution of the text is almost indiscernible from print. Plus they take almost no power. Effectively, you don't feel like you're reading from a screen anymore – it feels much more like reading from a book. When you add this to the convenience of never losing a folded corner, of carrying hundreds of books with you and of updating your device with the latest issue of Linux Voice, it's an essential device.

Which leaves Linux users with a quandary – which e-reader to purchase? The most famous, of course, is Amazon's Kindle range. These are fantastic devices that are good value for money. But they tie you to Amazon's restrictive DRM covenant and won't work well with Linux, let alone allow you the privilege of reading Linux Voice. So when we saw that a company with devices known to work well with Linux, Kobo, was releasing a new reader, and one that you can use in the bath, we had to ask them for one. And they thankfully obliged.

The Kobo Aura H₂O is the device in our hands. It's light and smaller than any book we've read. It has a single button on the top-right, and when pressed, the screen goes through the e-ink jiggle familiar to any e-reader user. The device uses the latest 'Carta' display, which is the same as used in the Kindle Paperwhite, but this beats the Paperwhite in both resolution and dots per inch. It's incredibly bright and



An e-reader that works with Linux and lets you read your favourite magazine in the bath. Surely 5/5?

reflective and a real pleasure to read from, whether that's by a candle or in direct summer sunlight. In dusky conditions, the invisible white LEDs secreted along the bottom edge pour light across the display in a way that's barely perceptible, but the whole background glows with a very comfortable, very uniform light that makes the text perfectly legible, even in the pitch dark of Count Dracula's guest accommodation.

Hard ware in soft water

When you first turn the device on, your heart sinks because the first screen asks you to connect the device to your computer, and Kobo seems to have abandoned its Linux desktop client. However, we connected the device as requested, and luckily, the process continued and allowed you to set up the device over Wi-Fi (why the cable, then?). It's a simple case of following the instructions and either using the store, or connecting the device as external storage and copying your files over. It really is that simple.

Input is via the infrared touchscreen. You swipe left and right to change pages, swipe up the left-hand side of the screen to change the brightness and touch various parts of the screen navigate the user interface. The reason for the slight clunkiness, and why it doesn't use a capacitive touchscreen, is the device's killer feature – the H₂O is waterproof. Kobo claims it can last for 30 minutes up to 1 metre beneath the surface. This is a first for an e-reader (other than modified Kindles), and it's a genuine boon

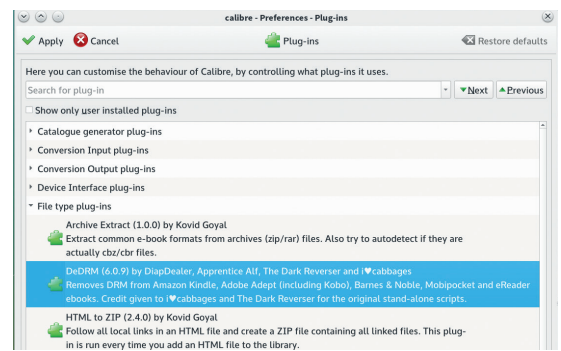


Get books onto your Aura H₂O

As we briefly explained in the main text, you can simply connect the device to your Linux machine and copy the files you need into the root of the storage area. After you disconnect, the Aura will re-appraise its library and present a new list of books for you to read. It really is that simple, and it works faultlessly from any desktop. We used *Calibre* 2.4 (see our review last month) with the amazing **amazon_drm** plugin to access our trusty Kindle library, and copy over our book collection while at the same time removing Amazon's DRM. We then converted these files into EPUB before manually copying them to the Aura. *Calibre* would usually talk to your device automatically, but

the H₂O edition is too new to be supported, and the manual process isn't really that difficult.

You can even perform the same task wirelessly. In *Calibre*, just start the 'Content Server' from the Sharing menu, and point the Aura's browser at port 8080 on the IP address of your Linux machine – these details are given in the Sharing menu. From the web page that appears, you can download any of your books without physically connecting and save them to your library. This is ideal if you purchase books from online retailers who refuse to cripple their titles with DRM and you need a central repository to store your copies and send them to your devices.



