

GEAR AVALON L7-700 CELTIC £5,950



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AVALON ARD RI L7-700B CELTIC

In case you are wondering, 'Ard Ri' means High King in the Irish language – and this guitar certainly has a significant amount of regal charm to it. Representing the upper end of the Avalon range, the L7 positively abounds with optional extras like the bevelled armrest and cutaway features – not to mention the presence of some beautiful Paua abalone edging and Celtic style rosette. It's exotica all the way as far as the body woods are concerned, too...

BUILD QUALITY

Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder and on opening the Ard Ri's case I was immediately hit by its stunning good looks. But Avalon understands if you want the same basic model without some of its decorative accoutrements and, as such, you can order this model in various more understated versions. For instance, if you could do without the Celtic rosette, you'd be looking at £5,650 – the alternative being a plainer mother of pearl job – and if you wanted to forego the bevel feature as well, it would knock the price down to £5,250. Still a fair amount short of a king's ransom, perhaps, but let's look at what you're getting for this kind of price tag... The L7's top is redwood, a timber we're beginning to see more of due to some of the restrictions on its use being relaxed.

A top of the range model from Irish builders Avalon – David Mead craves an audience with the redwood king...

Most of the redwood in use today is the result of natural selection – the trees have literally blown down – and whereas once upon a time even windfall wood was still strictly controlled, things seem to have got a little easier in recent years. It's a good thing because redwood actually makes a very good top: slightly stiffer than cedar, but not as stiff as Engelmann spruce, redwood falls tonally in between the two. So if you happen to be a fan of cedar



tops but want a little bit more power under the hood, you would be well advised to check out the sequoia option! Back and sides on the Ard Ri are African blackwood, which is another reason for the relatively high price tag on this guitar (the regular model starts around £3,440) due to its rarity. It is becoming hard to find the wood in sufficient quantity



to make two piece backs and so wood suppliers demand a high premium when a set becomes available.

African blackwood is a member of the rosewood genus and is well known for its dark colour and considerable density – it adds a fair amount of weight to the average instrument by its presence. Tonally it is known for its dark timbre, producing some complex overtones and good sustain. As such, it's often compared to the holiest of holies, Brazilian rosewood – some preferring one, some the other.

Here, the grain patterns are all but invisible, such is the dense blackness of the wood. Closer inspection reveals some fine detail amidst the darkness, but it's definitely not as stand-back-and-admire-it obvious as some rosewoods I've come across in the past.

While we're down the body end, the bevels – the arm rest on the lower bout and the semi-cutaway on the upper – are both fashioned from ebony, which acts as the perfect foil for the blackwood. As I have said, this feature is optional, but we'll look at the potential benefits when

I check out the sound quality in a paragraph or two.

The neck is mahogany with a fairly gentle and easy-on-the-hand contour and

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Avalon
Model: Ard Ri L7-700B/Celtic
Retail Price: £5,950
Body Size: Jumbo
Made In: Ireland
Top: Redwood
Back and Sides: African Blackwood
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 20
Tuners: Gotoh SG381
Nut Width: 44mm
Scale Length: 648mm
Strings Fitted: D'Addario 12 - 53
Left Handers: Custom order
Gig Bag/Case Included: Hiscox Pro II

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Brilliantly made instrument with a truly regal voice
Cons: This price point will deter many
Overall: An instrument with a fabulous tonal command that will take pretty much anything you care to throw at it

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality	★★★★★
Sound Quality	★★★★★
Value for Money	★★★★☆

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

CONTACT DETAILS

Avalon Guitars
www.avalonguitars.com



You can sense the African blackwood as soon as you pick this guitar up



The tonal capabilities that this Avalon offers is nothing short of incredible

culminates in a headstock surrounded by Gotoh SG381 gold coloured and ebony buttoned tuners. The fingerboard is ebony, with an abalone Celtic knot at the 12th fret. Both the string saddle and nut are made from water buffalo bone, the former sitting atop an ebony bridge.

As you can probably tell, Avalon has spared no expense in terms of building materials on the Ard Rí – it really is fit for a king. But, of course, the devil's in the sound detail, and so let's see what awaits us there...

SOUND QUALITY

You can sense the presence of African blackwood on picking this guitar up for the first time. Even without a pickup or preamp present, there is a distinct amount of extra weight involved here – that's not to say that the guitar feels at all unbalanced as a result, because it doesn't. It's just a tad more weighty than you might at first suspect.

The next thing you notice is the amount of volume on offer – and immediately after that, the almost supernatural levels of sustain. The sound is bright and focused, but without any harshness or brittle edges. If you play a series of harmonics, for instance, the notes all meld together and seem to hang around for ages. It's been said that a decent rosewood will add a kind of ethereal reverb into an acoustic's sound and that is certainly the case here. You can detect the warmth coming from the redwood, too,

but it's a little brighter than cedar with some of the hard-hitting projection qualities of a good spruce.

There's a good dynamic range on offer, too; everything from vigorous chord work to the gentlest fingerstyle is catered for without any drop in sound quality along the way. And yes, I did conduct my experiments in both standard and dropped tunings!

I have to say that I didn't really notice the arm rest bevel when I was sitting playing the guitar. While it certainly

means that you don't get the sharp edge of the lower bout sticking into your arm.

CONCLUSION

Despite spending a considerable amount of time with this guitar, I don't think I managed to coax all of its tonal nuances out of it. I suspect that there is quite a deep well from which to draw in that respect alone. Certainly, in order to consider spending nearly £6k on a guitar you would have to be a very serious player and it's been said many times that what you're really paying for is that extra 10% of tonal magic above and beyond what the rank and file can offer. Oh and remember that a reduction in the level of décor will shave £700 from the price. But the bottom line is that the instrument I have before me now delivers on every count and would definitely make a worthy investment for any tonehound out there wishing to up their acoustic arsenal!

David Mead



It's exotica all the way as far as body woods are concerned on the Avalon