

Speaking Portuguese



Back in January, IWC declared 2010 the 'Year of the Portuguese', introducing three new models designed to embody the spirit of discovery and celebrate man's unceasing desire to reach beyond what is immediately accessible.

Bill Prince





The 2010 Portuguese Yacht Club.

It's a sobering thought - particularly if you're a sailor - that in terms of navigational technologies, nothing much materialised between 1759, when John Harrison finally won the Longitude Prize for the fourth of his five Marine Chronometers and 1995, when President Bill Clinton relaxed the vice-like grip of the US industrial-military complex and opened up the Global Positioning System to the civilian world. That's 236 years during which - give or take the introduction of radio early in the last century - sailors have had to rely on super-accurate timekeeping to steer them across the vast, latterly charted yet still implacably featureless terrain of the oceans.

But this historical downside for salty sea dogs everywhere has nevertheless delivered an upside for watch aficionados of no less historic proportions. Namely the advent of timepieces that by their very existence exercise the right of all watchmakers to retain dominion over perhaps horology's most important function: taming the sun, the moon and the stars in the service of accurate navigation. It's also made for some pretty beautiful - and successful - watches. Possibly the most beautiful - as well as the one of the

more successful - is the IWC Portuguese. Its name not only reflects the birth country of the founding fathers of modern-day navigation (Da Gama, Magellan) but is actually a testament to the peculiar, cheek-by-jowl nature of the early 20th-century watch business.

In 1931 two retailers, in Porto and Lisbon respectively, commissioned the original Portuguese from the Schaffhausen-based *manufacture*, citing a local need for an ultra-reliable pocket watch movement housed in a wrist-worn case. "There were no catalogues in those days," explains IWC Creative Director Christian Koop. "So watches were pretty much tailored to retailers' requests. And these two retailers approached IWC because they wanted pocket watch movements for more precision and accuracy. So the watch was worked out and engineered by IWC. The name was really a nickname in the first instance, then, 'the watch for the Portuguese' was shortened to 'the Portuguese' and the name became a real product."

Sailing on

Embarking on its eighth decade in continuous production, in 2010 the



The flagship of the Portuguese fleet - the Grande Complication (first launched 20 years ago).

good ship Portuguese sails on. At SIHH in January IWC unveiled an engrossing range of anniversary models that included the first ever Portuguese Grand Complication, two tourbillons (one of which memorialises the *manufacture's* founder, FA Jones), a revised Minute Repeater and, perhaps most interestingly of all, the debut of a 'toughened up' tribute to a much loved but long-discontinued 1970s model. Dubbed the Portuguese Yacht Club, it finally unites this collector's piece with the family of watches that has become one of the most important in the brand's hierarchy.

The Portuguese Hand-Wound is equipped with the technology of a traditional pocket watch.



But then, placing the IWC Portuguese at the pinnacle of the IWC family tree isn't that controversial - as CEO George Kern puts it, "Most of the complications from the *haute horlogerie* of IWC are present in the family

of watches today - and there are a few more in this 'Year of the Portuguese'" - but understanding its enduring appeal perhaps requires a little more examination.

According to Kern: "It is part of the nature of *haute horlogerie* - the art of watchmaking at its finest - that there is no such thing as standing still. The development and continuous improvement of our in-house movements, functional displays and cases are part of IWC's philosophy. [And yet] despite complications such as perpetual calendars, tourbillons and minute repeaters finding their way into the Portuguese family over the years, the watches themselves have remained entirely faithful to their historical heritage: clarity, size, accuracy and exquisite mechanics." And it's this combination of classic design and high level of functionality, that accounts for the Portuguese's centrality to the brand's portfolio.

Discreet luxury

The latest additions to the Portuguese family reflect three areas of interest regarding the Portuguese at IWC. The first of these is maintaining the primacy of the Portuguese's status as a design classic. And this particular goal has become even more important now the market is rushing back to the downturn-resonant benchmark of 'discreet luxury'. Obliging, the Portuguese's dials, in all their configurations

(and despite an evolution spanning more than three-quarters of a century) maintain its central design tenets: beautiful, spidery Feuille hands, silvered (or golden) Arabic numerals and a railway track-style chapter ring. That these remain so identifiable is fundamental to any redesign process, and thus the key to the challenge. According to Koop: "From the design perspective it's quite a challenge because it's such a long established line and with such a long history.

"But the other challenge we faced was that, as a project, it had undergone many phases and design concepts and previews of these concepts - it's been three to four years during which we made lots of design studies both internally and externally. So we decided to do a very careful redesign and maintain the core design codes: iconic dial, big numerals, clear aesthetics, typical long set hands. And our vision has proven to be right."

The second area of interest for IWC was its wish to further expand the Portuguese range by uniting it with the company's haute horological know-how, thereby restating the innate flexibility of the Portuguese's enlarged case sizes. "There are two aspects to the larger case size of the Portuguese," says Koop. "The first is to do with it being traditionally the first big watch - amazingly big for the 1930s and most of the last century, though less so these days.

