

Back in the Groove

Ebel gets down to business... and gets down in Rio

James Gurney



Ebel's energetic new Brasilia collection marks the latest stage in a lightning turnaround that has seen the previously beleaguered brand suddenly thriving under new ownership. It is obvious that the Movado Group was wise to appoint Thomas van der Kallen to the helm. The young President has steered Ebel back to its core values and injected remarkable verve into the marque - a verve that, as van der Kallen exclusively reveals to *QP*, should engage with a new, more youthful generation. And with Gisele now on board alongside Claudia, it seems the carnival starts here...

That Ebel has had an unfortunate history over the last decade is unquestionable. The changes in ownership, management, strategy and identity have left the current and (we hope) future President Thomas van der Kallen with a seriously challenging job. However, as van der Kallen makes crystal clear to *QP*, there are elements to the challenge of revitalising Ebel that make it both attractive and very likely to turn out well. First and foremost is the incredible durability of the Ebel brand, particularly in key markets including the UK. Interestingly, the various directions in which Ebel has been cast in the recent past seem to have had

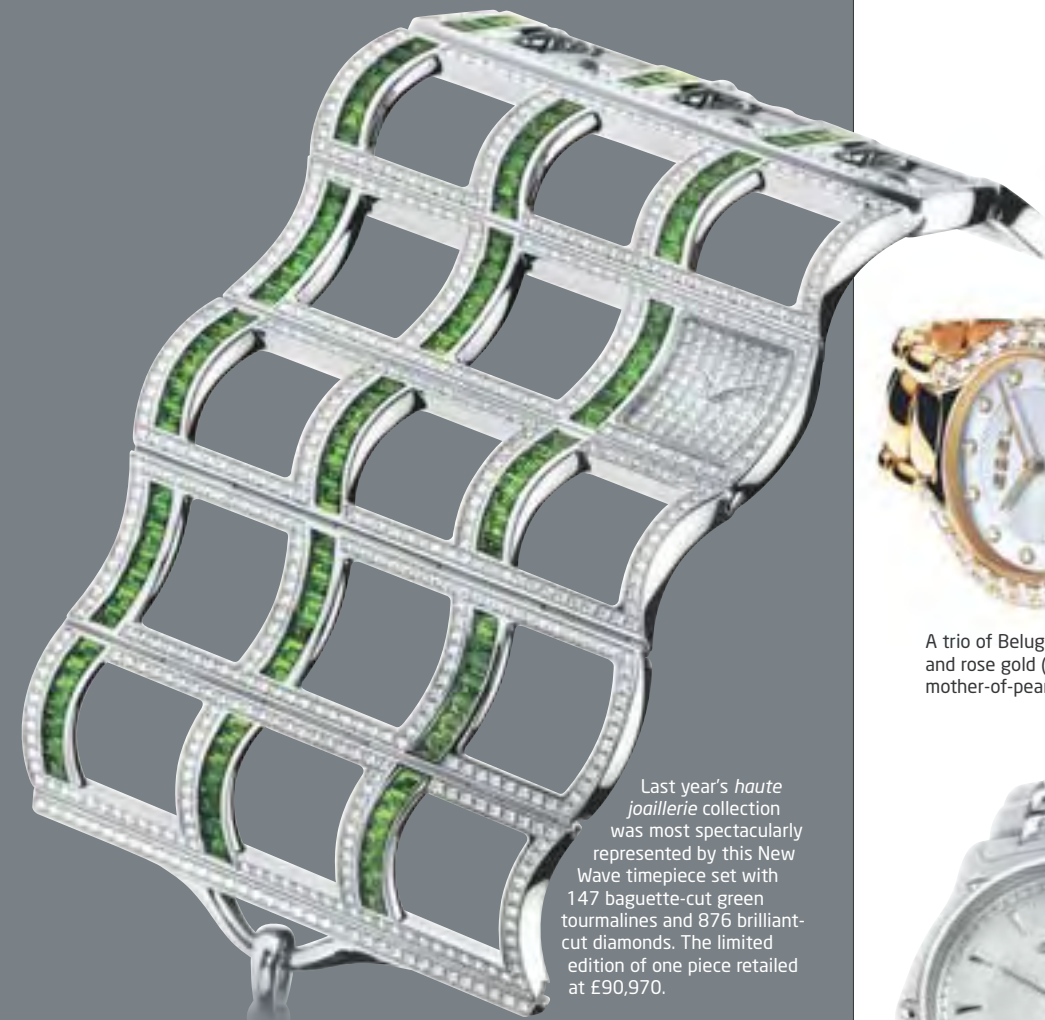
little negative impact on the brand; rather, Ebel merely slipped off the radar as different identities were grafted on, which were simply lost on the core audience (of which more later).

