

# Legends of the Deep

QP traces the history of an underwater treasure, and helps you to keep your head above water collecting the Submariner

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The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most recognisable watch designs yet produced falls this year. Despite the years, Rolex's Submariner is one of the most sought-after watches on the market – just ask anyone on the waiting list. This is no mean feat for a product that spans half a century. So how has the Sub (as it is known to those afflicted with the collecting bug) so out-performed its rivals for the affections of watch collectors and established itself as the premiere diver's watch?





## Rolex were the first company to introduce waterproofing with the release of the Oyster at the end of 1926.

The foundations were laid with the development of the Oyster – aptly named for its water resistance – which was unleashed on the world in 1926. Using metal seals, Rolex were able to “screw” together all the parts of the case, making it virtually impregnable to dust and water. “Screw-back” and “screw-down” are both terms that originate from these early Oysters. The launch of the Oyster coincided, in typical Rolex fashion, with the front-page coverage given by the *Daily Mail* to the record-breaking channel swim by Mercedes Gleitze who, un-coincidentally, wore a Rolex Oyster.

### Early years

The current Submariner is the end result of continual research and development by Rolex, and it is

the vast number of changes made and editions released along the way that have captured the collector’s interest. The first Sub, launched in 1953 (reference 6202), quickly caught the public’s imagination. The first watch produced in collaboration with professional divers, it boasted a rotating bezel that allowed divers to accurately time their dives, and all the features of the classic diver’s watch – namely the luminous dial and hands offering clear legibility under water – were present and correct in this very first attempt. It was even waterproof to a depth of 100 metres.

Between 1953 and 1959, the Sub underwent continuous changes. Importantly, Rolex seized the opportunity to further develop the screw-



The first Submariner, from 1953, was the starting point for 50 years of evolution... so far!



In 1969, Rolex introduced the Submariner Date, the first Sub to appear in gold.



The Rolesor was the result of Rolex’s experiment with a bimetallic finish in the 1980s, and became an instant classic.



The 2003 Submariner continues the legacy of ultradesirable Rolex diver’s watches.

down crown, introducing the larger “Triplock” in 1954 on the chunkier reference 6200. This model featured an “Explorer 3, 6, 9” dial, and became the granddaddy of modern Subs.

From 1955, the 6200 developed into the reference 6538 and was rated waterproof to 200 metres. Fleming’s British secret service naturally recognised the qualities of this diver’s watch, making it 007’s standard issue.

Eventually, in 1958, the 6538 was replaced by the reference 5510, which was fitted with the new calibre 1530 movement. References 6200 and 5510 are now two of the rarest models, and are eagerly sought after by Subaholics worldwide.

The smaller-crown Subs were made alongside these large-crown models. Featuring a slimmer case, they were waterproofed to 100 metres – the most popular model being the reference 6536 (or more rarely the chronometer version, reference 6536/1). The last of these models was the reference 5508, which was phased out in the early 1960s. All these early versions had beautiful, lacquered dials, although over the years many have been replaced with matt dials.

In 1960, Rolex developed a special deep-sea Oyster. This was attached to the outside of the Trieste bathyscaph used by Jacques Piccard to descend into the famous Marianas Trench to a depth of 10,916 metres. The Oyster withstood pressures of up to 1 tonne/cm<sup>2</sup>. Once again, Rolex’s ability to market, as well as make, proved pivotal – only NASA’s adoption of the Omega Speedmaster as the official Moon watch has created more resonance in the world at large.

### Definitive version

In 1959, the reference 5512 was launched, bringing with it the most radical changes yet and transforming the Sub into the most revered diver’s watch in the world. The case was increased from 37 mm to 40 mm in diameter and, for the first time, featured crown guards. The movement was chronometer-rated and, like its Triplock predecessors, was waterproof to 200 metres.

In 1962, a less expensive, non-chronometer version – the reference 5513 – was launched. These early 5512/5513 models retained the lacquered dials of the shoulderless models, which Rolex sadly stopped making in the mid-60s in favour of the more professional-looking matt dials. A strange variation, developed for the British market, was the explorer-dialled reference 5513. Today these are extremely desirable, and have a price to match!

These technical advances did not go unnoticed in the world of the professional diver. The diving company Comex required watches that their divers could use in the most extreme conditions, exploring the North Sea for oil. Rolex leapt at the chance to co-opt such a well of expertise, with the result that the next generation of Subs set an entirely new standard for diving watches.

A gas-escape valve was developed to prevent the watch crystal from exploding when ascending after a prolonged period in a high-pressure oxygen/helium environment. Initially, watches with this innovation were produced for Comex under reference number 5513 (and later as the reference 5514

Today, the Submariner is equally at home strapped over a wetsuit or under a Prada shirt cuff.



Comex-only model). Then, in 1967, Rolex gave the world the Sea-Dweller (reference 1665) – the first “civilian” watch to be fitted with a gas-escape valve. The Sea-Dweller was notably unique in offering a date facility.

