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Travel Tech: Begin Your Escape Early with Noise-Canceling Headphones

By Robert Haru Fisher
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"Are you a hypochondriac?" asked my friend as we settled in for the flight. A good question, as I was beginning to get decked out in some of the stuff I test in mid-air: the noise-canceling ear phones, the ionizer around my neck and the inflatable pillow, to start with. Then I was checking my fishing vest pockets for the nasal spray, the lip balm, Pepto Bismol tablets and foam earplugs. Thanks to fears of the TSA, I had ditched the skin moisturizer and the Purell bottle, but I did have handwipes in another pocket, as well as extra batteries for the earphones and the ionizer, and different kinds of jacks for the earphones.

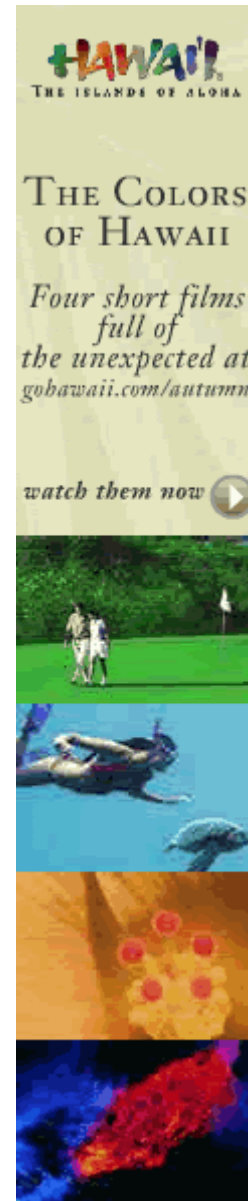
"No," said I, "I don't have enough time. I'm just an occasional hypochondriac." I always have the excuse that I am trying out things, on the off chance they will do me some good or just make me feel better. One such product is my earphones.

Noise-Canceling Earphones

I have used a variety of noise-canceling earphones, starting off with Bose and working my way through a couple of others. I am no technician, and will leave the specifics to the nerds, but I have noticed differences in the three brands I tried. And I won't get into the subject of which phone is compatible with iPods, MP3 Players, standard stereo equipment, computers and the airplane audio system. To me, how much noise the earphones cancel is primary, comfort secondary, and adjustment to other systems only a side issue. I found seven sets of typical earphones, the cheapest being only \$49.99, and estimates that from "up to 15" to 22 decibels are blocked, or that around 85% to 90% of ambient noise was blocked. Nobody claimed 100% noise blocking, of course.

There seem to be three types of earphones: in the ear, on the ear (cup), and around the ear (cushion), the latter sometimes called "over the ear." For comfort, the bigger and more cushiony the earpieces, the better, in my opinion. The Sennheiser ties with Bose in that field, at least for me and the three sets I tried. I really dislike the small plugs that fit inside the ear completely, which I tried on the ground. In fact, for the most complete noise blocking, I use the biggest possible earpieces and then I put soft plastic, foam or rubber old-fashioned earplugs inside my ear canals, making for an even better sense of relative quiet.

Honestly, none of the three sets of earphones I used blocked noise completely -- there is always a low rumble of ambient sound, so it becomes a matter of how much noise you can



block, how many decibels you can get rid of. Of course, to mask the ambient background noise, you can hook up your phones to the airplane audio system or your own personal playing devices and drown them out with music, but drowning out is one thing and blocking noise and getting peace and quiet is another. After multiple flights and multiple sideways glances from quizzical fellow passengers, I can rank the three headphones I tested in order of favorite to still pretty good:

Bose, considered a leader in the field, has two types of phones, the on-ear or cup (QC3) and around-ear or cushioned (QC2), which they say you can try for 30 days, risk free. These Quiet Comfort Acoustic Noise canceling headphones offer the same total (active plus passive) noise reduction, they say. The price for the QC2 is \$299, for the QC3 \$349. (I used an earlier version of Bose than these.) I could not find on their website any figures on how many decibels the phones screen out, as I could for a couple of competitors, but I liked my older set until one of the cushions came unglued after a lot of use. More information at **800/901-0256** or at website www.bose.com/QC.

Sennheiser's PXC 450, a full-sized round-the-ear that they call "over the ear" has nice cushions, and they say that "external noise is reduced to virtually nothing (90%)" (no decibels mentioned). On six flights (transcontinental, transatlantic and local) I didn't find it that much different from the Bose or NoiseBuster, however, but these flights and my reactions were not scientific tests, for sure. They cost \$449.95. More info at tel. **860/434-9190** or at website www.sennheiserusa.com.

NoiseBuster NB-FX cup phones (on-ear), which I have used a lot and continue to take along, are priced at just \$69, but this summer the company has a promotion of two for \$99, a real bargain. NoiseBuster says it has "the same noise canceling technology as the Bose . . . the ANR technology, delivering 18 decibels of active noise reduction across a wider frequency range than any competitive consumer audio headphone available on the market today." More info at tel. **877/226-1944** or at website www.noisebuster.net.

Other Examples

Logitech says their Noise Canceling Headphones "removes up to 22 decibels of background noise, allowing in only eight percent of noise to the ear." The cost is \$162, or \$149.99 tel. **800/231-7717**, website www.logitech.com.

Shure says its in-ear SE210 Sound Isolating Earphones "can block more than 90% of the ambient noise" (number of decibels not given) around you. The suggested retail price is \$179.99. Sound isolating works because the ear plug fits into your ear canal and physically blocks outside noise, they say. The company also has other sound-isolating headphones ranging in price from \$109 to \$499.99. More info at tel. **888/88 SHURE** (same as 888/887-4873), website www.shure.com.

Sony Noise Canceling Headphone, selling for \$199.99 (subject to change), says it provides "16.5 decibel noise reduction...(which) means you can shut out up to 85% of the ambient noise around you, including jet engines, office printers and subway chatter." More at tel. **877/865-SONY** or at website www.sonystyle.com.

Targus has a Travel-Ease Active Noise Cancellation on-ear phone for only \$49.99 (online price). The specifications on the website indicate that "active noise cancellation" is "up to

15 decibels." More information at tel. **877/482-7487**, website www.targus.com.

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