

Technical Specs

Model: Ref. 2200-1130-64B
Movement: Calibre 1151, automatic
Power reserve: 100 hours
Water resistance: 300 m
Jewels: 28
Price: Rubber strap, £3,810; steel bracelet, £4,370

**Rolex Sea-Dweller 4000**

Mention Rolex diving watches and most people assume you're talking about the granddaddy of them all (and the Fifty Fathoms' contemporary), the Submariner. Originally, it was secure to depths of 180 m, its capability increasing regularly. In 1967, at the behest of the French diving concern COMEX (Compagnie Maritime d'Expertise), Rolex upped the ante with an even more robust model for saturation diving. The first Sea-Dweller, with its chunkier case and helium escape valve, was good for 610 m depth. Sea-Dweller model numbers provided the depth in feet, though - i.e. Sea-Dweller 2000. In its latest form, the ref. 16600 is guaranteed waterproof to 4000 ft/1220 m. From across a room, it would take an eagle-eyed Rolex spotter to detect a Sea-Dweller from a Sub, but once its presence has been determined, the respect increases commensurately. This is just about as good as it gets. And another thing: it's actually a genuine bargain - £2,700.

Eterna KonTiki Diver

Eterna *could* have reissued an exact replica of the watch named after Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl's prehistoric raft, used for crossing the Pacific in 1947. And we'd have loved it. Instead, Eterna realised that the 'KonTiki' deserved to evolve. The resultant watch is so radical that, when the prototype appeared at Baselworld 2005 as a concept, most observers expected it to stay that way. But to every sporting aficionado's delight, the KonTiki Diver is going into production. It features a case designed to "separate watch movement protection and wrist attachment completely from each other." The diver folds the watch housing out of the case before he begins the dive after unlocking it by pressing two spring-loaded buttons. Then he sets his diving time on the dual-direction bezel; easily read from the inside flange. By locking the case into the frame, the bezel is secured against possible unintentional rotation. Simple, ingenious and watertight to 1000 m. Automatic movement, high legibility, robust case - this is undoubtedly one of the coolest watches of the year. Another bargain at £2,750.



Modern Classics: Blancpain Fifty Fathoms



Among the many themes that captivated the watch industry in the years after WWII - alarm watches, automatic movements, early electrics - the quest for serious diving watches increased with unexpected intensity. Despite a specialised function, the complementary roles of professional and sport appealed to numerous manufacturers, so the 1950s in particular emerged as *the* growth decade for diving watches, benefiting from wartime research. History shows us that Rolex 'won' the battle of the diving watches (see sidebar), but Omega, Panerai, Benrus, Heuer and plenty of others offered serious alternatives. Among the most coveted was Blancpain's Fifty Fathoms, which - because of its professional origins - remained unknown to all but the most serious collectors until its 50th anniversary in 2003.

Ken Kessler

Launched the same year as the Submariner, the Fifty Fathoms was never even considered a commercial proposition. In 1952, two French naval officers, Commander Robert 'Bob' Maloubier and Lieutenant Claude Riffaud, were instructed by the Ministry of Defense and the French Navy to set up an elite unit, 'Les Nageurs de Combat'. The pair approached Blancpain-Rayville SA, who came up with a design with large, luminous numerals, rotating bezel and a steel screw-case waterproof to 50 fathoms, or 91 metres. This was regarded as a safety point for divers at the time, equivalent to the maximum depth for a diver equipped with oxygen and nitrogen cylinders.

Over the years, this oversized automatic featured LIP or A Schild movements and - following in the tradition of Panerai from the decade before - was in numerous series of small production runs, as demand required. Between the launch year of 1953 and the 1980s, the Fifty Fathoms also appeared with dials bearing 'LIP' (in France) and 'Tornek-Rayville' (for US Navy models).

During its lifetime, the Fifty Fathoms found favour with special forces that, according to Blancpain, used the watch "on countless secret missions on behalf of their respective countries, including France, the United States, Israel and Germany." The watches were also supplied to Polish, Czech, German and other services,

including special models for the US Navy SEAL underwater demolition teams. (Again, a spiritual link to Panerai.) With admirable rapidity, the watch also found a following among scientific civilian divers, as well as oceanographers and marine researchers, including the crew that filmed the underwater sequences of *The Silent World*. Co-directed by Louis Malle and no less than Jacques Cousteau, the film won the 1956 Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Now that's what I call product placement.

For the 50th anniversary model, Blancpain released a near facsimile of the original 1953 design. What changed for this now-collectible re-edition was an increase in water resistance to 300 m, while its new automatic movement with twin barrels had an increased power reserve of 100 hours. Blancpain was clearly testing the water (sorry about that) with the reissue. It was manufactured in only three short series of 50 watches each, selling-out quickly. But all was not lost for those too slow to act: Blancpain wisely revised the Fifty Fathoms in an unlimited form, the black bezel was replaced with a sculpted metal bezel. Like Breguet's sublime Type XX and the base-model Panerai's, the Fifty Fathoms is one of those all-but-forgotten military watches that some passionate soul decided was worth reviving. This faith in the watch's greatness was rewarded: today, the Fifty Fathoms is one of the most handsome diving watches on the market. ◉

Further information: Blancpain UK, Tel: 023 80646 841, www.blancpain.ch