Also crucial to the viability of van der Kallen's mission, which is how the task comes across in conversation, is the belief in the underlying strength of Ebel held by Efraim Grinberg, whose Movado Group acquired Ebel from LVMH in 2003. Grinberg, it appears, had been following Ebel's fortunes for some years having made an attempt to acquire the brand from Investcorp, the brand's



Ebel's biggest launch at Baselworld 2006 will be its 20-model 'Brasilia' collection. Brasilia Gents pictured, with a brushed and polished stainless steel case, galvanic black dial and automatic movement (£1,595).

Brasilia Lady (£2,895) in polished steel set with 34 brilliant-cut diamonds. Its ultra-luminous white mother-of-pearl guilloché dial is also set with 10 diamonds. The "youthful, spontaneous" Brasilia woman that Ebel has designed for is conveniently personified by the marque's new model, Brazilian-born Gisele Bündchen.



Last year's *haute joaillerie* collection was most spectacularly represented by this New Wave timepiece set with 147 baguette-cut green tourmalines and 876 brilliant-cut diamonds. The limited edition of one piece retailed at £90,970.



A trio of Beluga Round Lady watches in yellow (£9,675), white (£10,450) and rose gold (£10,450), set with brilliant-cut diamonds and boasting a mother-of-pearl guilloché dial.



(Above) A duo of 1911 models (gent's watch, £1,695; chronograph, £2,650), named after the year that husband and wife Eugène Blum and Alice Lévy founded Ebel - an acronym of their initials. The blue-dial chronograph is driven by Ebel's proprietary calibre 137 automatic movement.

(Below) Ebel's Classic Lady in steel and gold (£3,050), set with 42 brilliant-cut diamonds on the bezel. Its mother-of-pearl guilloché dial gleams with 12 diamonds hour markers. The Ebel Classic was probably the most important product introduced last year as it meant a rediscovery of the well-loved 'Sport Classic' model introduced back in 1977.



previous owner. When the opportunity finally arose to bring Ebel into the Movado Group, Grinberg already had a firm strategy in mind: simply stated, he wanted to make the house "Ebel" again. Unsurprisingly, this is the strategy outlined by van der Kallen as we speak about his plans for the future.

Core values

Of course, aiming for brand integrity and rekindling the positive brand image that Ebel benefited from in the past is all very well and no more than anyone would expect to hear. I was just waiting for that dreaded phrase "brand DNA" to be uttered; that the DNA had been identified and would be applied to everything the brand would henceforth do - words that unfortunately bring images to mind of white-coated scientists doing unpalatable things to watchmakers. Cliché apart though, van der Kallen demonstrated exactly what he means and how Ebel's genetic inheritance can be expressed to great effect.

The Classic, originally launched in 1977 (AKA 'Classic Wave') is at the centre of perceptions about Ebel. Its latest incarnation is a studied return to the original. Its less detailed, simpler design allows the basics of shape and texture to come to prominence in a way that is very 'Ebel'. While producing a neat and appropriate watch for Ebel's core range, it also tidily encapsulates van der Kallen's strategy for Ebel: remove the excess and concentrate on the core.

