

S I M P L E M O D E R N C L A S S I C



Technology messiahs have declared 2010 'the decade of mobile'. But as anyone carrying the time around on their wrist knows full well, the principle of a mobile companion has been with us for a while. The humble pocket watch kicked things off in the 15th century, but the idea of mass mobile timekeeping technology properly got going at the start of the 20th century with the invention of another mobile device - the airplane.

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Once the first flying machines had got off the ground, it became clear that measuring flight times was critically important, but also that delving into a pocket while wearing flight gloves to extract a watch was rather taxing. And so was borne the wristwatch.

Alberto Santos-Dumont, the magnificent mustachioed Brazilian pioneer aviator, is often credited with popularising wristwatches. In 1904 he asked his friend Louis Cartier to design him a timekeeper he could reference without having to take his hands from the controls of his flimsy bi-plane. Cartier obliged and made what we now think of as a wristwatch. Santos-Dumont was one of the most famous men in the world at the time and before long his circle of high society friends were requesting wristwatches of their own. Today's Cartier Santos collection is named in his honour.

From there, the wristwatch swiftly replaced its cumbersome forbearer, profiting from The Great War and the rapid evolution of aerial warfare. During the Second World War, Longines and IWC were among those to supply



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wristwatches to the RAF, while the Americans had the Bulova Type A-11, now a collector's item.

Utilitarian in design, these pilots' watches had clear dials, large Arabic numerals, steel cases and reliable movements. They were basic tools, useful for navigation and coordinating maneuvers. Pilots returning home after the war held onto their trophies, which quickly became symbols of heroism and derring-do. With such cachet, the popularisation of the wristwatch was complete. Today, pilots' watches have lost none of their allure. Brands such as Breitling and IWC rely heavily on their aviation credentials, the former basing entire advertising and sponsorship campaigns around the subject.

But, in keeping with the theme of this series, for those with one eye on the time and the other firmly on the tension in their purse strings, affording a piece such as the iconic IWC Big Pilot's Watch is a flight of fancy. What to do with a budget under £1,500?

Mercifully, a quick scan of the market reveals an ample selection of watches in this bracket. As well as our three picks, the likes of Victorinox, Hamilton and U-Boat will all provide a perfectly serviceable mechanical pilots' watch without taking the shirt off your back. Make the investment in any of these and when the decade of mobile has been and gone, these lovingly designed watches won't have aged a day...

The Orfina Beobachtungsuhren

Orfina's Paleolithic-sounding Beobachtungsuhren is another case in point. Orfina, never prone to flashy excess, has a reputation for sturdy, classic-looking timepieces that define the company's near 90-year history.

Less complex than its name, the watch itself owes its style to pilots' watches of the 1940s. Literally translated, Beobachtungsuhren - and I promise I won't make you read that again - means 'navigator's watch'. It's a no-nonsense piece, unburdened by gimmickry, pared down to the point it looks almost unbranded.

The spec list is reassuringly brief. It's got a brushed stainless steel case and a scratch-resistant sapphire crystal, is powered by the tried and tested ETA 2824-2 automatic movement and features an Incabloc anti-shock proof system. All of which means there's not much to go wrong. In fact, Orfina is so confident of the piece's reliability that the company guarantees each one for five years. Shop around and you can pick one up for under £400 - a true bargain.

The Orfina Beobachtungsuhren is a design classic, representing a traditional pilot's watch. The ETA 2824-2 automatic movement is housed in a 37mm brushed stainless steel case.



The Oris BC4 Der Meisterflieger

Oris, a company that doesn't need introduction to the horolophile, produces a series of reasonably priced aviation pieces, such as the BC4 Der Meisterflieger. By today's standards, it's not one of the biggest men's utility watches, but the cockpit-inspired case still comes in at a healthy 42.7mm. All good pilots' watches need to be legible, and a large dial is a good start.

The BC4 makes headlines because of the vertical crown that operates the watch's inner bi-rotational dial ring, a regulator (the minute and hour hands are offset) and the 60-minute counter that sits in place of conventional hour markers.

It also has an instantaneous date at 6 o'clock, 100m water-resistance (useful if ever you find yourself bailing out over the sea) and, for those interested, the presentation case also comes with a leg-mountable clipboard for recording flight data. All in all, it offers a lot for your money - the BC4 Der Meisterflieger retails at £1,380 for the leather strap version or £1,450 with a steel bracelet.

The BC4 Der Meisterflieger was created using feedback from the Blue Eagles Helicopter Display Team. While the basic construction and vital statistics of the case and the dial are classic BC4, the Regulateur movement has a centralised, stand-alone minute hand making the minute display even easier to read.



The Stowa Flieger Automatik

Similarly free of fuss is Stowa's Flieger Automatik, which is also based on a 1940s original. A German brand of some standing, Stowa can stake a legitimate claim to being a manufacturer of pilots' watches. During the 1940s it was one of only five watch houses that produced the classic 55mm pilots' watches made to be worn over flying jackets. To put that into context, the others were A Lange & Söhne, Lacher & Co, Wempe and IWC - hallowed company indeed.

Stowa has based its collection on that heritage, sticking with the same understated dials and straight-talking materials that made the originals so desirable. The Flieger Automatik's black dial is disturbed only by blued-hands filled with Superluminova, white Arabic luminescent numerals and markers, and a date window. The combination of colours - particularly when combined with a riveted brown leather strap - makes an authentic style statement. Stowa's commercial presence in the UK is underwhelming, which is a pity, but find a stockist and the Flieger range should be available for between £400 and £500.

Stowa's Flieger collection is characterised by amazing simplicity and unique design - making the watch easy to recognise, even for a novice watch enthusiast. The star-timepiece of the collection is the Flieger Automatik.

