



Beautiful Freak



QP unveils the unique partnership behind Ikepod's cutting-edge designs

Josh Sims

It was a bold idea, verging on a high-stakes gamble: to launch a new watch brand based on rubber straps, coloured dials and outsize cases; one pitched at the premium market, far beyond competition with Swatch. It was to be a Swiss company, with design by an Australian, making high-spec watches in indulgent forms. And it has paid off; Ikepod turned 10 last year. The few remaining cynics were silenced, when it recently acquired a new majority shareholder in the shape of the Geneva-based investment group Perficio, ensuring that Ikepod will be around for a while yet.

Two new versions of the Hemipode Chronograph line, with (from left) rose-gold and yellow-gold cases, and smooth brown crocodile side and cream iguana lizard skin bracelets, respectively (£11,000).

Like Roger Tallon at the offbeat French watchmaker LIP before him, some must have thought Oliver Ike, Ikepod's founder, completely cuckoo. The Swiss entrepreneur and furniture company owner wanted to create a highly functional watch, whilst moving beyond pure functionality. As this deep thinker put it, in rather airy terms, he was to pursue a "philosophy of acknowledging that technology constitutes a fundamental value, while nonetheless seeking to endow it with a human dimension." Or, in other words, Ikepod watches are highly technical, they look it, and this is no bad thing because they manage it in a way that is atypically warm and attractive.

"It's the design aspect that makes Ikepod watches so different to anything else on the market among high-end mechanical watches, and to be honest it's a style you either really like or really don't," explains Jaz Minhas, Ikepod's UK MD. "Established brand names sell a lot on their name, not on the look of the watch, but many of

our customers, even collectors, have never heard of Ikepod when they buy one. People come up to me all the time to ask what watch I'm wearing (invariably a rose-gold Hemipode), which you don't get with many other watches. It bucks trends as to what a top-end watch should look like."

Enter the designer

This is largely down to the efforts of Marc Newson, the Australian, Paris-based product maestro; designer of chairs, lighting, glassware, restaurants and bicycles, and now rightly considered a design superstar on a par with the likes of Philippe Starck. He is also a surf nut (his breakthrough design, the knockout all-aluminium Lockheed Lounge lounge, was inspired by the shape of a surfboard) and – unsurprisingly – a watch fan.

Ike had already distributed some of Newson's products and knew that he was keen to design watches. Newson had always been intrigued by the idea of such small objects being so technically complex and had already designed one watch, the Pod, in 1986, not long out of Sydney



The Hemipode Grande Date, with typically distinctive bracelet. (£3,900)

College of Arts. Newson and Ike formed a business partnership, with Pod – Newson's own company producing designer objects in limited series – providing half of the company's name. Put on an extremely steep learning curve, he had to physically assemble 100 watches himself; a job he bluntly describes as "a nightmare".

Newson proved the perfect man for the job. He led what now seems to be an emerging trend for product designers entering the watch world, with Starck designing his own collection as well as a line for Fossil, and Ross Lovegrove becoming creative director of TAG Heuer. "Product designers don't work under the constraints of watch designers, but have more freedom to introduce influences from other sources," says Minhas. "There's a growing recognition of the need to move away from traditional designs and shapes."



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Natural inspiration

Ikepod's first watch, the Sealug, was shown in Paris in 1993. It was the initial expression of Ikepod's mechanical watches' distinct tactility, through curvy shapes and a unique blend of materials. It was also the first of Ikepod's watches to be carefully named after exotic, often bizarre fauna that capture Newson's imagination; among them the soft, rectangular Manatee model and the rounded square of the Platypus – Ikepod's only women's model to date. This was a deliberate decision, giving each watch a suggestion of the rare and slightly alien. Look closely, and you'll see that the crown of each model carries an image of the eponymous animal.

The Sealug was also a statement of intent for Newson's style: no lack of complex movement, with the Ikepod collection now featuring dual time zone, weekplanner/moonphase, Grande Date and 24-time-zone models, but cased in a distinctive blend of the retro and the futuristic: retro because

Newson's products can look decidedly 1960s' space age; futuristic because the technology involved in producing them is cutting-edge.

"Ikepod are for someone looking for something different and the focus is very much on the watches," adds Stephan Hufschmid, marketing director at Ikepod's Swiss operation, who compares Ikepod with Panerai and Franck Muller. "That also means we have to be careful. We're a young company and the watch industry belongs to history. We can't get too radical. It's about finding that space between 'design' and 'traditional'."

Like all other Pod products, Ikepod watches are also limited editions. Well, to an extent: editions run from 29 for the platinum automatic flying tourbillon, launching at the Basel watch fair in 2004, up to a not-so-limited 9,999 for steel pieces, with prices running the gamut from £1,800 to £85,000.

The Platypus, named after the bizarre aquatic mammal from Australia and Tasmania, is Ikepod's first women's watch, and the first with a rectangular case – in this case, made of rose gold (£8,500).

Epiphany

In 1994, a chance meeting between Newson and an American architect, Benjamin De Haan proved a turning point. De Haan introduced Newson to experimental computer-aided design (CAD) software that could take prototype designs direct from screen to production. The rubber strap for Ikepod's Hemipode watch, launched in 1996 and arguably Ikepod's signature model, was the first product developed with the new system.

It is attached to the watch at such a precise angle that it balances perfectly on the wrist.

"It is the kind of detail nobody would ever notice, but the computer calculated the exact curve I needed," Newson has said. "By this time the watch company was doing better; i.e., it wasn't half-way bankrupt, and I could afford to be more ambitious. For me the Hemipode is the logical progression from the Seaslug, and I've worn the prototype as my own watch for years."

Logical progression

Indeed, close financial calls over the years have led the Bassecourt, Switzerland-based company to reflect that it is perhaps too outré for a broad customer base beyond the design and fashion communities with which the Ikepod has been a huge success. The company will continue to grow, especially now it has Perficio's money muscle. On the cards this year are the launch of a new model, new ranges for discussion and the opening of further Ikepod boutiques in major capitals. The first boutique, opened in Tokyo last September and, somewhat expectedly, has been a big hit with the Japanese. Dedicated boutiques may be the way ahead for Ikepod; it already has a policy of selling through the less obvious outlets, including such fashion stores as Colette in Paris and London's Richard James. But, in the meantime, a slightly less moderne manner has been adopted: Hemipodes are now available on crocodile or lizard skin straps with a deployment fastening.

The Ikepod Seaslug has a bracelet wholly reminiscent of the eponymous mollusc, which ripples along the bed of tropical seas (£345).



Ikepod's watches are appropriately named after exotic and bizarre sea fauna, the crown carrying an image of the eponymous animal.



"The watch sector is still a traditional market, and a lot of traditional watch retailers still think Ikepods are too way ahead for what most people want to wear," says Minhas. "They're not sure it's worth taking the risk for. Certainly the rubber strap on a gold piece, for instance, has left some of them wondering what's going on. But we're proud that even now there's nothing else out there quite like it." ◯

The Hemipode Weekplanner (£4,150). The Hemipode line is named after a small-sized bird, resembling a chubby quail – the image of which is found on the crown.

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