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Review: Plantronics Backbeat 500 Headphones

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The Backbeat 500 Series from Plantronics is an inexpensive pair of on-ear Bluetooth headphones for those who value comfort and battery life for extended listening.

Background

Bluetooth headphones are available in all shapes and sizes, each serving its own purpose for the needs of the listener. Some people prefer in-ear buds, while others favor on-ear or over-the-ear cans. Earbuds may be ideal during workouts, but aren't necessarily the best option for dedicated listening. Similarly, full-sized headphones that encompass your ear might sound amazing, but the bulky size makes them a pain to cart around. On-ear headphones such as the Plantronics Backbeat 500 Series can be a Goldilocks option: the bigger drivers produce richer sound than what's possible from in-ear headphones, while the compact form makes them easier to toss in your bag.

Competition in the headphone market is fierce, especially in the sub-\$100 category. If you stroll through your local electronics store, you'll be sure to see numerous on-ear and over-the-ear headsets in that price range from Beats, Skullcandy, Sony, Sennheiser, Klipsch, JBL, and others lining the shelves. Plantronics' new headphones easily go ear-to-ear with any of these at a price point that's affordable for everyone.

Form Factor

On-ear headphones don't envelop your ears; rather, they rest on top of your earlobes. Hence the name. There are benefits and drawbacks to this design. For example, they mostly isolate your ears from the outside world, while still allowing at least some ambient sound in. This may let you remain more aware of your surroundings. On the flip side, because on-ears allow in some sound, you won't enjoy quite as pure a listening experience as you might with over-the-ear headphones.

I find on-ears to be the most comfortable headphone style. As much as I love the immersive sound of full-sized headphones, huge cans tend to get my ears all sweaty over time. On-ear headphones won't trap moisture against your head. Full-sized 'phones also tend to be heavy and can cause fatigue over time. The Backbeat 500 headphones rest gently on your head, aren't too heavy, and are comfortable for hours at a time.

The Backbeat 500 has a hard plastic headband with some padding on the inside of the curve where it sits on the top of your head. The plastic band has plenty of flexibility, but doesn't include hinges for folding the headphones into a smaller shape. The leather ear cups are stuffed with memory foam that feels spongy against your ears. The 500s cling to your head, even when moving around, and never felt too tight. I was able to go on walks with the 500s and not fear they'd fall off, but I don't think I'd use them when jogging. The ear cups are mounted to the band via metal posts that slide in and out to adjust for the size of your head. I like that these posts feel strong. The cups rotate 90 degrees so they can lay flat for storage.

Controls are divvied up between the two sides. The right cup includes a the sliding power switch, plus a dedicated call answer/end button. The button is a good centimeter long and has a ribbed texture so you can find it by feel. A quick press answers/ends calls, while a long press will call up Siri or Google Assistant.

Everything else is packed onto the left cup. The exterior, round panel of the cup holds music playback controls. Press the front of the cup to jump forward a track, press the center to play/pause the track, and press the rear of the panel to jump back a track. The panel has a rubber texture and the controls are easy to find by feel. You'll find the volume toggle on the rear of the left cup, where your thumb comes to rest naturally. The toggles are easy to tell apart, and pressing both at the same time mutes/unmutes the music. There are two ports on the left cup, as well: microUSB for charging and 3.5mm headset jack for wired listening if the battery runs out. This is a great fallback feature that I like to see on Bluetooth headphones. (Sound via the 3.5mm headset jack will vary depending on the power of your phone's amplifier.)

The BackBeat 500s come with a storage bag, headphone cable, and USB cable. The storage bag isn't as nice as the one Plantronics includes with its pricier 'phones.

Plantronics did a fine job designing the Backbeat 500s. They come in three colors (dark gray, white, and light gray w/green accents). They may not be quite as flashy as the offerings from Beats or Sony, but they aren't overly conservative or boring. More importantly, Plantronics selected a fine set of materials and assembled the headphones well. They inspire confidence, function as they ought to, and let you listen to music with minimal fuss.

