Rolex
Open Sesame

QP enters into the parallel universe that is Rolex, a place where size really does matter and chance is not allowed

But despite not being a watch brand, Rolex does make an enormous number of very good and very popular watches. The company keep numbers fairly close so estimates have to be projected from COSC figures, other sources and best guesses, but the figure usually agreed upon is 800,000, or maybe 900,000, or more. Given these sorts of numbers it is probably only fair that Rolex are not a watch brand as it gives everyone else a chance.

Of course such figures are virtually meaningless - you might as well ask how many times around the world would the annual production of Rolexes go? Or would football pitches be the proper measurement? The only way to truly understand the size of Rolex is to visit the company in Geneva and feel the scale. I have to admit I jumped at the invitation to visit - such summonses being once in a decade events - particularly as Rolex, quite rightly, see little need to court the attentions of watch journalists (who seem mostly intent on getting Rolex to admit the ref. 6399 came out in May 1965 and not April).

Opening the gates

So my sense of curiosity was at it's fullest as the security shutter rolled up and our bus entered Rolex's recently opened Plan-les-Ouates site. Through the last decade Rolex has been busy rationalising and "verticalising" their production, merging a scattered array of workshops under three very large roofs in Geneva (the movements are made in Bienne). Ironically, several of the vacated sites are now occupied by new watch companies.

Plan-les-Ouates is probably the world's smartest industrial estate, being home to Patek Philippe, Piaget and Vacheron Constantin among other famous names, but Rolex dominates in height and volume - the site simply overwhelms through its size. You expect Airbus to be a large place, but this volume to make watches seems strange.

The roof gardens are large enough to accommodate a small vineyard (no plans for Châteaux Rolex just yet) and what we thought would make a nice tennis court. Inside is all antiseptic, environmentally friendly, climate controlled, state of the art blandness. Until you get to see what actually happens there that is.

Plan-les-Ouates is Rolex's R&D centre as well as its facility for making cases and bracelets etc. The basement holds Rolexes own metal refinery - their gold alloys are proprietary and have been carefully developed to cope with the stresses and strains a Rolex will face in its lifetime - the loss of colour in pink gold watches due to too much swimming pool chlorine lead to the development of 'Everose' for example.

The blue PARACHROM Hairspring was developed to be resistant to shocks and magnetic fields.

As you move through the building you discover there is a parallel geometry. For every passage there is a matching tentacle of the buildings Matrix like stock control system. In itself it is quite something to see, but more importantly the existence or need for such a system reminds you powerfully of the scale of operations at Rolex.

The testing ground

The same sense is apparent in the R&D floors, which come equipped with labs that I imagine would shame many a university department. It is here that ideas are tested and, for the most part, rejected - Rolex appear to see little practical value in new escapements or exotic materials. At the scale Rolex work at, any idea or modification not only has to work absolutely - imagine a return rate of 0.5% - but must also be practical to apply to their production process, again the scale of Rolex dictates an ultra conservative approach compared to the free-wheeling atelier that cause so much excitement in the watch world. This is not to say that nothing ever moves forward at Rolex. There's a constant evaluation of everything they do and even the most marginal improvements are sought out and implemented.

Over at the even larger Acacias site where final assembly takes place the importance of apparent minutiae magnified to Rolex scales are brought into sharp focus. Computerised control, ordering and monitoring of the production process extends to almost every turn of a screw. Cartridges loaded with the watch arrive at a workbench automatically, while a screen on the workbench lists the operations to be carried out, the parts to be used and the order in which to proceed. Once the operation is complete, say the placing of a bridge, the cartridge and watch automatically move onto the next step.

So while it is the size that initially impresses, it is the level of control, and by implication quality, that truly amazes. If you are after artisanal craft and soul then Rolex is not the choice for you, but that is not what Rolex is really looking to sell.

A precise denouement

And what, you may ask, of the end-product of all these processes and machines? You get innovations that you would hardly notice individually such as

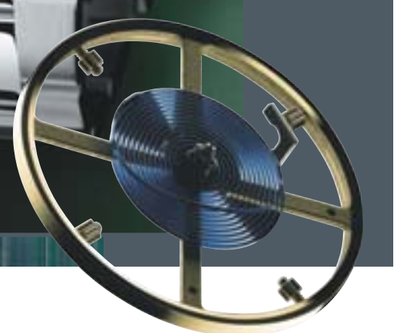
Yacht Master II has a programmable countdown feature with a mechanical memory, which gives it the advantage of being able to be set according to the countdown time of each regatta. The new 4160 calibre movement comprises of 360 components and beats at 28,800 variations per hour. Fully automatic, equipped with a perpetual rotor and with a power reserve of 72 hours.

Everose, but you also get big ticket items like the new Parachrom hairspring, which is made from a non-ferrous alloy of, principally, niobium and zirconium. Rolex claim its' main quality is that it is far less open to magnetisation than Nivarox, though it also has the attraction of being made by themselves and not a Swatch Group supplier!

While the watches are, in quality, terms all you would expect from such a sophisticated machine, my feeling is that the scale of Rolex also means an excess of conservatism when it comes to design. Just look at the two main launches for 2007. On the one hand there is the updated Milgauss, elegantly updated from the original with its green tinted glass. It is a simple smart watch that showcases everything that Rolex is good at. On the other hand there is the Yacht-Master II, which, alongside such gems as the 2004 Leopard skin dial Daytona, beg the question why?

The Oyster Perpetual Milgauss. Resistant to a magnetic flux density of 1,000 gauss, the movement and the magnetic shield allow for continual performance when subjected to intense magnetic fields. Designed particularly for telecommunications, the aerospace industry, medical imaging and research laboratories, among others, the Oyster Perpetual Milgauss is the latest version of a watch that was introduced in the 1950s.

The Movement is equipped with the PARACHROM hairspring (see image), while the escape wheel is made from a new paramagnetic material. The Magnetic shield comprises of two components screwed to the inside of the case that are manufactured in ferromagnetic alloys and help protect the movement. Automatic, features a Perpetual rotor and certified by COSC. Available in steel on an Oyster bracelet featuring an Oysterclasp with Easylink.



Pouring alloy - Rolex house their own metal refinery in the basement of Plan-Les-Ouates. Everose is a form of rose gold that protects against discolouration by adding platinum to the alloy, allowing the copper to maintain the colour.