



2 Noise-Cancellation Headphones Worth Hearing About

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This is your captain speaking: If you really want to tune out the fatiguing drone of the 757's twin engines, it'll take more than daydreaming about the Caribbean vacation that's about 1,700 miles and four hours away.

In the cockpit, a commercial pilot reduces background noise by using a headset equipped with active noise-reduction technology. That same technology is also available to the passenger in noise-cancellation headphones that, though simpler and far less expensive, produce a quieter and more relaxing trip.

I took two such headphones, the NoiseBuster NB-FX (\$69) from Pro Tech Communications Inc. and the Philips HN060 (\$50), on a recent trip remarkably similar to the dreamy vacation cited above. Neither approaches the most glamorous noise-cancellation headphones available to consumers, the Bose QuietComfort 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling[CQ] headphones, in price (\$299) or performance. For the money, however, they're better investments for the occasional traveler or for more rugged noise-cancellation scenarios, like mowing the lawn or riding an exercise bike.

These battery-powered headphones reduce external noise by picking up sounds with miniature microphones built into the earpieces, then creating an inverted signal of those sounds electronically. This noise-cancellation process eliminates up to 70 percent of ambient noise.

The NoiseBuster NB-FX, a traditional "open" headphone that covers the ears with soft padding, updates the original NoiseBuster by eliminating a cumbersome battery pack that also housed the noise-cancellation circuitry. The NoiseBuster now looks like standard-issue headphones. A single AAA battery tucks neatly into a compartment just above the right earpiece. The electronics are built into the earpiece, just behind the tiny speaker.

Within its noise-cancellation frequency range, 40 to 1,200 hertz, the NoiseBuster reduces noise by up to 18 decibels. A small slide switch on the headband activates the noise-cancellation circuitry, illuminating a red LED. Because noise-cancellation headphones are essentially stand-alone electronic devices, they don't need to be plugged into anything to work. They'll reduce the ambient noise level, no matter where you are.

Of course, if you also want to hear music or listen to a movie soundtrack, you'll have to plug in the NoiseBuster using its iPod-ready minijack. The NoiseBuster, like the Philips HN060, comes with a battery, storage pouch and a twin-plug adapter required by some commercial airline entertainment systems.

The HN060 looks nothing like the NoiseBuster. Its earplug-style design should appeal to iPod lovers - you won't find a smaller set of noise-cancellation headphones. An oval case attached to the cord holds the battery, noise-reduction circuitry, volume control and on-off switch. The on-off switch activates a LED, but that switch was tricky.

Sometimes I had to take two or three swipes at the elusive slide switch before the light went on.

Right away, the NoiseBuster proved superior to the HN060 in both noise reduction and sound quality. Both headphones instantly reduced exterior noise. (If you've never used noise-cancellation headphones, the difference can be shocking.) The cabin didn't become library quiet, but engine noise suddenly faded into the background.

The NoiseBuster, perhaps because of its around-the-ears design, seemed quieter - the HN060 claims noise reduction of up to 14 decibels - so music sounded better at lower volume levels. It had deeper bass and greater clarity on vocals. Both headphones passed the ultimate performance test: When the noise-cancellation circuitry was turned off suddenly when music or a movie soundtrack was tuned to a comfortable listening level, the audio feed became almost inaudible.

So these headphones save the ears on two counts, from the loud external noise and from the increasingly high volumes required to hear music or a movie over that external noise. In this little test at 40,000 feet, I preferred the NoiseBuster. My wife liked the NoiseBuster's performance but winced at its clunky headband design. She preferred the discrete, in-ear Philips HN060.

At ground level, I'd probably agree if I were the mobile, iPod type. In the home or in the air, I don't mind looking like a pilot.

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