

Plantronics Backbeat Sense Wireless On-Ear Headphones Review

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In the world of headphones, style and comfort are almost as important as performance; after all, headphones are as much of a daily companion as our watches and handbags.

That's what makes the Plantronics Backbeat Sense wireless on-ears (MSRP \$179.99) so alluring—they look good on your head and are comfy enough for long-term use. The even better news is that, from a performance standpoint, the Backbeat Sense sound phenomenal. There's no distortion to speak of; the stereo field is vast, and the Sense don't drown the mix in bass like most of their competitors.

Unfortunately, the Sense aren't perfect. There are a couple of flaws in particular (the incessant noise of the cans jostling and shoddy, inconsistent controls) that really put a damper on an otherwise fantastic experience.

But at the end of the day, these are an incredibly comfortable pair of on-ears that sound great, look stylish, and don't cost as much as some of the alternatives. In other words, the benefits outweigh the annoyances, and if you decide to commit to a pair, they'll treat you about as good as you could ever reasonably hope.

About the Plantronics Backbeat Sense On-Ear Headphones

The Plantronics Backbeat Sense are lightweight, on-ear headphones; they won't isolate and cup ears the way over-ears do, but their soft leather cups will rest on top of your ears comfortably. Inside the ear cups are smart sensors that, when enabled, pause and resume the sound when you put them on and off.

- Driver: 32mm dynamic driver
- Impedance: N/A
- Frequency response: 20Hz - 20kHz
- Weight: 4.8 ounces
- Dimensions: 9" x 8" x 2"
- Battery & Charging: Rechargeable lithium-ion battery with microUSB charging cable
- Includes: Soft case, 1.2-meter audio cable with 3.5mm jack, smart sensors for pausing/resuming playback

What We Like

Stylish enough to be a part of your outfit

The Sense are available in two different color variants: white and black. The white variant features camel-brown leather accents on the cups while the black model is outfitted with dark brown leather. There's also leather on the secondary, flexible headband, which sits below a thin, adjustable metal band on the very top of the Sense.

One of the things I've come to really appreciate about the Sense is the slim profile. I'm not one for big, bulky headphones; call me boring if you must, but I prefer headphones that fade into whatever outfit I happen to be wearing instead of calling attention to itself. And it's not just the Backbeat Sense's lack of bulk that makes them fashionable—the leather accents (particularly those on the white pair) make for a dashing pair of cans.

Like you're wearing nothing at all

Historically, I have a rough relationship with on-ears. They either clamp too hard, don't clamp enough, or just generally make my head and ears feel lousy after a short amount of time. The Backbeat Sense, however, are a different story—they sit so lightly atop your head it's almost as if they're floating above it.

The lightweight build combined with the Sense's cushiony, leather ear cups makes for an all around fantastic fit that isn't hampered by long-term issues; I've been able to wear the Sense for several hours without so much as a hint of discomfort.

Fantastic, well-rounded performance

The first thing you'll notice when taking the Backbeat Sense for a spin is the clarity and vastness of their soundstage, which

I've found to be a heck of a good fit for just about every genre of music I throw at 'em. The key here is that the Sense don't overemphasize bass like many of their contemporaries, allowing for the mids and highs to shine appropriately. That's not to say that the Sense lack a full-bodied low-end, however—on the contrary, bass-heavy genres like minimal techno and rap get the love they deserve. When I listened to Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient Works 85-92, for example, the steady thumping of the bass drum in "Xtal" shone through the mix—something I almost never hear on standard earbuds.

I was also pleasantly surprised with the Backbeat Sense's ability to keep music in and not out; despite the tendency for on-ears to let a good amount of sound spill out, our leakage test revealed that the Sense do a remarkable job ensuring that your music isn't polluting the space around you. In fact, the Backbeat Sense handle leakage better than several over-ears we've tested recently, which is not an easy feat for on-ears.

The Sense's wireless range, too, is nothing to scoff at—I was able to top out at a distance of around 90-100 feet before audio began to clip. In terms of battery, the Sense averaged around 15-20 hours of battery life before I needed to return them to the included microUSB cable for a refueling. Charge times were respectable, as well, with the Sense only needing about two hours before reaching a full charge.

What We Don't Like

A simple design flaw creates an incessant knocking sound.

Both of the Sense's ear cups are outfitted with buttons and switches, but it's the left cup that houses the Sense's main controls. In addition to basic playback buttons (play/pause, skip track), the left ear cup also features a volume knob in the form of a circular piece of plastic that wraps around the entire ear cup. Think of it as a round, springy switch: twist forward for volume up, twist backwards for volume down.

It's an elegant system on paper, but in practice, things can get irritating pretty quickly. Because the volume knob sits on the back of the ear cup somewhat loosely, the whole piece jostles around whenever you take a step. This jostling reverberates throughout the entire device, causing a knock-knock-knocking on your noggin's door. The noise is at its worse when you're walking, obviously, but shifting around in a chair is enough to get it going, too.

Inconsistent playback controls and performance

The Backbeat Sense get their name from tiny, hidden sensors in each ear cup that recognize when the cups are on your ears and when they've been taken off—put on the headphones and the music starts, take 'em off and the music stops. Simple, right?

For the most part, the Sense work the way they ought to (provided you're not wearing a hat or headband over your ears, which might cause trouble). Unfortunately, this isn't always the case, and I've often found that the Sense's sensing abilities just stop working altogether. Buried in the user manual for the Backbeat Sense is a note about re-setting the sensors by plugging them into a computer and laying them on a flat, non-metallic surface with the ear cups facing up for at least ten seconds. The technique works, but not without a few curse words being mumbled under my breath first.

Worse is the inconsistency of the playback controls. Sometimes I can successfully pause music and skip tracks via the buttons on the ear cup, but other times the buttons just inexplicably stop working. I still hear the beeping of each press, but none of the actions are followed through with. In these situations, rebooting the Sense often works, but it's a serious drag to encounter this issue as often as I do.

Should You Buy Them?

Maybe, if you're in the market for wireless headphones and don't mind a few performance quirks.

Despite my trouble getting these doggone cans to work consistently, I've really grown to appreciate the Backbeat Sense. Other than the uber-comfy Bose QC35 over-ears, they're probably the most comfortable and care-free wireless headphones I've worn in the last year (which is really saying something, considering their on-ear status).

The fact of the matter is that it's a lot harder than it might seem to find a pair of headphones that agrees with your head and ear shape, so don't take a real comfy pair for granted when they come along. And, stumbling on a comfy pair that also sounds great is an even rarer opportunity. So, does the incessant knocking of the volume knob really get to me sometimes? Sure. But the Backbeat Sense sound fantastic otherwise and I'm able to wear them for hours on end, and I'm not letting go of that anytime soon.

If you're somewhat of a stickler for premium audio but you just don't see yourself sinking several hundred dollars into a pair of high-end wireless headphones, the Backbeat Sense are a fantastic compromise. Right now, for instance, they're on sale via Amazon for around \$140: an order of magnitude cheaper than, say, the Beats Powerbeats on-ears (and an order of magnitude more comfortable during long-term use).

When the time comes for me to pack these cans up and send them on their way, I'm gonna miss 'em, rascally controls and all. They're a rare find: comfortable, stylish, and great-sounding.

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English

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