Sound Machine Reviews

Unless you’ve been living in a cave somewhere, you may know that the Corona Virus pandemic has turned our world upside down. Many of us have been stressed out, and the uncertainty seems to grow as cases are rising agaon.

If you’re looking for a gift to help yourself or someone you care about cope with the stresses all of us are dealing with, consider a sound machine. This high-tech stress management tool uses sound to help you calm donw and relax during the day, and can help you sleep better at night.

Like me, many of you might not have cared for sound machines of the past. As late as 5 years ago, most sound machines offered a limited number of natural sounds, such as ocean waves, rain, a thunder storm, birds, crickets and white noise. If any of these didn’t interest you, tough beans.

Sound machines of the past were notorious for horrible sound reproduction. Many had terrible speakers, and the recordings themselves didn’t sound all that great.

Plus, many sound machines were just sound machines, unless they also included a clock radio that could be inaccessible to a blind person.

But today, sound machines now offer better sound and a greater variety of sound choices, including music. Not only that, a number of sound machines are also Bluetooth speakers.

I’d like to review some of the best sound machine/Bluetooth speaker combos from a blindness perspective.

iHome Zenergy

IHome is one of the most wellknown brands for consumer electronics, and their Zenegry line of sound machines can be found in both physical and online stores, and are recommended by Dr. Michael Bruis, the sleep doctor.

Many of these sound machines draw from an impressive sound library that offers not only the typical sounds of ocean waves, a thunderstorm and nature, but a number of musical selections designed for relaxation and meditation. Of these, one of my favorites is Zen, which iHome describes as, “A tonal melody in frequencies that mimic the Delta brainwaves of a mind in meditation.”

Another unique sound featured on many of these units is a 4-7-8 breathing meditation, where a relaxing female voice leads you in a meditation to slow your breath and calm down. The voice is supported by relaxing music and ocean waves.

These sound machines also offer light therapy, which might be useful if you’re partially blind, but not so if, like me, you’re totally blind.

All of my iHome Zenergy sound machines also are Bluetooth speakers, so you can use them for music, podcasts, audio described movies, or audio books.

The IZBT4 is the least expensive of the units I have, and is highly accessible except for the light therapy. This cylinder-shaped unit is great both at home and on the road. The 15 sounds are organized into groups: relax, nature and sleep. I like this because you can easily find a sound you like within these groups without having to go through the full sound library. You need only select one of the 3 buttons, and use that button to move through that group of sounds.

As a Bluetooth speaker, the IZBT4 is not the greatest, and if you use it with a smart phone or tablet, you can play audio, but you can’t use it to navigate; you need to use your device. Because of this, I enjoy using it with my Victor Reader Trek wo play audio books, I’ve often used it to play materials for Bible studies through my church.

I only wish the battery lasted longer than 7 hours.

At $40, this sound machine is not very elaborate, but if you’re looking for an inexpensive sound machine and Bluetooth speaker that can travel with you, this unit gets the job done.

The IZBT7 includes a clock, and is more designed for use at the bedside. As a basic sound machine and Bluetooth speaker, this unit is highly accessible. On this sound machine, you do need to use the Sound Therapy button to cycle through the sounds until you find the one you want. The oval Zenergy button, exactly in the center of the unit, is very tactile, and it remembers what sound you were on when you last used it.

As a Bluetooth speaker, you can play music and navigate in both directions through your playlist, album, or whatever.

However, many of the more advanced features, such as setting the clock, setting the sleep timer, and sleep therapy are where you might need visual assistance from a friend, family member, or visual interpreter service such as AIRA or Be My Eyes.

One thing I find odd about this triangle-shaped unit is how the speaker radiates from the rear of the unit. This causes the audio to sound strange.

The IZBT110 is the newest zenergy product. This cylindrical unit is designed to simulate a candle, so if you have friends who want all the benefits of a candle without the open flame, this sound machine could offer that. As with the IZBT7, you need to cycle through all the sounds to find the one you like. Like the IZBT4, even though it’s also a Bluetooth speaker, you need to use your smart phone, tablet or Victor Reader Trek to navigate through audio you’re listening to.

Because this unit is meant to simulate a candle, the speaker is on the bottom. This muffles the sound somewhat.

One thing I like about this unit is the voice guided sleep timer. Sounds can last from 10 minutes up to 8 hours, and eing able to set the timer nonvisually is a plus.

My main complaint is something I’ve seen a lot with small Bluetooth speakers: the battery life is too short.

Finally, we have the IZBT10. This is probably the most elaborate of the iHome sound machines I have, and there’s a lot to like about it. This triangular unit is a bedside unit, as is the IZBT7, and I’ve enjoyed using it because it’s the only Zenergy unit I’ve seen with stereo sound. I also like that you can navigate through music when using it as a Bluetooth speaker. I love the buttons on the sides of this unit that let you immediately choose from one of the 10 sounds offered.

But as with the IZBT7, the clock and sleep therapy programming is where you may need some visual assistance to set up.

Finally, the sound is excellent, making it a good candidate for anyone looking for a good sound system to stream your church’s services.

