

# Fairphone Fairbuds review: ethically made earbuds with replaceable batteries

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Fairphone, the repairable and ethical electronics pioneer, is back with a pair of some of the first Bluetooth earbuds to make it so easy and cheap to replace their batteries that you can do it at home in minutes. Bluetooth earbuds have become a ubiquitous part of life, driven by the success of Apple's AirPods. Until now they have all compromised on sustainability by being very difficult to repair, in effect making them disposable. The Fairbuds cost £129 (€149) and are designed from the ground up to be as sustainable as possible, combining fair trade and recycled materials with replaceable parts that can be swapped in and out with a standard small screwdriver. On the surface they look like any other mid-range earbuds. The case has a flip-top lid, a pairing button and magnetic charging slots for the earbuds. The buds have a familiar shape with silicone ear tips and an oval outer that points down towards your mouth. It is only the outline of a battery and a small screw in the bottom that marks the Fairbuds out as different. Unscrew it to release the innards of the case from the translucent outer shell and pop out the battery just like the Fairbuds XL or a Fairphone 5. The earbuds have a little door hidden behind a silicone sleeve, which opens to reveal a small button battery ready to be replaced once it wears out. The design seems so simple you wonder why no one has tried it before. The oval top of the earbuds has a touch-sensitive surface for a good set of controls. Tap once, twice or thrice for playback controls, slide your finger up and down for volume, or touch and hold on the right to switch noise-cancelling modes or the left to trigger your phone's voice assistant. Take out an earbud and the music pauses. The earbuds feel light and fit well, remaining secure and comfortable in my ears for long listening sessions. They are sweat resistant, but do not have any wings or hooks to keep them in place, so are less suitable for exercise than general wear. Specifications Water resistance: IP54 (splash) Connectivity: Bluetooth 5.3 (SBC, AAC) Battery life: Six hours ANC off (up to 26 hours with case) Earbud weight: 5g Earbud dimensions: 28.7 x 24.6 x 21mm Driver size: 11mm Charging case weight: 68g Charging case dimensions: 65 x 65 x 27mm Case charging: USB-C Solid battery life for Android or iPhone Replaceable batteries do not mean the earbuds are short on battery life. They last between five and six hours with noise cancelling active and can be recharged just over three times by the case, which is competitive with mainstream rivals. The Fairbuds are standard Bluetooth 5.3 earbuds, supporting the usual SBC and AAC audio formats, ready to work with Androids, iPhones, Macs or PCs. They also have multipoint for connecting to two devices simultaneously – handy for juggling calls with watching videos. The Bluetooth connection was strong to various devices but experienced a small skip here and there in the highest of interference areas, such as a packed St Pancras railway station concourse. Call quality is pretty good, sounding clear and natural in quiet environments and doing a great job of blocking unwanted noise on busy streets while

remaining clear. You have to talk up a bit for the earbuds to pick up your voice, however. Sound and noise cancelling The Fairbuds have decent but not class-leading noise cancelling. It handles low-end rumbles well and dampens the general hubbub of an office – but struggles with higher pitched noise such as the roar of tyres on the road or announcements on a train. The ambient mode is fairly natural sounding but is quite quiet and has a constant hum of white noise in the background. The Fairbuds will not win any awards for audio quality but, on the whole, have an easy listening sound that is decent on detail with reasonable separation of tones. They can be a bit flat in certain parts of tracks, and they do a better job with rock or grunge tracks than something grand such as orchestral music. As is common for budget earbuds, the noise cancelling also changes the quality of the audio, making it a bit more forward and energetic but also sounding more closed. There is an equaliser in the Fairbuds app to alter the balance for personal preference. A bigger problem was latency causing lip-sync error, where video and audio are not in perfect alignment, across multiple devices and platforms, including Netflix and YouTube. Fairphone said it was aware of the problem and was working on a fix, but not imminently. Sustainability Fairphone says the batteries will maintain at least 80% of their original capacity for more than 500 full-charge cycles. Replacements cost £9 for a pair for the earbuds and £12 for the case. Fairphone offers a three-year warranty, while replacement earbuds as well as charging-case inners and outers will be available for at-home repair. Fairphone recycles the equivalent weight of electronics for each set of earbuds sold, making it e-waste neutral. It uses fair cobalt, gold and silver and recycled plastic, rare earth elements and tin. The firm also tops up the pay of its contract manufacturing workers to a living wage. Price The Fairphone Fairbuds cost £129 and come in a choice of black or white. For comparison, the Fairbuds XL cost £219, the Nothing Ear 2 £109 and the AirPods Pro £229. Verdict The Fairbuds prove that modern Bluetooth earbuds do not have to be disposable, and that companies such as Apple, Bose, Sennheiser and Sony should be trying harder on this front. They look good, work and fit well, and have most of the modern conveniences of rivals. They have a decent easy listening sound and reasonable noise cancelling, which will not trouble the best in the market but get the job done. As with other Fairphone products, you are paying a bit over the odds to be more sustainable and ethical. The Fairbuds have the sound and noise cancelling of lower mid-range buds costing in the £90 to 100 range, meaning you are paying about £30 more for the replaceable batteries and fairer manufacturing. There are some niggles that need sorting out for a wholehearted recommendation, the biggest of which is the lip-sync error. But Fairphone should be commended for showing what is possible with smart design. Pros: replaceable batteries, recycled and ethical materials, decent sound, noise cancelling, multipoint, comfortable, good controls, sweat resistance, solid battery life, cross-platform app. Cons: lip-sync problems, slightly more expensive than rivals for the design, noise cancelling changes sound quality and struggles with higher tones, audio quality cannot match the best.