

# The Life Aquatic

Dust off your wetsuit – a shoal of new diver's watches is swimming your way

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With the mysterious synchronicity of a school of fish, diving watches have become all the rage among the Swiss watch houses this year. But don't worry if the choice is baffling, as most of these watches will not be found anywhere near a reef until autumn this year.

Not content with all appearing at the same time, this new shoal of diving watches even share a common aesthetic in the form of a conscious nod to the diving watches of the 1960s - though some are rather more Zissou than Cousteau. Of course, it's hard not to assume that the appearance of IWC's well-received Aquatimer collection, complete with its reference to IWC's own 1960s original, made the development path of these watches that much smoother.

A little unscientific research around London's watch stores revealed that the Aquatimer has done well on the retail front, but not so astoundingly well that the recent glut is a bandwagon phenomenon, which raises the question, why now?

One answer is that with watch buyers prepared to buy ever-more daring and leftfield watches, diving presents a comparatively unexplored arena for watchmakers to show off their inventiveness. With the simpler diving watches, these watches also create a way of offering a more accessible price without diminishing the mystique of the brand. But second-guessing the workings of watchmaking companies seldom equals time well spent.





**A** First launched by IWC in 1999, Deep One integrated a mechanical depth gauge with a flyback hand, designed especially with skin divers in mind. It set the aesthetic tone for the Aquatimer range launched in 2004.

**B** The Aquatimer Minute Memory (from £5,300 on rubber) has a split-minutes hand activated by the switch at 8 o'clock. It 'freezes' the superimposed central minutes hand to allow measurement of intermediate, ascent or decompression times, then immediately re-aligns the lower hand with the running minutes hand.

**C** The minute-memory mechanism is located non-coaxially to the motion work on the dial side, avoiding the necessity for any additional height of the movement. The resetting device is a heart wheel plus a heart piece and reset lever wheel with a clutch coupling, connected to the motion work via toothed wheels.

**D** Unlike the historic wrist-born depth meters made by Panerai for the Italian Navy, which measured to depths of either 16 m or 30 m, the new Luminor 1950 Submersible Depth Gauge indicates, on a logarithmic scale, depths down to 120 m. Water pressure is sensed by a silicone membrane through six grooves in the titanium case's screwed back, and interpreted by an electronic module hybridised with Panerai's mechanical calibre OP XV. It is tested and certified as a professional instrument by the Swiss Federal Office for Metrology (METAS). Limited to 600 pieces, £7,800.

**E** Panerai's Submersible Depth Gauge might measure all the way down to 120 m, but Jaeger's new Master Compressor Diving Pro Geographic (from £12,100) is purely mechanical, transposing the system that drives the Atmos clock. In the latter, a gas capsule expands or contracts with variations in air temperature, winding the mainspring. In a similar way, the Diving Pro Geographic's sensor chamber at 9 o'clock has a membrane that expands or contracts according to the aquatic pressure. It acts on the blue pointer by means of a transmission system that is partially visible through the dial. The rack and pinion are shaped to enable a logarithmic-scale display to 80 m.

It's a strange hybrid of automatic watch and battery-powered electronic depth gauge, and massive even by Panerai standards.

### Instruments

Following the Aquatimer precedent, the new diver's watches fall into two camps. Firstly, the headline-grabbing super-gizmos that are conceived as mechanical dive computers - albeit fairly simple in scope. Panerai's offering in this field even comes under the name 'Instrument' rather than 'watch'. IWC's GST Deep One set the standard here as far back as 1999 with its mechanical depth gauge. Although this watch caught everyone's attention, it was only produced in limited quantities; the Deep One was better in conception than reality.

When IWC returned to the fray with the new Aquatimer collection, it was without a direct replacement for the Deep One. In its place, a more practical - and more securely engineered - headline watch, the Aquatimer Minute Memory Chronograph, which can be used underwater, allowing the user to time another action separately from the overall dive time, such as an ascent or the length of a decompression stop. In true IWC style, unlike the Deep One, the watch doesn't shout its special status to the world and is only noticeable for the thicker-than-usual split hand and the stubby button that activates the split.

Far more 'out there' and more visible from the neighbouring yacht are two watches that follow on more directly from the Deep One, both launched at the SIHH trade fair in Geneva this year. The most extreme of the two is Panerai's Instrument PAM193, otherwise known as the Submersible Depth Gauge. It's a strange hybrid of automatic watch and battery-powered electronic depth gauge, and massive even by Panerai standards - far too large to wear unless already bulked-out with aqualung, wet suit, weight belt and all the



other paraphernalia required for serious diving. All of which makes you assume that these watches will actually be used for the purpose intended.