This doesn't mean there are no surprises in store at Ebel, though. One of the first manifestations of change was the signing of Claudia Schiffer as star of the company's advertising campaigns. Combined with the new designs for the basic collections, Ebel's stock immediately rose; not immediately in terms of sales, but in a far more surprising and interesting measure. Not long after the new campaign rolled-out, Ebel's service department apparently reported a huge rise in servicing and battery-change requests for 10-year-old-plus watches.

In other words, the new Ebel had somehow restored the confidence of existing owners to dig their Ebels out of the drawer and wear them again. Van der Kallen sees this as a vindication of the strategy he wants to adopt in terms of keeping and developing Ebel as a status brand. It isn't news to say that Ebel has Cartier in its sights (although both Cartier and the market as a whole have changed since that sort of claim was made with any confidence), nevertheless, in terms of volume and quality, Ebel certainly has the wherewithal to match its ambitions. For example, the quality of the Classic's bracelet is immediately apparent to the touch. As Ebel already has a strong reputation as a maker of *haute joaillerie* pieces such as the Gems of the Ocean collection, we can expect a steady population of the space between Gems of the Ocean and the Classic watches. This intent also fits with van der Kallen's vision of Ebel as an aspirational brand, which relies on reputation as much as direct communication.



Formerly of Piaget and Baume & Mercier in the States, Thomas van der Kallen joined Ebel in January last year as President. His employer, the Movado Group Inc. also designs, manufactures and distributes Movado, Concord, ESQ, Coach and Tommy Hilfiger watches.



(Left) Launched last year to much acclaim, the Ebellissimo in 18 ct rose gold (£11,200). Its new COSC-certified calibre 139 automatic movement marked the 10th anniversary of Ebel's other proprietary chrono' movement, the calibre 137. (Right) The Villa Tourbillon (Sfr.175,000) vanquishes any doubt concerning Ebel's high-end watchmaking status. Named after Ebel's Le Corbusier-designed 'Villa Turque' HQ in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and coloured in a similar orange.

Spice to the mix

The second major surprise at Villa Turque is that van der Kallen is keen to build on the steady reputation Ebel has for classic men's mechanical watches. Historically on a par with companies such as Longines, it appears that the bar is being raised. Van der Kallen says that male buyers need to be offered slightly more "stand-alone" watches, where the brand element is more a matter of trust than desire. Either way the Ebellissimo collection, based on the calibre 137 and new 139 movements, are clever and attractive in their own right, regardless of what they say about the brand. Using apertures for the chronographs instead of hands is not unique, but is radical for Ebel and works surprisingly well in the understated designs offered. This year also promises a perpetual calendar chronograph - an almost unique proposition on the market.

So much for the initial strategy, but Ebel has earmarked 2006 for the next stage in its development, "beyond the roots," in van der Kallen's words. This will mean adding a little spice to the mix, as Ebel seeks to engage a younger generation that have no,

or little feeling for the brand. As he acknowledges, a much tougher prospect, as the market is so much more developed and competitive. However, this intention is fairly clear from Ebel's recent decision to use Gisele Bündchen alongside Claudia Schiffer as the face of its new campaign. And the styling of the images suggest that Ebel is sticking close to their core identity.

And the watches to take Ebel into the fray? The Brasilia collection, doing exactly what van der Kallen promises in terms of identity and style. Strong emphasis on shape, quality and feel are the qualities that Ebel hopes will separate Brasilia from the herd. Paradoxically, these qualities are easier to see in the men's collections, but are strong throughout the range, particularly in terms of their touch and feel.

Overall, it's hard not to admire the delicate balance of Ebel's approach. Too much emphasis on designer indulgence and you end up with the Tarawa again; too brand orientated and you end up with a soulless non-entity. And at the scale and market sector Ebel is concerned with, there is no room for error. ●