

Plantronics BackBeat Sense review:

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[Consumer](#) ^[1] [2015](#) ^[2]

Subtitle:

An on-ear wireless Bluetooth headphone done right

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THE GOOD The Plantronics BackBeat Sense is a lightweight, comfortable on-ear wireless headphone that delivers very good sound for Bluetooth and has a strong feature set, with dual microphones and a sensor that knows when you have the headphones on or off. Battery life is good and the headphone works well as a headset for making calls. The included carrying case is nice.

THE BAD Low-end may not be strong enough for those looking for fatter bass.

THE BOTTOM LINE At less than \$200 USD, the well-designed Plantronics BackBeat Sense is one of the best on-ear wireless Bluetooth headphones currently available.

Plantronics isn't going to fool anybody into thinking it's Beats, but over the years the company -- best known for monaural headsets of the [wireless](#) ^[4] and [business/call center](#) ^[5] variety -- has been creeping into mainstream consumer [headphones](#) ^[6] market and putting out some very respectable products, particularly in the Bluetooth realm.

We gave high marks to the [BackBeat Fit](#) ^[7], a wireless sports headphone, and also liked the [BackBeat Pro](#) ^[8], a full-size Bluetooth headphone that combines wireless connectivity with active noise cancellation. New for 2015 we get the \$180 BackBeat Sense, a more mobile friendly on-ear Bluetooth headphone that comes in black or white and may very well be the best of the bunch. Price and availability in the UK is listed as "coming soon" on the company's respective websites. We'll update this review when that changes.

For starters, it's lightweight (140 grams or 4.9 ounces) and very comfortable for an on-ear headphone, with a "self-adjusting" headband (the frame is metal) and memory-foam-equipped earpads that are clearly labeled "L" and "R." I found it to be as comfortable as the [Bose Soundlink On-Ear Bluetooth](#) ^[9] (which, to be clear, is high praise).



I also like the feature set. As with the [Parrot Zik](#) ^[10] and [Zik 2.0](#) ^[11], the Sense has a sensor that knows when you have the headphones on and when you have them off. It pauses your music as soon as you take the headphones off your ears and resumes playback when you put

them on. (There is a way to disable the sensor, but it requires calling customer support to get a code -- a series of button pushes -- to turn it off.)

The headphone uses Bluetooth v4.0, and you can simultaneously connect two Bluetooth source devices and switch back and forth between them. The Sense also claims extended wireless range -- up to 330 feet/100m instead of the standard 33 feet/10m if you have a Class 1 Bluetooth device (most recent smartphones are Class 1 devices).

However, to get that kind of range you'd have to be in an open field. In a more typical indoor environment, even an "open" office like CNET's in New York, where you have obstacles to contend with, you get some extended range, but it's more like 50-60 feet, not 330. Still, that means it should work fine in any reasonably sized room or backyard.

Those who have a phone that supports [AptX](#) [12] will be happy to note that the BackBeat Sense is AptX-enabled, which is supposed to allow for better sounding audio streaming over Bluetooth (it's debatable much how it actually helps, but some people swear it does).

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As you'd might expect from a Plantronics product, the Sense also works as a headset and works well. It's equipped with dual microphones so you can hear your voice in the headphones when you're talking. You can also press a button on the bottom of the left earcup and your music pauses and you hear the world outside your headphones through the microphone. This might come in handy if you want people to think you're listening to your headphones when, in fact, you're listening to them.

There are some other buttons -- a call answer/end button on the outside of the right earcup and a pause/play button along with track back/advance buttons on the outside of the left earcup. You adjust the volume using a ring control on the left earcup. In all, button placement has been well thought-out and it doesn't take long to figure out how to operate everything.

It's worth mentioning that I also connected the Sense to an Apple iMac via Bluetooth and I had no trouble with the connection but I couldn't advance tracks forward or back using the controls on the headphone (pause/play worked fine).

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The only thing missing as far as features go is noise cancellation (NC). It's not something everyone wants (like Bluetooth, NC tends to have an adverse effect on sound quality), but if you are looking for it, Plantronics does make the \$300/AU\$390 [Voyager Focus UC](#) [13], which is more of a business-class [headphone](#) [6] with a boom microphone and PC connectivity through a USB dongle. It looks a lot like this model and should sound very similar but adds noise cancellation.

In terms of accessories, this headphone, the Sense, comes with a nice canvas carrying case that has two pockets -- the main one is for storing the headphones while the smaller side pocket serves as a home for the included headphone cord (yes, you can use the Sense as a wired headphone should the battery die) and USB charging cable.

Battery life is rated at 18 hours of music playback, which isn't as good as the BackBeat Pro's battery life (24 hours), but it's quite solid for an on-ear Bluetooth headphone.

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Performance

There are a handful of really good on-ear Bluetooth headphones, most of them more expensive than the Sense. On the budget end of the spectrum, you have the \$50 [Creative Sound Blaster Jam](#) [14], which may deliver the best sound for your Bluetooth buck, but its build quality, comfort and feature set isn't in the same league as this Plantronics and other premium on-ear Bluetooth headphones.

Among the better ones are the aforementioned Bose SoundLink Bluetooth On-Ear, the [Beats Solo 2 Wireless](#) [15], [Samsung Level On Wireless](#) [16] and [Sol Republic Tracks Air Wireless](#) [17]. At the higher-end you have the [Bang & Olufsen BeoPlay H8](#) [18], [Bowers & Wilkins P5 Wireless](#) [19], and [Sennheiser Momentum On-Ear Wireless](#) [20], all of which cost \$400/AU\$550 or more, which is a lot to pay for a Bluetooth headphone. (By that I simply mean that virtually all Bluetooth headphones have their sound-quality shortcomings, even the most expensive models).

The BackBeat Sense comes across as a pretty well-balanced headphone with ample but not fat bass and good clarity (it should work well with a variety of music genres). It's a pleasant, fairly natural sounding headphone that plays loud at its highest volume but sounds better when its restrained to about 75 percent volume. I wouldn't call it airy, but it's reasonably open for a on-ear model (noise isolation is decent; the ear pads seal out a good amount of ambient noise).

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Probably the closest competitor to this model would be the Bose, which retails for \$250, so I spent a little extra time comparing the two. The Bose is a bit warmer, particularly in the midrange (vocals), and more forgiving (read: slightly smoother) with a little plumper bass at higher volumes. The bass is tighter on the Plantronics, but there isn't quite as much of it, so if you're a bass lover it might not quite satisfy you. It had enough kick for me when I threw some techno and hip-hop tracks at it and it held together pretty well with one of our torture tracks, Bleachers' "Wild Heart."

I also put it up against the [Bowers & Wilkins P5 Wireless](#) [19]. I like how that headphone sounds -- and it looks and feels like an expensive headphone -- but the stereo separation wasn't quite as good as that of the Plantronics, which cost less than half the price.

The long and short of it is this is a very good-sounding Bluetooth headphone for the price. Some people may prefer the bit warmer, forgiving sound of the Bose SoundLink Bluetooth On-Ear, but others may prefer the Sense's slightly more forward sound profile.

Conclusion

The Plantronics BackBeat Sense is well-designed on-ear Bluetooth headphone that's comfortable to wear, has a strong feature set and sound and good battery life. If you're looking for an on-ear wireless headphone, it should be on your short list.

Language:

English

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