Apple AirPods Max first look: lots to prove

I've been playing with Apple's new $549 AirPods Max over-ear headphones since yesterday afternoon, and so far they sound very nice and fit very comfortably.

They also — I have to say this — have a distinct smell, like a funky riff on new-car smell. I am pretty sure that's a byproduct of the memory foam earpads rolling off the manufacturing line and straight into a shipping box to my house, and I'm reliably told it will fade away over time.

I would probably not tell you what a pair of $100 headphones smells like. But at $550, I feel compelled to note that the AirPods Max are a multisensory experience out of the box.

Design-wise, the AirPods Max are an interesting blend of classic only-Apple design flourishes and odd incongruities. The headband is stainless steel covered in white rubbery material, with a "breathable mesh knit canopy" across the top; Apple says this distributes the weight of the headphones more evenly across your head. (I can't say it feels very much different than my Sony WH-1000XM2s, but it's possible I just have a very large head.) The headband connects to the earcups with adjustable stainless-steel extensions culminating in a pleasantly spring-loaded hinge, all of which is nicer than any other premium headphones I've used.

The fairly large earcups are where things get a little messier. I have the silver AirPods Max, and the vast expanse

of flattish aluminum does not look at first glance like $550 — it’s possible the other colors look more premium, but you would be forgiven for thinking these are plastic until you touch them and feel the coldness of metal.

The earcups are not smooth, unbroken surfaces. There are 10 slots of various shapes and sizes cut into the earcup shells. Seven of those are microphones: six used for noise-cancellation and another for voice calls. (There are another two mics inside the earcups.) These slots are not symmetrical; the top of the left earcup has one long slot, one short one, and then three more slots on the bottom along with a long gray plastic antenna line.

There are two slots on top of the right earcup, and there are three more on the bottom, in addition to a small status LED and the Lightning port, which Apple chose over USB-C to be more convenient for all the iPhone users out there. The AirPods Max can be charged to its full 20-hour battery life in two hours from the standard 5W iPhone brick, and run for 90 minutes after just five minutes on the charger. (There’s no fast-charging available, even if you use a USB-C to Lightning cable.)

The right earcup also has a button to switch between noise-cancelling and transparency mode, as well as a Digital Crown volume control you can press to play and pause music, and hold to invoke Siri. (You can also just say “Hey Siri,” which worked well enough.) One note on the crown: it’s much bigger than the one that appears on an Apple Watch, so it doesn’t feel too awkward to use.

All of this is to say: there’s a lot going on visually with

the AirPods Max, much more so than you'd expect from a pair of $550 Apple headphones.

One thing you will not find: a 3.5mm or 2.5mm analog audio input, which is standard issue on noise-canceling headphones at this price point — that's how you plug into an airplane seat-back entertainment system to watch the movie. Apple knows this is a common use case, because it is selling a $35 3.5mm-to-Lightning cable for exactly that purpose. That brings you to $585 for the AirPods Max, which is just $15 less than an entire iPhone 11.

The memory-foam earcups are very comfortable, and attach magnetically — they remain firmly in place, but come out easily when you need them to. Underneath, there's white plastic, and a window for the sensor that detects your ears — the music automatically stops when you take the headphones off, or even just lift one earcup to talk to someone. The AirPods Max don't have a power button, which is very Apple; they just go to sleep when they haven't been on your head for a while, and then wake up when you put them back on. Clever.

The back of the AirPods Max case exposes where the material comes through itself and is glued in place.
I have no idea what's going on with the AirPods Max case, which is a goofy one-piece contraption that's folded and glued over on itself to form a case. It looks very much like a purse when wrapped around the headphones, which is at once fun and clever and also not the point of a headphones case that needs to survive in a backpack. It does not appear very protective,

feels like it will get dirty fast, and generally does not hold a candle to the nice hard cases that come with almost every other set of premium headphones.

It is one of the cheaper-feeling things Apple has ever made, in my estimation — the second in a trend that started with the MagSafe Duo Charger. I hope there is not a third thing.

Sound-wise, I've had fun listening to the AirPods Max for a few hours — they're crisp and bright, with a pleasingly wider soundstage than my Sony headphones, and no distortion at all, even at max volume. We'll have a full review of these soon, including tests of spatial audio and Apple's claim of Atmos surround sound support, so stay tuned for that. But for now, rest assured the AirPods Max sound more than good enough to compete with other high-end headphones.

Of course, those competing headphones are all cheaper — much cheaper — than the AirPods Max. The newest Sony WH-1000XM4s are regularly on sale for $300, sound very good, and have a 10-hour-longer battery life. The Bose Noise Cancelling Headphones 700 are $339, also sound very good, and have brand cachet that's known in first-class cabins the world over. (They also both have audio-in jacks for those seat-back entertainment systems.)

Whether Apple has actually done enough here to justify the staggering premium over the competition is an open question that it'll take us a little more time reviewing to answer.

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