"The second aspect refers to the value placed upon the original use of a pocket watch movement inside. It's this precision, this 'technicity' that marks out the value of the Portuguese. It's an instrument and its size makes it perfect to include details such as those found on the Tourbillon Retrograde. This plays perfectly with the family's instrumental heritage."

The last area of IWC's interest in the new Portuguese is perhaps the most important: restating the Portuguese's position - in the face of competing stories from its Pilot, Ingenieur and Aquatimer families - as the natural fit for the IWC admirer in search of the ultimate manifestation of the brand's fit-for-purpose ideals. And I would venture that while all models can be readily adapted for - or simply adopted by - women, the newly enlarged Portuguese family nevertheless represents something grounded in a profoundly masculine worldview.

"Each of the families has its own world of adventure - sailors, divers, pilots and so on," explains Koop. "But they all have in common the same foundation, which is the spirit of technical purity. And it is this technical purity that

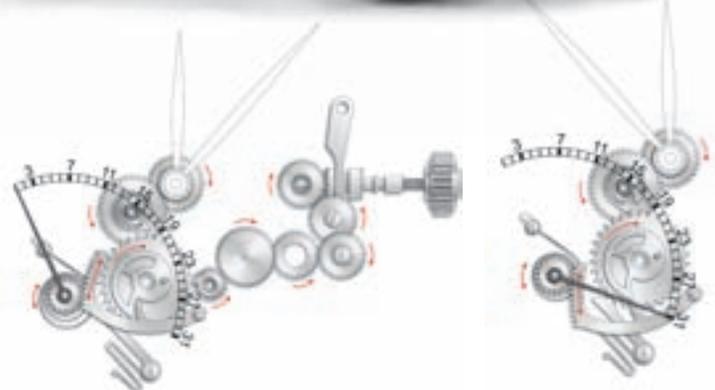
Right: The new white gold variant of the Portuguese Perpetual Calendar shows the age of the moon for the northern and southern hemispheres with the display deviating by only a single day in 577 years.



Left: The in-house 98950 calibre pocket watch movement provides the power behind the Portuguese Minute Repeater.



Below: With the Portuguese Tourbillon Mystère Rétrograde, the fine cage containing the balance appears to rotate in a void.



Day after day, the spring of the date display wheel of the Portuguese Tourbillon Mystère Rétrograde is tensioned via the helically-shaped cam and the associated rack. At the end of the 31st day, the feeler of the rack jumps from the outer to the inner diameter of the cam. This causes the spring to relax and allows the date indicator to spring back to the first day of the month.

Embarking on its eighth decade in continuous production, in 2010 the good ship Portuguese sails on

The Portuguese Chronograph - IWC's all time best-seller.

The Portuguese Anniversary Wristwatch, released in 1993 to mark the company's 125th anniversary.

One of the first Portuguese models from 1939.



accounts for their look. These are the umbrella values that account for the watches themselves."

It's this ability to maintain those umbrella values, thanks in large part to its evergreen aesthetic that lies at the core of the Portuguese's continuing success.

Join the club

And the latest entrant into this hallowed collection doesn't disappoint either. "The Yacht Club is really the perfect combination of two aspects," explains Koop of the newest arrival to the Portuguese clan. "The name was already established within IWC - in the 1960s and 1970s there was an established collection of club watches such as the Polo Club. We took this iconic name because we felt it would be perfectly suited to the Portuguese family as, aside from the name, the positioning was perfect from a precision nautical instrument point of view."

The Yacht Club is perhaps more unusual in that it augments the Portuguese's supremely rational design ethos with a bold red centre seconds timer, screw-in crown protectors that elegantly incorporate those famous capped chronograph pushers, and a single subdial that aggregates both hours and minutes at 12 o'clock. Other design cues that play with the consummate simplicity of the Portuguese include the first ever use of luminous hands and appliqués on its broad, bold dial and a black rubber strap. Although this is not so much contemporary as conventional on luxury sports watches these days, it was still a huge step away from the model's elegantly leather and pin buckle strapped past.

All these subtle reinforcements of the watch's essential qualities nevertheless home in on the Portuguese's perfect pitch: a supremely handsome watch that represents a top of the range tool for risk-takers everywhere - even if for many that won't extend much beyond dinghy sailing in the Solent. It's a balancing act that extends to the movement too: the Yacht Club features an automatic movement with a four-pawl winding system that effectively pushes and pulls the click wheel - perhaps the only feature to be retained from the Yacht Club's original iteration.

It's this approach that underlines quite how impressive - and decisive - the design department at IWC has become. Taking on a project like reimagining the new-era Portuguese, one imagines, is akin to standing before a very large diamond, pondering its facets and imagining the resulting brilliance when the cutter's work is complete...

"Your analogy of cutting a diamond is exactly right," says Koop. As a brand we are not about designing new watches. We are about recreating our designs. So a careful rather than a radical approach is needed. But it's also bringing the original spirit back to life - for sailing and navigation - that you see in that watch." ☺