

Nothing Ear (a) review: cheaper, smaller, longer-lasting earbuds

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The tech firm Nothing's latest set of cut-price Bluetooth earbuds offer great sound and noise cancelling for an even more competitive price, while continuing to stand out from the crowd through cool design. The London-based firm has launched the budget Ear (a), which keep almost everything that was great about previous Nothing earbuds and cost £99 (€99/\$99). That is £30 less than its previous offering and the new £129 (€149/\$149) Ear, which offer a few more customisations for sound and other features. The Ear (a) have the same shape as their predecessors, though now with an injection of colour to make them a bit more jazzy. The fit and finish is still excellent, with the firm's signature transparent design revealing some of the inner workings. The stalks have the same squeeze controls for playback, noise cancelling and volume as their predecessors. They are customisable and work pretty well by pinching once, twice, thrice or squeezing and holding the stalks, though the final gesture, double squeeze and hold, took a bit of practice to get right every time. The main body of the earbud and silicone tip sit comfortably and securely in the ear for extended listening sessions. The battery lasts for a solid five to six hours of playback, with a further three or so charges in the case. Nothing has significantly improved the case for the Ear (a), too, shrinking it to roughly the size of the best in the business, such as Apple's AirPods, slipping nicely into the watch pocket of a pair of jeans. It lacks Qi wireless charging, having only USB-C, which is a sacrifice well made for the size. Specifications Water resistance: IP54 (splash resistant) Connectivity: Bluetooth 5.3 (SBC, AAC, LDAC) Battery life: 5.5h with ANC (24.5h with case) Earbud dimensions: 30.9 x 21.7 x 24.3mm Earbud weight: 4.8g each Driver size: 11mm Charging case dimensions: 47.6 x 63.3 x 22.7mm Charging case weight: 39.6g Case charging: USB-C Great sound for the price The earbuds have Bluetooth 5.3 support with multipoint for connecting two devices at once, making it easy to juggle between devices. They support the usual SBC and AAC Bluetooth audio formats, but also support the high-quality LDAC, which is fairly common among Android devices. Nothing continues to offer better sound quality than rivals at this price. The Ear (a) are just as well-rounded as their predecessors and sound very similar to their more expensive Ear siblings. They handle complex tracks with ease and have a fairly wide and expansive sound. They can hit very low notes when required but have plenty of detail in the treble and highs. They are a bit more bassy out of the box thanks to a new bass enhance feature, which has five levels and can be adjusted in the Nothing X app along with a basic equaliser. The noise cancelling is also pretty good, managing to dampen the drone of the commute and hubbub of an office well when set to maximum. They also do a slightly better job of dealing with higher tones, such as keyboard clacks and voices, than their predecessors. The ambient sound mode is one of the better ones available, too, while call quality in quiet and noisy environments was decent, if a little artificial-

sounding. Sustainability Nothing says the batteries in the earbuds and case will maintain at least 80% of their original capacity for 500 full charge cycles. Out of warranty, replacement cases or earbuds cost £39.99 each, but the earbuds are not repairable, ultimately making them disposable. The earbuds contain recycled tin, but Nothing does not offer trade-in schemes for audio products or publish environmental impact assessments. It estimates the earbuds' carbon footprint to be 2.72kg. Price The Nothing Ear (a) cost £99 (€99/\$99) and come in a choice of three colours, shipping from 22 April. For comparison, the Ear cost £129, the Fairphone Fairbuds cost £129, OnePlus Buds Pro 2 cost £179, Google Pixel Buds Pro cost £199, and the Apple AirPods Pro 2 cost £229. Verdict The Ear (a) have set a new bar for quality at the cheaper end of the market. Costing just £99, they offer better sound and noise cancelling than most rivals, and with a more interesting transparent design that looks great. The earbuds work and fit well, the controls are good, multipoint Bluetooth is very welcome, and they have a solid battery life. The new, smaller and more pocketable case is a clear upgrade over previous Nothing earbuds. They might lack bells and whistles such as a full equaliser or support for advanced spatial audio, and won't trouble the best on outright audio quality and noise cancelling, but you would have to spend a fair bit more to get a better set of everyday earbuds. The biggest issue is that the battery still cannot be replaced in the earbuds or case, ultimately making them disposable and losing them a star. The Fairbuds have proved it can be done, so it is time for others to take notice. Pros: great value, interesting design, great sound and noise cancelling for the price, comfortable fit, good call quality, solid controls, Bluetooth 5.3 with multipoint, cross-platform app. Cons: disposable, case is very easy to scratch, no head-tracking spatial audio support, no support for future-proofing LC3 or Auracast.