

Pick a Peck of Polycarbonates



There are any number of sub-£150 wristwatches on the market, some good, some bad, some downright awful. So what is it about the affordable and rather cheeky 'look-a-likes' produced by the Italian brand EmaS that have made them such a hit with the international jet set? QP goes to a classic car showroom in Kensington to find out.

Simon de Burton



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Numbers 18 - 23 Radley Mews will be familiar to many classic car fans as being the site of Bramley of Kensington, a purveyor of quality collectable carriages made by elite marques such as Aston Martin, Ferrari, Bentley and Rolls-Royce. But the address also serves as the U.K nerve centre for a watch brand that, as recently as 18 months ago, was unheard of in this country, yet has now become a firm favourite with horolophiles who don't always take themselves too seriously.

Courting counterfeit

Bramley's proprietor is Graeme Hunt, a man with more than 25 years experience in the prestige car game, who began his career with the celebrated Rolls-Royce and Bentley dealer Jack Barclay. His partner, Bettina Spurrell, is commonly regarded as one of the most knowledgeable and experienced women in the London watch trade, having managed the Watch Gallery in Fulham Road for several years, before leaving to pursue new ventures in 2006.

Among their various shared interests, Graeme and Bettina are both mad about watches and equally passionate about Italy. So it was that they found themselves on holiday in Porto Fino two years ago, where they noticed that every other person seemed to be wearing a watch that was almost a Rolex Submariner...but entirely made of plastic.

The name on the dial was Nivrel, and the story goes that the brand came to prominence following a series of thefts of expensive watches from wealthy customers staying in high-end hotels along the Italian riviera. One of the hotels - although no one seems able to remember exactly which one - apparently decided to fox the thieves by supplying guests with a free watch to wear during their stay, meanwhile they could leave their 'real' timepieces safely locked away in the hotel safe.

The fact that the guests were well-heeled, however, meant that if they were going to be given a substitute watch it would have to be of decent quality and, of course, be chic enough to look the part when teamed with Vilebrequin swimming shorts and a pair of Ray-Bans, for example. It would also have to keep time accurately and be robust and properly waterproof. The Nivrel, it seems, fitted the bill perfectly.

Accidental advertising

Bettina takes up the story: "Because so many wealthy people were wearing them and showing

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them to their friends, these watches suddenly became the trendy thing to have and pretty soon they were all over the place in the South of France and on the Italian Riviera, so Graeme and I decided we should bring them to Britain.

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"The only problem was that Nivrel had become so popular that the design was being copied by all sorts of other makers, so we ended up buying a whole selection



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EmaS Diver is also available with a carbon fibre dial, £150.00.

of models from the cheapest to the most expensive and bringing them back to evaluate. The better ones were made from polycarbonate, just like the Nivrel, but many were just plastic and they were all inferior in terms of movement, finish or reliability - so it was obvious that the Nivrel was the one to start importing,” explains Bettina.

She tracked down the source of the watches to a man called Enrico Masserini, whose family has been involved in the watch business for three generations as the Italian distributors of Ulysses Nardin. Impressed by Bettina’s credentials and

interest in the brand, Masserini agreed to make her the U.K. outlet for Nivrel which, for various reasons, is known here as EmaS (as in Enrico MASserini).

Since putting them on sale in the U.K. little more than 18 months ago, Bettina estimates that around 3,000 have been bought, either from her ‘TimePieces’ web site or from the 15 outlets around the country, which include Bamford and Sons in London and the St. Albans based jeweller and watch retailer, Galeo.

“The reason they are proving so popular is that, although they are inexpensive, they

are actually really good, reliable watches,” says Bettina.

“They have high quality Japanese Miyota movements, available in either quartz or automatic versions and they are genuinely tough and waterproof. They have mineral crystal glass, with polycarbonate cases and bracelets. Every model is guaranteed for two years, so you get quite a lot for your money. Many buyers already have expensive watches, yet they buy one of these to take on holiday and quite often come back for more because they like wearing them so much.” So a bit of an accident, but I doubt EmaS will complain.



Limited to an edition of 99, the EmaS Tourbillon has a polycarbonate case, transparent case back and a guilloche-decorated dial. The movements were assembled in Switzerland and decorated with Cotes-de-Geneva, £1,200.

Dubious Diver

The most commonly seen EmaS model is the Diver which, as already mentioned, bears more than a passing resemblance to a Rolex Submariner - save for the trademark large number '10' on the dial. Rolex, apparently, has retained a dignified silence about the similarity, presumably on the basis that the price of the EmaS and the material it is made from is so far removed from that of the genuine Sub that no one could regard it as a serious attempt at fakery.

But as the EmaS name becomes better known, so new models are emerging and with it the makings of an almost Swatch-like collectability. In addition to the Lady Stones, Jolly Roger and EmaS Cup yacht versions, there is another with a leopard-pattern bezel, a Diver with a carbon fibre dial and 'Casino' and 'Yacht Timer' chronographs with rose gold bezels.

There is even an 'Erotica' series costing £575 and a £1,500 tourbillon, with the latest model being the Paparazzi, which is finished in a form of PVD coating with rose gold or steel additions and costs up to £1,195.

Perhaps most amusingly, however, the EmaS/Nivrel brand is now starting to achieve an impressive level of celebrity endorsement without, apparently, having to ask for it or, more importantly, pay for it. Renault F1 boss Flavio Briatore is one of its many fans in the car world, as is his friend Silvio Berlusconi. Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty will also wear a Ladystones for a new film she is making with Richard Gere, and the watches have been chosen as the 'official' timepiece of a new Italian soap opera about Sicily, called *Agro Dolce*.

Plastic fantastic? It certainly seems that way... ☹



EmaS Paparazzi uses a steel case, rose gold bezel and a Citizen quartz movement. Prices range from £330 to £425.