

Fairbuds XL review: the excellent noise-cancelling headphones you can fix yourself

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On first impressions, the Fairbuds XL are just another set of big, plush noise-cancelling Bluetooth headphones. But their novel design allows them to be easily dismantled for simple at-home repairs, making them some of the most sustainable on the market. Produced by repairable and Fairtrade electronics pioneer Fairphone, the £219 (€249) headphones follow in the footsteps of the modular Fairphone 4. All products from the company are aimed at being better for the planet, the workers making them and your wallet. Out of the box they look and feel like a regular set of well-made headphones with nicely padded ear cups and a cushioned vegan leather headband. But they break down into nine modular components using a standard small Philips screwdriver, all of which are available to buy from Fairphone should a fix be needed down the line. The outside caps unclip, revealing a removable battery like the good old days of Nokia dumbphones. The ear cushions twist off for easy replacement when they wear out. If that wasn't enough, the headphones are made from more than 80% recycled plastic, 100% recycled aluminium and tin, and 100% Fairtrade gold, while Fairphone tops up the wages of the people putting the devices together to a living wage. The Fairbuds XL are comfortable to wear for extended periods with well-balanced weight and good padding. The ear cups swivel a little to adjust to the side of your head and clamp with just enough force to hold them in place. They are splash resistant in case it rains and fold down for travel, coming supplied with a recycled nylon bag to keep them safe. The right ear cup has a noise-cancelling button and an excellent control joystick. Press and hold the stick for three seconds to turn the headphones on and off, double press to hear the battery level. Press it in once for pause/play, left and right for track skip or up and down for volume. It is simple and effective. The one thing the headphones are missing compared with competitors is a sensor to detect when they are removed to pause the music. But I can live without that. Specifications Weight: 330g Dimensions: 190 x 180 x 70mm Water resistance: IP54 (splash) Drivers: 40mm Connectivity: Bluetooth 5.1 with multipoint, USB-C (charging and audio) Bluetooth codecs: SBC, AAC, aptX HD Battery life: 26 hours (ANC on) Solid battery life and multipoint Bluetooth The battery lasts a good 26 hours of listening with noise cancelling active and fully recharges in about 2.5 hours via the USB-C port, which doubles as a wired audio input too. An optional USB-C to 3.5mm cable is available from Fairphone for €12.95, but there is no analogue 3.5mm socket on the headphones. The headphones have Bluetooth 5.1 with multipoint, meaning they can connect to two devices at the same time. They support the standard SBC and AAC Bluetooth audio formats, but also support Qualcomm's high quality aptX HD, which is common on Android phones. Call quality in quiet environments is excellent. They were still pretty clear in noisier places, suppressing background sounds well, but my voice broke up slightly around really loud sounds. Good noise

cancelling and sound The Fairbuds XL have surprisingly good sound for a new entry into headphone market, helped by the company's collaboration with pro-audio tuning firm Sonarworks. On their default "Amsterdam" profile, they produce a nicely round sound with reasonably deep bass, nicely warm mids and detailed highs. They handle complex tracks well with good separation between tones and render most music genres with aplomb. They can sound a little narrow and clinical at times, lacking a little rawness or aggression with some tracks, but overall they are nicely tuned. There are several other sound presets to choose from in the app, but not a full equaliser. The sound is slightly affected by the noise cancelling when active, sounding a bit wider with bigger bass with it turned off. The noise cancelling is decent, dulling the rumbles and noise of a commute well. Sounds coming from certain directions were handled better than others, which was noticeable when turning your head. They manage higher pitches such as typing and background chat in an office a little better than many, but can't quite replicate the cone of silence produced by the best in the business from Bose and Sony. The ambient sound mode is reasonable, sounding quite clear if a little muted. Certainly good enough to have a conversation or listen out for an alert. Sustainability The Fairbuds XL have a two-year warranty. The battery is expected to hold at least 80% of its original capacity for more than 500 full charge cycles and can be easily swapped with spares or replacements costing £17.95. Other modular components include: a £69.95 right speaker, £34.95 left speaker, £17.95 headband, £17.95 headband cover, £13.95 cable, £13.95 ear cushions and £5.95 outside covers. The headphones contain 100% recycled aluminium and tin, more than 80% recycled plastics and 100% Fairtrade gold. The firm also tops up the pay of its contract manufacturing workers to a living wage. Price The Fairphone Fairbuds XL cost £219 (€249.95) and come in green or black. For comparison, the Sennheiser Momentum 4 Wireless cost £310, the Sony WH-1000XM5 cost £349, the Bose QC45 cost £250 and Urbanista Los Angeles cost £169. Verdict The Fairbuds XL prove that good, wireless headphones can be made more sustainably and in a way that is easy to fix and maintain without huge compromises. They are well made, comfortable to wear for long periods, have excellent controls, the battery lasts a long time and you could carry a spare one if you wanted to. They connect to two Bluetooth devices at once, support high quality audio standards and sound great. They even have pretty good noise cancelling and are weather resistant despite being modular. The headphones lack a sensor to pause the music when removed and won't trouble the very best from Sennheiser and Sony for sound quality and noise cancelling but they do better than rivals around the £150-£200 mark. In effect, you're paying about £50 more to be as ethical and sustainable as possible with your headphones purchase. But given the parts that wear out are readily available for reasonable sums and are easy to replace, they could last significantly longer than other models. The big question is: why aren't all headphones designed like this? Pros: decent sound and noise cancelling, 26-hour battery life and removable battery, comfortable, Bluetooth 5.1 with aptX HD and multipoint, USB-C charging and audio, great controls, modular design you can fix yourself with readily available parts, more ethical manufacturing. Cons: slightly more expensive than rivals for the design, no 3.5mm headphone socket, no full EQ, no pause on remove.