It was not only Comex who exploited the qualities of these new Subs; the Royal Navy used modified versions of the 5513 fitted with fixed bars (rather than the more usual sprung bars) to take the fabric straps favoured by the military, as well as unique hands and bezels. Later, a Royal Marines-only consignment was given a unique reference number of 5517. These military and Comex models are very sought-after, but are also unfortunately the most faked, so beware if you are thinking of buying one.

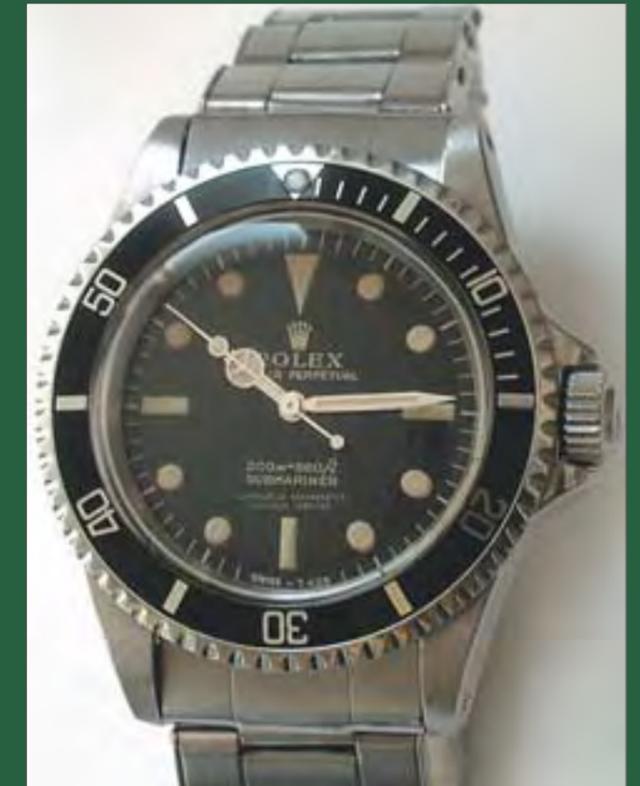
### Submariner Date

In 1969, Rolex made a new variation of the reference 5512. In a truly revolutionary move, they added a date function and gave it the reference number 1680. This model, the Submariner Date, has become Rolex’s best-selling professional watch ever. It has annihilated all opposition in this market segment, and is possibly the most recognised watch in the world. Such was the Sub Date’s success that the reference 5512 was discontinued shortly after its launch. And for the first time the Sub was available in an all-gold version, no doubt causing many swimmers to wonder whether the sharks would have their hand for it! These early Submariner Date and Sea-Dweller models had red print on the dials and are, yet again, further classic, collectable Subs.

In 1979, the Sub Date was given its first major overhaul. The new model, reference 16800, was the first Sub to be rated waterproof to 300 metres. The old Plexiglas was replaced with new sapphire crystal, and a new movement – the calibre 3035 – was fitted. In the style of the previous reference 1680, early reference 16800 models were fitted with the distinctive matt dials, although Rolex later replaced these with the modern glossy dials featuring white-gold surrounds to the luminous indices. Many owners of the early 16800s “upgraded” their dials to the newer style, and, as a result, these early, vintage-look Subs are extremely rare now and – as with all Rolex rarities – highly desired by collectors.

Four years later, in 1983, the Rolesor model (steel and yellow gold) was added to the range. The success of this model, especially in its blue livery, was nothing short of phenomenal. Even with today’s all-steel obsession, the bimetallic Sub’s popularity is as high as ever.

Finally, the modern-day reference 16610 arrived in 1989, and was essentially the same as the reference 16800 but with the new “complete bridge”



movement – calibre 3135. The non-date Submariner – the reference 5513 – has changed very little since its inception, save for the introduction of the new modern dials in the mid-1980s, which is testament to the flawless design created 30 years previously. In 1989, the 5513 was finally upgraded with a sapphire glass and a new movement to become the reference 14060.

### Commemorative edition

Earlier this year at BASELWORLD, Rolex revealed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Sub Date model. It is a striking new variation on the classic reference 16610

movement – calibre 3135. The non-date Submariner – the reference 5513 – has changed very little since its inception, save for the introduction of the new modern dials in the mid-1980s, which is testament to the flawless design created 30 years previously. In 1989, the 5513 was finally upgraded with a sapphire glass and a new movement to become the reference 14060.

Today, the Submariner is equally at home strapped over a wetsuit or under a Prada shirt cuff. Or perhaps having a tough time under those DIY overalls. The Sub’s success has been phenomenal, and remains both an inspired and an inspiring choice. Happy birthday Submariner! ●

(Left) The reference 16800 was the first Submariner to be fitted with a sapphire glass.

(Above) The reference 5512 is the only Sub without a date to be awarded chronometer status.

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