Liberate your Amazon Kindle book collection with a little help from *Calibre* and a wonderful plugin.

for those of us who enjoy reading in the bath. It felt a little strange taking the device into the water, but fortunately, the only hitch we experienced was slightly too much bubble bath. The Aura performed perfectly, and we could even interact with the display whilst the device was submerged.

Fantastic Voyage

The 'Home' page provides access to the Kobo store, your own library, and a couple of handy extras, including reading statistics and a dictionary. The store itself seems well stocked, although the books use Adobe DRM, which we're reluctant to recommend. At least you have some option if you only realise in the departure lounge that you've forgotten a good read. The only remote connection is through Wi-Fi, which is fine for us, and the 3.2GB free out of the 4GB of internal memory is more than enough for a few good reads. However, there's a micro SD card reader hidden alongside the micro USB port that can be used to expand storage up to 32GB, which is fabulous. To access both ports you have to peel back a protective plastic door on the bottom of the units, which is used to make them both waterproof.

reader devices (a wide variety are supported, including Android MTP phones and tablets). It can also display ebooks, but desktop and laptop screens are rarely good for reading from. Perhaps, as tablets get more powerful, *Calibre* will see more installs on reader hardware (*Calibre* supports touchscreen controls for Windows tablets, but not yet for Linux ones).

The biggest change in version 2.0 is that it's shifted from the Qt 4 toolkit for its graphical interface to Qt 5. This has cleared a lot of problems that were the result of Qt 4. However, it does mean that the project no longer supports Windows XP. We won't take any marks off for that though – *Calibre* has supported XP later than Microsoft, and it's high time you switched any remaining XP machines to Linux anyway.

If you've got enough books to make managing them difficult, *Calibre* lets you sort and filter them by author, tag, language and various other parameters. You can also convert between most popular ebook formats, so you can manage books across a range of devices. This all works well, but the interface is a little lacklustre. The icon theme is inconsistent (some are flat, some aren't, one's animated and the save icon is like nothing we've seen before), the window feels cluttered even though it's actually quite a simple layout, and it's not always obvious where particular options are. None of this is bad enough to put us off using it, but the software would really benefit from a little more attention to design.

Calibre can get books from a wide range of sources including free (both as in beer and speech) and paid-for stores. The list of sources

Reading is a real pleasure, regardless of where you are. While we normally prefer buttons to swiping the screen, we were able to turn pages while holding the Aura with a single hand. Touching a word brings up the essential dictionary, and you can both highlight a section and make notes, although the on-screen keyboard isn't very fast. Touching the screen again removes the user-interface that appears, rather than waiting for a non-existent timeout.

There's also a lot of control over the 12 installed fonts, including OpenDyslexic, a typeface designed to help readability. You can fine-tune both the font size and the weight of the font rendering, as well as the line spacing and margins, and we found the results to be worth the effort but that could be because we prefer a high word density.

We can't emphasise enough how comfortable and how rewarding it feels reading off this screen.

File compatibility is excellent, as long as you stick with EPUB.

Image formats were handled decently, but they don't look great on any e-ink display – the imperfect placement of the pixels and the greyscale makes images feel like cheap newsprint. Smaller PDF files work, but our own PDFs constantly asked too much of the Aura, often requiring a paperclip inserted into the reset hole. This is a device for EPUBs and EPUBs only, which is fine by us, because its EPUB support is brilliant. In the week we had the device for testing – and we read lots in and out of water – we used only around 10% of the battery life, so even with the subtle lighting, it's likely the Aura will last the duration of a transatlantic cruise. And to put it simply, we loved it. 

“The only hitch we experienced was slightly too much bubble bath.”

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

A little expensive, but it works with Linux, it looks amazing and you can read it in the bath.

★★★★★

There's a lot of control over the device's font rendering – you can even make it virtually indistinguishable from a 1970s era Penguin Classic.