

Budget Classics: Seiko Orange Monster



Technical Specs

Orange dial: Ref. SKX781P9
(US\$400)

Black dial: Ref. SKX779P9
(US\$375)

Yellow dial: Ref. SKZ203K1
(limited to 300 units)

Blue dial: Ref. SKZ213K1

Movement: Seiko cal.7S26;
21 jewels; automatic; 21,600 vph
(newer 23-jewel cal. 7S36 in
Blue and Yellow Monsters)

Power reserve: >40 h

Case: Stainless steel; 42 mm
diameter; 13 mm thickness

Bezel: Unidirectional rotating;
elapsed time

Crown: Screw-down

Water resistance: 200 m
(660 ft, 20 ATM)



(Left) The SKX781P9, known as 'The Orange Monster' among collectors - an appellation now extended to the Black, Blue and Yellow Monsters. Seiko once tried, unsuccessfully, to register this name as trademark, so popular has it become. (Right) The screwed casebacks of Seiko's Monsters bear a nautical motif, in keeping with their function as a very proper diving watch.



Occasionally, you need a third party to convince you that something is special. It's simply not enough that a host of websites proclaim an item to be so: with such sites being inescapably influential amongst collectors, their choices become self-fulfilling prophecies. After all, it takes just one feverish blogger to champion a piece of tat from the old Soviet Union, and before you know it, everyone's hot for watches that were selling for £2 to tourists in Hungary a decade ago. But sometimes they get it right. As they have with Seiko's automatic diver, now affectionately known as the 'Orange Monster'.

Ken Kessler

I'd been after one for years, and the first thing you learn about this elusive gem is that it's very hard to find outside Asia. At least, it was until the online vendors discovered it. If you Google 'Seiko Orange Monster', you'll be greeted by a quarter-of-a-million sites, the bulk of which will sell you one with prices ranging from \$100 to £400. And yes, the most overpriced dealers are UK-based. Meanwhile, the utterly dependable amazon.com sells them for US\$159. That's under £85 at current rates!

Just as I was about to yield to an online purchase, having successfully acquired a JeanRichard Highlands that way, Asia beckoned. In October, I found myself on business in Hong Kong - one of the true 'paradise cities' for watch enthusiasts. I planned to link up with Howard, a collector buddy from Canada via New York, who emigrated there some years ago. The night before our meeting, while wandering along Nathan Road, I happened upon a store that is part of the biggest retail chain in the city, and a Seiko dealer to boot.

What else can you purchase for under £150 that will bestow upon you so much ineluctable cool? A couple of tattoos? Pierced nipples? Five Swatches? I don't think so.



It's almost worth buying Seiko's diving watch for the bracelet alone! Solid steel links with a flip-lock buckle and press-button release mechanism, plus a secondary flip-out extension means you can even wear the Orange Monster over a wetsuit!



(Left) The Seiko Black Monster with optional black rubber strap. (Right) Another brilliant feature of the Seiko Monster is a choice of two formats for the day indication. You can either select between English (Mon, Tue, Wed, etc., as seen on the Black Monster here) and Roman numerals (as on this Orange Monster, 'IV' meaning Thursday), or a variety of other languages depending on where the watches are being sold, e.g. English and Spanish, or English and Arabic.

Ordinarily, I steer clear of any store with watches I can actually afford but something suggested that this temple to quartz might be worth a shot. Sure enough, I looked in the Seiko display and there was the Seiko Orange Monster. And the Seiko Black Monster. And at least three other Seiko diving watches with automatic movements.

Without hesitation, I bought the Orange Monster for £120.

"Cool watch..."

Next morning, I met Howard, who was proud to show me his new Graham. But he couldn't take his eyes off my Orange Monster, so we headed back to the shop, found only a Black Monster in stock, bought that and sought-out one of the retailer's other premises. No luck. After hitting a handful of Seiko dealers, one told us - in characteristic Hong Kong fashion - that he didn't have either in stock, but could get both, "I swear", in 10 minutes. Since I was flying back that evening, it was all the time I could spare. But sure enough, exactly 10 minutes later, a staff member from another premises arrived with a Black Monster *and* an Orange Monster. This time, £104 each.

