Eastern Promise
Seiko’s reputation for mechanical excellence, inventiveness and long-sight has been hard won. Domestically, Seiko is part of the industrial tradition, long associated with the same prized blend of innovation and quality that propelled other Japanese companies such as Sony and Toyota into the global premier league. As it turns out, however, comparisons with the likes of Sony have not exactly helped over the past decade or so.

While the Swiss were discovering the virtues of a return to mechanical watchmaking, not the least of which being that this is what the world wants, Seiko was concentrating on developing technologies such as Kinetic, Thermic (which generates a charge from heat differentials), AutoRelay and Spring Drive. In order to emphasise the difference of these technologies from both traditional mechanical and basic quartz watches, and in order to maximise the effect of their communication efforts, Seiko restricted the distribution of their mechanical watches to the domestic market, effectively hiding these watches from the outside world.

The arrival

While this approach undoubtedly made sense at the time, the inexorable growth of demand for mechanical watches in general and the pent up demand for Seiko’s mechanics in particular meant changes would have to be made. If waiting until 2010 to launch a mechanical range for export seems a little slow moving, there were painful memories of earlier forays into European luxury markets such as Jean Lassalle to overcome. As innovative as Seiko can be when it comes to technology, the company is nevertheless conservative at heart - it is still owned and run by the Hattori family that founded the business in 1877.

If Grand Seiko might have reached European shores earlier, it is still a welcome presence. In terms of quality and status, Grand Seiko has long been a name to conjure with in Japan and given the range launched this year looks a good bet to be around for the long term. Carefully thought out as a collection, Grand Seiko stands as concrete history of one of the world’s great watch companies.

Opposite page: Grand Seiko Automatic Hi-Beat Calibre 9585 movement (10 beat) developed in 2009 after 41 years of R&D.

Right: Grand Seiko Spring Drive with stainless steel bracelet. Features 18ct gold symbol mark and 50th anniversary inscription on the back.
The GS name dates back to the 1960s with the stated goal of proving that a Japanese company could match the best that the Swiss could offer in terms of precision and technology. Although developed from existing high grade watches, the first Grand Seiko watches were an ambitious step up, both in terms of price and quality, using more expensive materials and the latest technologies available.

The first GS watch was launched in 1960, with new models steadily introduced throughout the decade, typical examples being the 1963 57GS — a hand-wound, 35 jewel watch — and the 1966 fastbeat 61GS that ran at 36,000 bph and was a regular winner in its VFA (Very Fine Adjustment) form of numerous observatory prizes — until the advent of quartz made these tests almost redundant.

Although Seiko effectively abandoned mechanical watches in the early 1970s, the revival of interest in traditional watchmaking was spotted early and Grand Seiko was relaunched in the early 1990s and ever since Seiko has strengthened its fine watchmaking capabilities. One of the few total manufactures in the industry, Seiko makes everything from hair springs to cases.

With a very Japanese devotion to craftsmanship, Seiko’s two ateliers at Shiojiri in the central highlands and Morioka in the north, are home to the Grand Seiko collections. At Morioka, with its Alpine lakeside setting, there are 60 watchmakers of whom 20 have ‘Master Craftsmen’ status. The care and dedication to the craft is palpable—yellow scrolls on the wall denoting imperial notice are pointed to with unfeigned pride, the most recent recipient being named this year as Kazuo Takeoka.

Retro style

The new Grand Seiko collection goes right back to the 1960s in terms of design and ambition with mechanical perfection taking centre-stage — movements are subjected to 17 days of tests and are regulated in six positions — and design firmly stripped down to basics. The collection includes mechanical, quartz and Spring Drive watches, most of which are specific to Grand Seiko.

The highlight of the collection is the fast beat Calibre — 9S85 is the latest from the 9S series. Running at 5Hz or 36,000 vibrations per hour, it is a direct descendant of 61GS, though with several improvements in terms of design and materials used. New alloys for both balance and main springs were developed as well as a new geometry for the escape-wheel teeth, the effect of which is to achieve the stability of slower movements while gaining the greater
The Calibre 9F surpasses all known quartz standards featuring a regulatory wheel with a balance spring to control free-play between gears and reduce pointing errors in the second hand, a 'super sealed cabin mechanism' to maintain long-term high performance and a well sealed mechanism to prevent dirt from entering the watch movement.

precision offered by the faster rate. By comparison, the standard for 'mean daily rate in different positions' for chronometers is -4.0 to +6.0 seconds per day, for Grand Seiko the standard is -3.0 to +5.0. Typical Seiko in other words.

With the 40th anniversary of the Astron just passed, it is no surprise that the Grand Seiko collection includes a highly accurate Calibre 9F quartz movement that should remain true to within 10 seconds per year as well as a Spring Drive GMT/Chronograph. Add competitive pricing and excellent standards of finishing - Seiko use a technique called Zaratsu to achieve a mirror finish - and you have a compelling mix.

Spring Drive is the culmination of decades of research into quartz technology and will be a mainstay of Seiko’s future. Grand Seiko naturally includes both power reserve and chronograph versions.

Further information: www.grand-seiko.com