

The new Defy Xtreme Open chronograph (£12,995) - like all the 'Xtreme' Defy models, distinguished from the more conventional 'Classic' range by its sinister black titanium case, crown protection device and water resistance to 1,000 m. Also showing in stark relief here is the 'Xtreme' interpretation of Zenith's 'Open' window to the El Primero movement - inspired by a jet turbine fan.

More Than Alpha

Zenith's extreme measures are paying dividends, not least with Defy - the latest collection to get the Thierry Nataf treatment

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(Left) At the helm: Zenith's flamboyant CEO Thierry Nataf, whose personality is firmly stamped all over the LVMH brand's recent output.

(Below) The zenith of Zenith's Defy collection: the Xtreme Tourbillon chronograph (£75,000). Unlike the other Xtreme 'turbine' subdials, the tourbillon bridge here emulates a 'helicoïdal' propeller. Unusually, and presumably in the interests of aesthetic impact, Zenith has opted to drop its brand logo from the dial of the tourbillon.

The question that Defy Xtreme asks is whether you can carry it off? And no, mere possession of a 911 is not enough.



(Left) At the less 'Xtreme' end of Zenith's Defy range is 'Classic', in steel rather than titanium, without the crown protector, turbine dial motifs or carbon-fibre dial, and 'only' water resistant to 300 m. This Open chronograph (£6,495) still retains the same butch profile and the bezel with decorative screw-heads, not to mention the chunky proportions (a whopping 46.5 mm diameter).

(Below) Defy Classic Chrono Aero (£4,595), whose use of colour "maximises in-flight readability".

Zenith's evolution over the past decades is quite probably the most extreme of any of the major watch houses - quite an accolade in an industry that has been shunted around by technological, social, economic and just about any other sort of change that you care to mention. And there is stiff competition as well, as famous names have expired and been reborn, been sold and bought again. From the 1969 highpoint that saw the launch of the El Primero chronograph to the quartz disaster that followed soon after, with ownership passing in and out of the hands of the US Zenith Radio Corporation during the 1970s - the house's symbol has been less of a star than a meteor.

Guiding the star

By the mid-1990s, Zenith had regained a limited equilibrium, thanks, in large part, to its supplying Rolex with movements based on the El Primero. At the point that Zenith was acquired by LVMH in 1999, Zenith was well respected by collectors and watchmakers but equally the brand was hardly setting the tills alight either. The watches were soberly classic in style, well made but increasingly lost on younger generations (my 1995 El Primero is still my most 'grown-up' watch).

And now look! Zenith is an aggressively competitive, ultra-chic template for what it means to be a 21st-century luxury company. The revolution over the past seven years has been total and even if the recent launch of the Defy collections might indicate that the revolution is complete, don't assume the revolution is over.

Two hours with Thierry Nataf - Zenith's 'great helmsman' - is more than enough to be assured that the revolution continues. A voluble pocket of energy, Nataf fronts Zenith in the fullest sense of the word. He takes responsibility for the changes at Zenith utterly and presents his collections personally as if every single facet, every choice of hue, every technical decision or innovation bears his imprint. Now, it has to be said that this approach can be a little disconcerting, even absurd, until the realisation dawns (and this may just be me falling for the line) that there is an element of truth here. If Nataf is not actually milling-out prototype components for the inclined tourbillon cage or sifting through satin or shagreen swatches, then his personality does inflect almost everything that emerges under the Zenith name - to the extent that you almost expect to find the staff exhibiting signs of cult indoctrination (disappointingly they don't).

And if all this seems a little incredible and possibly irrelevant, a sift through Zenith's press



