

Bose Ultra Open earbuds review: unique open-fit and great sound

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Bose's latest earbuds are very different from its previous noise-cancelling champs, designed to let the sound of the outside in, rather than blocking it out and attaching to your ear, more like jewellery than gadgets. They are the latest evolution of Bose's open audio tech that uses small speakers to play music into your ears without blocking them, last seen on the excellent Frames audio glasses that have been discontinued. The Ultra Open earbuds cost a hefty £300 (€349/\$299) and join a small niche of open earbuds such as the £179 Shokz OpenFit or £149 Sony LinkBuds. But the Bose have two big advantages over their rivals: great, full sound and a novel fit that does not get in the way of glasses or other headwear. A battery cylinder sits behind the ear linked to the L-shaped plastic speaker arm via a flexible silicone spring, which together hold the earbuds in place around the side of your ear. The fit is very alien and takes a little practice to get right, but once hooked in place they are light and comfortable. I was certain they would fall off on a run yet they stayed locked on regardless of how sweaty I got or how hard I shook my head. The button on the top of the battery cylinder takes care of controls. Press once, twice and thrice for playback control or press and hold to activate your choice of shortcut, which cycles between modes by default. A double-press and hold manually adjusts the volume, which is awkward to make precise adjustments. Instead the earbuds have an auto-volume system that quickly turns the sound up and down to adjust to ambient noise levels. It works but is sometimes too sensitive, quickly ramping up when blowing your nose or rustling a packet of crisps for instance. I only turned it on when running. Specifications Water resistance: sweat resistant (IPX4) Connectivity: Bluetooth 5.3 (SBC, AAC, aptX Adaptive) Battery life: up to 7.5h (27h with case) Earbud weight: 6.4g each Earbud dimensions: 19 x 17 x 27mm Charging case weight: 44g Charging case dimensions: 42 x 65 x 26mm Case charging: USB-C Quality sound One of the best features is just how good they sound. They produce full range audio with solid bass and a quality typically associated with full earbuds, not open-fit types, which tend towards the tinny. They can't quite hit the deepest of notes and are bettered by a good set of fully sealed earbuds, but they sound more than good enough to do justice to most genres for a nice, rounded and easy-listening sound. Because they do not block your ear canal, you have full awareness of your surroundings, which is ideal for running or simply walking about city streets. The speakers have a clever port system along the top that cancels out some of the sound that escapes from your ears. It works well enough that only those in very close proximity will be able to hear your earbuds and only when they are cranked up loud. The earbuds also have Bose's immersive or spatial audio mode from its latest noise-cancelling models, which simulates a pair of speakers placed in front of you giving some tracks a much wider and less compressed sound. They support higher quality audio with Qualcomm's Snapdragon Sound certified devices,

which include a small selection of Android phones. Otherwise they are standard Bluetooth 5.3 earbuds, each of which can be used on their own but can connect to only one device at a time. A Bluetooth multipoint update is in the pipeline. Call quality is good with both ends coming through clearly, but my voice sounded a bit distant compared with the best, such as the QC Ultra earbuds and Apple's AirPods Pro. The battery lasts for seven hours of constant playback in my testing, which is pretty long for earbuds but just shy of Bose's estimates. The case can charge the earbuds about 2.5 times, which adds up to more than 24 hours of total playback time. They also have a long 48-hour standby time, meaning you can wear them all day and use them for intermittent calls or audio without needing to recharge. Sustainability Bose estimates the batteries will last in excess of 500 full-charge cycles but they are not replaceable and the earbuds are not repairable, ultimately making them disposable. Some replacement parts will be made available. The earbuds do not contain recycled materials. Bose offers discounts for returning broken products. It does not publish individual product environmental impact reports but does publish annual sustainability reports. Price The Bose Ultra Open earbuds cost £299.95 (€349/\$299) and are available in black or white. For comparison, the QuietComfort Ultra earbuds cost £270, the Sony LinkBuds cost £149, the Shokz OpenFit cost £179 and the Apple AirPods cost £169. Verdict The Bose Ultra Open offer a novel approach to open-ear listening that does not compromise on comfort or sound. The behind the back of the ear fit keeps them out of the way of glasses and other headwear, while being secure and light enough to forget they are there. They are the best-sounding open earbuds by some margin and do not bleed sound to people around you as much as most rivals. But they are also twice the price of some good competitors and, like most earbuds, the battery is irreplaceable ultimately making them disposable. They will not be for everyone, but for those that can afford them and want a set of earbuds they can wear all day while hearing still the outside world, the Bose Ultra Open are the best available. Pros: novel open fit, light and comfortable, excellent sound, long battery life, good case, sweat resistance, solid controls, AptX Adaptive/Snapdragon Sound but only for certain Androids. Cons: no sound isolation, very expensive, larger than traditional earbuds, unrepairable.