Performance

The Backbeat 500 Series includes two, full-range 40mm drivers, one for each ear. These are the same size drivers found in Plantronics top-of-the-line Backbeat Pro 2 headphones. By way of comparison, most in-ear buds have drivers that are between 6mm and 8mm. Larger drivers are vital for improving sound, as they push more air. The 500s have a standard range of frequency response at 20 to 20,000 Hz. The headphones can reproduce most of the lows and highs in modern recorded music.

The Backbeat 500s took me by surprise. They easily rival pricier headphones thanks to rich lows and clear highs. I spent hours listening to a wide variety of music, including jazz, classical, electronic, rock, pop, and metal. I was sure to sample music from Apple Music, Google Play Music, and Spotify, and tested the 500s with an iPhone and several Android phones. No matter the genre, app, or device, the 500s delivered clean, balanced sound that accurately represented the source material.

If you love pounding, skull-crushing bass, the Backbeat 500s are not necessarily for you. Some headphones prioritize certain sounds. For example, Beats are known for their strong bass. The 500s are more nuanced for a wider range of musical styles.

I think what pleased me most is that I didn't have to jump through any hoops to enjoy the Backbeat 500s. Many headphones force you to experiment with ear tips, or require an accompanying app to help adjust the sound. Not so with the Backbeat 500s. Simply pair them with your phone and enjoy.

It's worth noting that the Backbeat 500s do not include active noise cancellation. The on-ear foam cups block out a decent amount of ambient noise, but there isn't any fancy technology aboard to dramatically cut down external noise. One of the drawbacks of the on-ear form factor is that ambient sound will be audible from time to time. As a result, I found myself turning up the volume a bit when using the 500s in coffee shops or other noisy spaces. You need to be careful not to turn them up too high, lest you damage your hearing. It's up to you to strike the balance between listening volumes and your surroundings.

The 500s have Bluetooth 4.1 aboard and support the A2DP v1.2 stereo Bluetooth profile as well as the HFP 1.6 profile for HD voice calls. Press the dedicated call answer button to accept incoming voice calls. Doing so automatically pauses music, which will resume once you end the call. I was very pleased with call quality via the 500s.

Further, 2H2S support means you can connect multiple devices — such as a tablet and a phone — to the 500s, thanks to multipoint technology.

The Bluetooth radio did a fine job. The headset paired with multiple devices simply and quickly. I tested the 500s over a week and didn't experience a single dropped connection or cut in sound; the headphones maintained a perfect wireless connection with every phone. The 500s have a range of 10 meters, or about 33 feet. This is typical for most headphones and the Backbeats easily held a connection all the way to the edge of this range.

Plantronics says the Backbeat 500s offer 18 hours of continuous music listening or talk time. My tests showed slightly better battery life at 18.5 hours on average. That's plenty of time to rock out, allowing you to fly cross-country and back on a single charge. The deep sleep mode lets the 500s hold a charge, even if accidentally left on, for up to six months.

Discussion

The Plantronics Backbeat 500s may be my new go-to headphones for general listening. These inexpensive on-ear headphones are comfortable to wear, include useful features, and, most importantly, deliver excellent sound for the dollar.

The 500s are a nice blend of plastics, leather, foam, and rubber. The on-ear style and compact form make them ideal for at-home and on-the-go listening. The headphones stayed on my head and make it easy to take calls, adjust volume, or call upon Siri to check the weather. I prefer balanced, clean sound and that's what the 500s push through the 40mm drivers. If you like insane levels of bass response the 500s may not be for you. The 18-hour battery life is plenty for general use and traveling alike, and the Bluetooth radio offers a nice mix of performance and feature support.

Have I mentioned that the Plantronics Backbeat 500s cost just \$80? Yep. At that price, they're a steal. If you're looking for an alternative to in-ear buds, but don't want to go with full-sized over-the-headphones the Plantronics Backbeat 500s pack a pleasing punch to the ear.

The Backbeat 500s got your back with good beats for barely any green.

Language:

English

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