Sound Oasis

Sound Oasis is a company that specializes in sleep therapy and sleep sounds. This company sells a variety of sound machines, but the ones I have are the BST80, BST100, and BST400, all of which offer Bluetooth. These sound machines don’t offer a clock or sleep timer. Instead, they offer soundscapes that last through 8 hours, a typical sleep cycle. These soundscapes don’t repeat every few minutes, making it easier to relax or fall asleep.

These sound machines are what I call accidentally accessible, since their controls are simple, functional, and only do what’s needed.

Unlike most sound machines, Sound Oasis stores its sounds on micro SD cards, which offers a number of advantages. More on that later.

All of these units offer a micro USB charger, a headset port, and the slot for the micro SD card.

The sounds included on your starter card are mostly what you’d expect: several variations of white noise, several ocean soundscapes, a heartbeat, a jet interior, a woodland soundscape, and a musical soundscape, Hawaiian Dream.

At $35, The BST80 is the least expensive sound machine in this group. There are 3 controls on the front of this square unit, and they perform one function if you press and release them quickly, and another if you press and hold them. So if you press and hold the center button, you turn the unit on. Pressing and releasing it quickly will simply play or pause your sound machine or Bluetooth audio. The buttons on either side of that control will increase or decrease the volume, or move you forward or backward through the sounds or your Bluetooth audio. On the bottom, there is the only other button which lets you toggle between Bluetooth audio and the sounds.

The BST100 is a cylinder-shaped unit right in the middle of the group at $60. This unit has all of its controls near the bottom of the cylinder. Closese to the micro SD card slot is Power, followed by previous, play/pause, next, volume down, volume up, and the button to switch between luetooth and the sound machine.

The largest, at $100, is the BST400. This stereo unit looks like a typical Bluetooth speaker, and the control panel is fairly simple. From left to right, there is the Mode botton, which switches between sound machine and Bluetooth audio. This is followed by the Volume up and down button, the sound selection button, and the play botton. The on/off button is on the rear, followed by a headset connection, a micro USB charging port, and the slot for the micro SD card.

The sound quality on all of these units is fairly good. I’ve used the BST100 some nights when I retire, and I really like it.

As stated earlier, these units all use micro SD cards to store their sounds. Thanks to this micro SD card, it’s possible to back up the sounds to your computer, since the sounds are really large mp3 files. This allows you to play them on any mp3 player, including your smart phone, tablet, Victor Reader, and even your NLS digital talking book player.

Because these units use micro SD cards, you can buy additional sounds from the Sound Oasis web site. These sounds can be downloaded to your computer and played on these units and any other mp3 player you have. But if you want to buy a bunch of sounds, Sound Oasis gives you the option of creating a custom micro SD card with 10 tracks for $25 and 20 for $35. This gives you additional sound options should you get tired of the sounds they offer.

If there was one shortcoming with these units, it’s that old bugaboo, a battery life that’s too short. I have to wonder why none of these units couldn’t offer a battery that lasts all day.

To sum it up, the Sound Oasis Bluetooth sound machines are highly accessible and highly recommended.

HoMedics

HoMedics is one of the leading health and wellness manufacturers. They produc everything from air purifiers, massagers and humidifiers to sound machines. The Deep Sleep and Revitalize Alarm Clock and Sound Machine, model HDS300, is their top of the line sound machine. Apart from the clock, this sound machine is highly accessible.

This sound machine offers 15 sleep sounds and 8 sleep therapy programs. The sleep sounds can play for a set amount of time or through the night. With the sleep therapy programs, you choose one of the 8 sounds which will play for 20 minutes, then transition to brown noise through the night.

This sound machine is meant to look like a clock. On the front, there are touch sensitive areas at noon, 3 o’clock, 6 o’clock and 9 o’clock. The area at 9 o’clock starts and stops your audio, while the 3:00 position is used for the sleep timer. At noon and 6:00 are the controls that cycle you through the sleep sounds and sleep therapy programs.

While these are touch sensitive areas, this unit is not a touch screen.

But because this is also a Bluetooth speaker, there is a full control panel on the top of the unit. I love this control panel, because you can move through the sound library, sleep therapy and Bluetooth audio with the same controls.

But the real show stopper is the sound. The sound quality of this unit is incredible, and it offers stereo sound.

Most of the sounds are typical of what you’d find on sound machines. The sounds include 4 varitions of white noise, a babbling brook, campfire, ocean, sunrise, seaside, rain, a thunderstorm and wind chimes. But 3 meditation sounds set this machine apart. Energize and Zen are musical meditations to help you relax of stay focused. But if there is one sound that makes this unit stand out above the crowd, it’s a beautiful 10-minut guided meditation that rivals anything you could find on You Tube. The meditation combines breathing exercises with a body scan and a short visualization in 10 glorious minutes of audio.

I had never heard of a guided meditation within a sound machine until I saw this unit in the Bed Bath and Beyond store. When I heard it, I was blown away.

Face it, at $100, you’d expect this sound machine to be a good one, but this guided meditation is worth the price of this unit.

And as if that wasn’t enough, there is a port in the rear of the unit so you can charge your phone, as I’ll probably do tonight.

Final Thoughts

All of these sound machines have features I like especially the accessiblilty of their sound library and their Bluetooth capabilities. But sound machines like these are surprisingly still in the minority. I’ve often wondered why so few sound machines offer Bluetooth audio, and in this age of multi-function devices, I with more sound machines offered Bluetooth.