

Barefoot shoe review - Koel Ila

I have been researching and wearing barefoot shoes for nearly a year, but have been a fan of zero drop shoes (without knowing the terminology) for years! In fact, the reason that I wanted a pair of Koel Ila was because they remind me of a former favorite pair of Merrell Duet Sport shoes - in Gunmetal - that I had for 20 years.

Though my feet were wide as a child, they continued widening steadily over the years, both from being barefoot around the house and from wearing sandals and flip-flops so much of the year in warmer climates. I went through a shoe crisis last year when my feet began to hurt regardless of which pair of shoes I wore. And, being a shoe-a-holic, my grief was significant when I realized that most of my extensive shoe collection was no longer wearable.

I began to read about foot health and foot-shaped shoes, searching through blogs and reviews. Then I discovered barefoot shoe groups on social media and fell down the rabbit hole of all things barefoot! When I found the buy/sell/trade groups, my bargain-hunting side seriously kicked in.

My first barefoot shoes were a resale pair of Lems Primal 2. They were slightly bigger than I needed, but they were a decent entry style and more than wide enough. I liked them and would have kept them in spite of being too long, but they were ultimately too cushiony, so I later sold them. Though the Koel Ila has a more minimalist sole, they have similar flexibility to the Lems.

As I searched and bought and sold various makes and styles of barefoot shoes and sandals, I kept returning to the Koel site to dream over the Ila. I was attracted to the sporty fashion style and I have always liked suede shoes. (Care tip: rub dry baking soda onto the suede to deal with any spots or discoloring, then brush it off.) I did not see a lot of reviews for this model, but continued to read whatever I could find. Before deciding on the size, I printed out the size 38, 39, and 40 templates.

The sizing of the Ila is just wide enough. I tend to be between a 38 and 39 (I'm a 38.5 in "normal" shoes) but, in this model 39 was definitely the way to go. I may have fit into the 38 in length, but they would have been too narrow at the balls of my feet. The fit of the Ila is similar to the original Splay Freestyles and marginally smaller than the Be Lenka Champs. The Ila came without insoles, but I added some thin felt to increase their warmth for colder weather, which works pretty well. I even went for a walk in shallow snow and had no problem with the cold.

My feet are mid-volume, with a moderate arch, wide at the ball of the foot with narrow heels, what they call duck or pizza feet. This model would probably not work as well for someone with square or “brick” shaped feet.

I am very happy with the construction of the Ila, it seems very high quality. The edges are clean, the stitching is beautiful, both attaching the sole and the accents. The soles have fairly good traction.

Koel is one of the shoe manufacturers that I perceive as high end. Yet the cost is fairly competitive compared to other brands I own, including Xero, Mukishoes, Be Lenka, and Feelmax.

The suede of the Ila feels luxurious and the colorways are so cute that I would be tempted to get multiple pairs besides the grey with green accents, if I had the discretionary income to purchase more of them!

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