Slightly less extreme in size and far more wearable out of the water is Jaeger-LeCoultre's eye-catching 'Master Compressor Diving Pro Geographic'. It's a serious-looking diver's watch with a mechanical depth gauge. Pressure applied to the membrane in the chamber at 9 o'clock is read from the dial via a blue hand. Apparently this relies on similar linkages to the famed Atmos clock, and it is certainly very responsive - the 0-80 m gauge is logarithmic, being more sensitive at the lower end of the scale - and has all the stand-out design qualities you would expect from Jaeger-LeCoultre, though the simpler versions are much more attractive. But while the company insists that this is a professional diver's watch, the game is slightly given away by the rather bizarre inclusion of a world-time function.

Recently tested far beyond the limits of human usage was Jaeger-LeCoultre's new Master Compressor Diving Pro Geographic (limited to 1,500 pieces, £5,500). With the help of Total Marine Technology (TMT), an example of the 44 mm titanium time-zoner reached a depth of 1,080 m along the Isla Lana'i coast, Pacific Ocean on June 14th - 80 m beyond its specified water resistance. TMT designs and builds work-class remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) for offshore drilling and production companies, and worked closely with Jaeger on the latest addition to its robotic fleet, *Jaeger-LeCoultre 1*, to which the watch was attached adjacent to a depth gauge.

Longines' Legend Diver (£1,060) was a big hit with our writers at Baselworld this year, thanks to classy styling that remains absolutely loyal to a model from 1960, plus its incredible value for money.

(Left) Red-gold Automatic (£12,080), whose calibre 1315 is a more rugged version of the six-day calibre 13R0 presented last year (no swan neck or balance index means less susceptibility to shock). (Centre) Flyback chronograph in red gold (£13,480). (Right) Tourbillon in white gold (£55,760).

Launched in 1953, the same year as the Submariner, the Fifty Fathoms was never a commercial proposition - Blancpain-Rayville SA was originally commissioned by the French Navy's new elite, Les Nageurs de Combat, as no existing watch would meet its specification. It was adopted by specialists in ocean exploration and also accompanied Jacques Cousteau while shooting *Le Monde du Silence*, long before the Cousteau Society collaborated on IWC's Aquatimer. Its water resistance was upped in 2003 from the eponymous 50 fathoms (ca 91 m - a safety point for divers at the time) to 300 m. This year it resumes its gleaming black bezel, and gains chronograph and tourbillon variants.

## Revived Dives

But for those who are looking for a simpler, more authentically Cousteau approach, it seems the answers are all to be found in the 1950s and '60s. The acknowledged original is still Blancpain's Fifty Fathoms, which has been a staple in varying forms of the company for many years. This year, however, Blancpain seems to have caught the retro bug and released a new edition based closely on the design drawn-up in response to the French Defence Ministry's specification in 1952. The plain-steel automatic is the choice of the collection, updated as it is with a slightly more rugged version of Blancpain's new six-day 13R0 movement, rather than the original A Schild or LIP movements of the Fifties. However, both the chronograph and the flying tourbillon are exceptional pieces too, both being rated at 300 m for water resistance. Blancpain even says that the chronograph can be used beyond that sort of pressure.

The Superocean Héritage caught the attention of everyone who went past Breitling's stand at Baselworld (once they had dragged their attention

away from the monstrous aquarium set in the wall). This was for the simple reason that the Superocean is one of the best-looking watches the company has shown in years. More strictly retro than Blancpain's, the watch is noticeably stockier than its predecessor, even in the 38 mm size, but preserves many of the details, including the steel mesh bracelet. While authenticity demands the 38 mm in black, Breitling has also made appropriately retro blue and bronze versions in both 38 mm and 46 mm sizes.

That Longines is catching up with its heritage after decades of mid-table obscurity is no longer news. And it's no surprise to discover that Longines has serious form with diving watches. The Legend Diver is easily the closest in design to its original 1960s forebear, but as with Breitling and Blancpain, you get modern specifications and capabilities. And with Longines being maintained as a value-conscious brand, this highly credible piece of watch history is yours for a little over a thousand pounds - almost astonishing. ○

(Above) Breitling joined the diving club in 1957 with the Superocean and 40 years later the retro Héritage version (from £1,845) adds contemporary bulk to the original shape - either in 38 or 46 mm diameter - and water resistant to 200 m.