

Vertical Limit



Where is left for Bell & Ross to boldly go?

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Originally born out of an alliance between specialist watch designers and a manufacturer of aeronautic cockpit controls, Bell & Ross' zero-pretension, no-frills approach has gained the company something of a cult following. *QP* explores the company's latest wristborn adventures, and is afforded a sneak preview of this year's BR01 Instrument, which Bell & Ross hope will be a tipping point for their reputation.

The BR01 Instrument can be transformed into an office watch, pendant watch or a fixed instrument panel clock; not only inspired by 1950s cockpit design, but applicable to such an environment too.



(Facing page) Bell & Ross' striking new launch for 2005, the BR01 Instrument. This chronograph variant, the BR01-94 is so named for its ETA 2894 movement. Time-only (BR01-92), grande date (BR01-96) and power reserve (BR01-97) variants also available.

(Above) The construction of the time-only BR01-92 Instrument, illustrating the clip fastening system, which allows removal of the strap and attachment of the watch as panel clock.

"The essentials never leave room for the superfluous." Never has Bell & Ross' motto been so inherent within one watch as its new BR01 Instrument, due to launch at Basel this April. The 12-year-old brand's engineers have designed four variants of one startlingly stark base model – a square-cased military watch, not only inspired by 1950s cockpit design, but applicable to such an environment too: remove the strap and fit the watch to your instrument panel as a clock.

For such a radical departure from the brand's standard fare, it may come as a surprise to learn that the BR01 Instrument harks back to its origins faithfully and with more than a touch of sentimentality. Bell & Ross owes its name to the founders of the brand, French duo Bruno Belamich and Carlo Rosillo. Heading up a team of watchmakers, the respective Design Manager and now-CEO began their venture in 1992



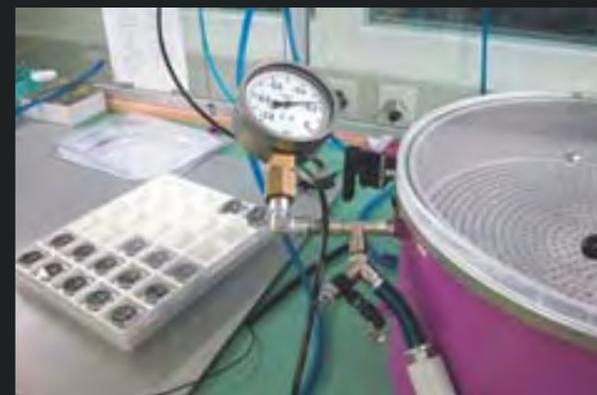
by collaborating with German instrument panel manufacturer Sinn to design clocks for the aeronautic and space industries. Their rugged nature and uncluttered aesthetic found a warm reception among professionals in extreme, time-dependent conditions. Two years later, Bell & Ross decided there was room to turn this into a watch business.

Bell & Ross had to ensure that utility informed design from the start, expressing technical precision through clean lines and elegance. And not for fashion's sake. The anti- and non-magnetic nature of the Démineur model, for example, means that there is one less thing for the French Civil Defence to worry about whilst fiddling with ultra-sensitive bomb wiring. The recent travelling 'Sky Land Sea' exhibition hammered home the brand's commitment to such professionals, displaying a range of timepieces whose 'form follows function' – the tried-and-trusted Bauhaus philosophy, clichéd for all the right reasons.

Gadgetry not gimmickry

Two years after its foundation, Bell & Ross reissued the first automatic chronograph ever to be worn in space – Sinn's Space 1, originally worn by the German astronaut Professor Reinhard Furrer during the Spacelab D1 mission in 1985. This marked the company's continuing production of exceptional watches that appeal as much to the general public as to those treating them as tools of their trade.

Soon enough, Sinn became surplus to requirements and Bell & Ross started to develop and assemble its own watches at its new production unit in La Chaux-de-Fonds, opened in 1996 (despite the official collaborative agreement with Sinn ending as recently as 2002). Every part is tested for resistance to water, pressure, ultra-violet radiation, humidity, substantial temperature variation, shock, chemical aggression and magnetic fields. Indeed, testing to the absolute physical limit is



(Above) Rigorous testing of the Hydromax model (£1,680), water-resistant to a record-breaking 11,100m.

(Left) Space 3 came back down to Earth last year, onto the F1 track. The Grand Prix special edition (from €2,060) was acknowledged for its readability, precision and performance and named official watch of the Belgian F1 last year, eliciting a limited series of 100 pieces sporting a tiny map of the infamous Spa-Francorchamps circuit.

Bell & Ross stretched the limits of water-resistance to 11,100 metres, beating the existing record hands-down.

what Bell & Ross excels at. By 1997, Bell & Ross had secured its name in the Guinness Book of World Records for inventing the Hydro-principle. By introducing liquid silicone into the watchcase of the Hydro Challenger, Bell & Ross succeeded in stretching the limits of water-resistance to 11,100 metres, easily beating the existing record.

The Hydromax model, released five years later, is still rated to 11,100 metres but now uses a higher performance liquid – a transparent fluorescent oil called Hydroil. The Hydromax is also fitted with a steel and rubber casing that flexes to compensate for the liquid's temperature-dependent volume deviations.

Just as unique is Bell & Ross' chunky 'T-Crown System' – as much an aesthetic trademark as the brand's businesslike monotone. It is a screw-down system that allows the crown to be integrated into the thickness of the case, protecting the watch from unintentional handling and shocks. It is composed of a watertight screw-down crown, attached to a toothed cylinder, which serves as a telescopic extension. Once retracted, the T-Crown self-locks as a result of a spring-loaded ball system inside the watchcase. Glove-friendly paddles replace traditional button pushers, completing the sleek functionality.

The new BR01 Instrument furthers Bell & Ross' avant-garde innovation and practicality. It is constructed with a removable clip-fastening system, allowing the wristwatch to be transformed into an office watch, pendant watch or a fixed instrument panel clock. The four attachment screws at each corner of the square case follow the clamping system used for panel gauges in aeroplane cockpits.

Military service

While the BR01 might catch the eye, the reputation and near cult following of Bell & Ross is mostly down to the simplicity and appeal of the Vintage and Classic collections – nostalgic tributes to the military; the first professionals to use the wristwatch as a tool *per se*. Either way, Bell & Ross' tactic of deconstructing classic functions to produce modern designs is paying off. With professional endorsements to rival Breitling, the watchword here is clearly 'authenticity' – all-important to that aspirational (and affluent) action man. ◉

Further information: www.bellross.com



The 10th Anniversary edition of Bell & Ross' Pilot chronograph (£2,200), limited to 500 pieces. The ultra-curved sapphire crystal required over a year of study and trials.