

Technical Specs**Model:** Air-King, ref. 14000M**Bracelet:** Ref. 78350**Movement:** Calibre 3130; automatic; 28,800 vph; Breguet overcoil hairspring**Functions:** Hours, minutes, seconds**Case:** Steel**Water resistance:** 100 m**Price:** £1,860**Bell & Ross Vintage 123**

If you still can't bring yourself to wear a Rolex (more the fool, you) then Bell & Ross' achingly cool Vintage 123 (£1,320) should satisfy any craving you have for a three-hand watch. B&R makes no bones about its look: it states clearly that it has "designed a model in a classical style evocative of the origins of the professional watch." And it is a looker, especially if - in your break from the Air-King - you opt for the beige dial. Of course, this won't be mistaken for an Air-King for another reason: in keeping with the 'vintage' tag, B&R has opted for small seconds, rather than sweep, at the 6 o'clock position, arranged above the date window with typical panache. Inside is the ubiquitous self-winding ETA 2895 movement, with an approximate 40-hour reserve. The case is satin-finished stainless steel, the seconds hand is of the hacking type, and the bracelet is, well, very Rolex-y. 'Vintage' designation aside, this watch is made for moderns, with rapid date correction, anti-glare and anti-UV treatment for the dial and domed sapphire glass, water-resistance to 100 metres, and screw-down crown and back. Buy with confidence.

IWC Mk XVI

While purists balk at IWC's attempts at maintaining the Mark 11 bloodline, the legendary pilot's watch's offspring are handsome watches with serious credibility and historical worth yet to be earned by the century-plus-younger Bell & Ross. The Mark XVI (ref. IW325501; £2,700) updates the recipe by sporting a 39 mm case, but it still exhibits the Mark 11's *raison d'être*: protection against magnetic fields via a soft-iron inner case. The rest of the spec is utterly appropriate for this company: stainless-steel case, a date display at the 3 o'clock position (date read-out being one of the departures from the Mark 11 that irritates the anoraks), hacking sweep-seconds hand, screw-in crown, sapphire glass that's antireflective on both sides and secured against displacement by drops in air pressure, plus that unmistakable pilot-watch demeanour. Unlike the Air-King or the 123, this beauty should only be worn on a strap; a bracelet just doesn't suit it. Trust me on that one. And if you find it simply too staid, too discreet, there's always the more stylised Spitfire equivalent. Any IWC 'Mark' model deserves respect - even from niggling purists.



Modern Classics: Rolex Air-King



Rarely are the words "bargain" and "Rolex" used in the same sentence. Even then, it's probably another scammer selling yet another fake. But Rolex's entry-level model is, without question, the biggest bargain in the world of serious watches. Even though the brand is the most divisive as far as collectors are concerned - you either love them or you deplore them - only a fool would challenge the company's and the watches' undeniable merits. A Rolex for Everyman? **Ken Kessler** thinks he has found one.

Suffice it to say, Rolex's Air-King has been, for over half a century, horology's 'Best Buy' - ever since the immediate post-war years, when Rolex's Oyster models segued to the modern case from the so-called 'Bubblebacks' that made Rolex's name during the 1930s as the world's most rugged timekeepers. Its name suggests that Rolex was targeting pilots; not unrealistic at the same time that Breitling was producing its Navitimer for similar clients. Commercial air travel was booming and the war had created a surfeit of genuine pilots. Modestly, the Air-King promised only superior timekeeping rather than a host of other functions. It was a classic in the making.

Although various authorities contradict each other about timekeepers officially issued to RAF pilots during WWII, it seems that Rolexes had a following amongst pilots from before the war. Back then, pilots tended to come from the upper classes. Thus, it has been suggested that many pilots wore their own superior watches rather than military issue. And it's likely that some of those well-heeled Brits owned Rolexes. This bond between Rolex and professional pilots, it should be remembered, also led to the development of the dual-time-zone GMT.

Over the decades, both manual and automatic models were available, always using Rolex's current base movement, from the

calibre 15s of the 1950-70s, to the present calibre 31 series started in 1990. Some had date functions and, although now only offered in steel, models were available over the years in steel and gold, or all gold, with myriad dial combinations, including the rare cross-hatch pattern. In line with other Oysters, the Air-King appeared in cases in the 32-34 mm range, the latter being the (now relatively diminutive) diameter of the current version.

Although the Air-King is the least expensive automatic Oyster, it has the same basic heart as any Rolex, the same case integrity, the same operational qualities. It is the Rolex for the man (or woman) who cares not at all about flash or bling, and - aside from Rolex tarting-up the dial with outlined numbers and indexes - it is the most discreet model in the catalogue. Well, not always: I recall a few years ago when *the* version to own in Hong Kong bore a metallic pink dial.

And as my other Rolex is a vintage Explorer, I get a kick out of this bit of trivia: at various points in its evolution - and this should 'wind up' a few self-appointed Rolex mavens - certain Air-Kings were virtually indistinguishable from the highly desirable Explorer. The main difference? Just the dial. Bottom line? At £1,860, there's absolutely nothing on the planet to touch it. **o**

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