

Closing Time

Has the fizz gone out of the watch industry's once legendary launch parties? *GQ*'s Deputy Editor **Bill Prince** ponders whether the days of the free lunch, dinner and week-long party in Hawaii are a thing of the

"The champagne was Canadian, the hostess sang a song..."

The author of these lines, Neil Innes (the greatest Python that never was, although, usefully, he did go on to form The Rutles) had clearly never been to a watch launch. Indeed, so sumptuous have these events become that rumour has it, a few years ago the Swiss government was minded to intervene, as they were unsure whether the inordinate sums being declared by watch companies for marketing their latest timepieces were entirely kosher.

Let me put the Swiss Government watchdogs' minds at rest: yes they are! Or rather were. Maybe I've fallen off the invite list, but the glory days of the long-haul, week-long watch launch have well and truly passed. And, if you think I'm exaggerating, think again: I once had to turn down a seven-day trip to Hawaii for the launch of a dive watch. The five days on the ground were to have been divided between parties, boat trips and, for the initiated at least, a chance to actually dive (although whether this involved actually wearing the star-of-the-show watch I was unfortunately never able to establish).

Another brand, with next to nothing to do with Italy, basically took over Venice for a night of entertainment that even the Venetians might have found a little *de trop*. For this single event, a grand palace

overlooking the Grand Canal had been requisitioned, enough food and drink laid on to feed, if not stultify, an entire army, and an array of amusements and glamorous diversions – not least the watches themselves – paraded before the gawping, guzzling crowd until well past silly-o'clock.

The lucky few

Not surprisingly competition to attend these kinds of events became necessarily fierce. When word got out that one brand had access to the US Navy's largest nuclear carrier and was preparing to enlighten journalists to the primacy in the marketplace of its pilot's watch with a chance to fly with a real life Top Gun, writers almost came to blows over the all-too elusive club-class tickets to San Diego.

Still, those who didn't make it could always console themselves with a trip to the Arctic Circle to track down a watch 'ambassador' in the throes of a trans-global expedition armed with only a 45mm titanium behemoth for the inevitable, mid-trek photo opportunity.

Of course, all this largesse isn't unique to the watch industry. Car companies have flown the industry's journalists here, there and everywhere for weeks of individual 'drive aways' usually to and from a region's grandest hotels, with one or two days' off at the end for good behaviour (usually referred to as "rest and relaxation" on the invite).

Indeed, one colleague whose presence was politely requested by a famous car company for the unveiling of its all-new version of a gilded, pre-war marque, was presented with a difficult decision: did he take the Concorde to New York and return aboard the old QE2, or the other way round? In the end, he opted to fly the Concorde outbound and 'slum it' in BA First on the way back. But then he had something approaching a work ethic...

All work and no play

And there's the rub. Despite the inevitable cutbacks, watch companies certainly haven't seemed any less generous than before: it's just that journalists have become even more snowed under with work. iPads have added an entirely new dimension to the 'printed' page and that's before you consider the extra time spent tweeting, blogging, writing, reviewing and generally commenting on your chosen sector. And, like land, time is something they just aren't making any more of.

By the same token, watch companies, perhaps sensing quite how blasé some journalists have become, have chosen to divert some of their marketing spend away from jollies in favour of hiring global ambassadors, driving charitable initiatives or investing in more direct sponsorship. After all, if you're a watch

retailer, who do you really want to spend time getting to know, the man from *Spendalot* magazine waving away another glass of free Krug, or the world's greatest cricketer, Sachin Tendulkar?