So, armed with two fresh Monsters each, Howard and I went to visit his favourite vintage watch store.

Now here's where I touch a nerve with each and every one of you. Watch collectors are deeply sensitive about one-upmanship.

And wearing £100 watches is no way to earn the respect of another collector. So there we were, looking in a window filled with rare Panerai's, mint vintage Rolexes, Patek Philippes - only premium stuff, with boxes and papers. Window-shopping alongside us were two Canadians, one sporting an immaculate Rolex Milgauss and clearly a collector of note. We started the usual banter. Milgauss Man's buddy checked out Howard's Graham, which got a nod of approval, while my sleeve slowly crept over the Seiko. He said, "What are *you* wearing?" Milgauss Man answered for me: "That's a Seiko Orange Monster. Cool watch."

Talk about a 'Kodak moment', when your anorakish heart soars from the positive recognition of a fellow collector! He was merely voicing what a few hundred thousand collectors - and not necessarily impoverished ones - have acknowledged the world over: Seiko's oversized, almost grotesque budget diving watch is very cool indeed.

Look at what they've been selling to everyone but us and the Americans: The Seiko SKX781 (and SKX799 for the black dial) uses the well-proven Seiko 7S26 self-winding movement in a massive stainless-steel case genuinely waterproof down to 200 m. It boasts every single professional diving detail you could want, including a screw-down crown, a unidirectional rotating bezel, intense luminosity and - with the orange dial - absolute legibility on a par with one particular watch that it calls to mind: the Doxa 'Dirk Pitt' SUB300T and its descendants.

Cult status

Although the watch has been around since winter 2001, it pushes all the right buttons in today's market because of its beefy 43 mm case. On a bracelet (rubber strap available too), it weighs a considerable 180 g, or nearly 6-and-a-half ounces. It certainly owes its look to no other diving watch, not least because its crown - guarded by integral shoulders - is at the 4 o'clock position and its heavy, concave bezel boasts graphics that border on the elementary. The bezel's movement is smooth, with clearly defined clicks, so Seiko certainly hasn't cut costs in this area.

Some enthusiasts bemoan the lack of a sapphire crystal, as Seiko's own 'Hardlex' heat-treated composite material containing barium and silicon isn't nearly as tough. However, it's hardly as fragile as Perspex or plastics and with that thick, concave bezel, you can lay the watch dial-downward without fear of scratching the dome.

Furthermore, Seiko's attention to detail is so thorough that the hands of the Orange Monster are outlined in black, while those on the Black Monster are outlined in white. Enough to warm the cockles of any diver's heart, their design is a lesson in clarity and function, so even a middle-aged old fart with failing eyesight like me can read the time without squinting. Also aiding legibility

is a raised chapter ring, reminiscent of the dials on the late, lamented Japy watches.

By this time, collectors are wondering, how did they do it? OK, so the Seiko movement isn't going to cause Rolex any distress, but neither is it a dog: this is a workhorse of a movement, dependable and easy to service. As the object of a cult, there are also variations to consider, including rare blue- and yellow-dialled versions, sold exclusively in Thailand (each with the newer calibre 7S36, and a day-date cyclops over the Yellow Monster's date), variants with black bezels, even 'pimped out' versions made for collectors by enthusiasts.

Naturally, as this is a web-instigated phenomenon, there are those who have to niggle: no hacking movement; the aforementioned lack of sapphire glass; the case material isn't titanium; no helium valve; *ad nauseum...*

To them I say: what else can you purchase for under £150 that will bestow upon you so much ineluctable cool? A couple of tattoos? Pierced nipples? Five Swatches? I don't think so. What we have here is a modern classic to join those other truly cool and affordable diving watches - the aforementioned Doxa and the Rado Diastar. The only downside is convincing your mates that the entire watch cost less than a decent strap. ○

Further information: Seiko UK, Tel: 01628 410202, www.seiko.co.uk