

More For Less

With the revival of the Nomos name, high-quality watches from Glashütte are getting more affordable

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 Germany's reunification has seen numerous watch houses spring up in and around the Saxon town of Glashütte, making it once again the centre of German watchmaking. The two central players are obviously A Lange & Söhne and Glashütte Original, owned by the Richemont and Swatch conglomerates respectively. In my mind, the cream of the output from this region at least equals the best the Swiss have to offer, and has paved the way for Glashütte to regain its reputation as a home of watch-making excellence. Alongside Lange and Glashütte Original there are a growing number of companies whose products are exceedingly good value. Nomos, whose Bauhaus-style, function-led design is allied to a determined good-value philosophy, are typical of the watch houses that have been established since the demise of the GDR.



Nomos are confident that they will avoid being swept away in the sea of small independent watch brands: “We seem to have found a niche within the market where we’ve had little real competition: great-looking hand-wound watches for around €700.”



Nomos were one of the first to re-establish in Glashütte. Their story, however, begins with Roland Schwertner. If Roland hadn't found himself working as an IT consultant to a company in Düsseldorf that made “fashion” watches, Nomos might never have happened. “When the Berlin wall came down in 1989, everybody got excited about the other half of the country – East Germany,” he says. Intrigued, he asked some of the company's older watchmakers what they could tell him about watches from the GDR. Some of them had learnt their watchmaking in Glashütte and were so enthusiastic that he became curious and so began to research Saxon watchmaking. Schwertner became fascinated by entrepreneurs such as Ferdinand Lange, who created an industry in the middle of nowhere, and, recalling he had an aunt in one of Glashütte's neighbouring villages, made a visit.

Despite the neglect of the socialist period, Schwertner realised that Glashütte was a place where fine mechanical watches would once again be built. After some initial ideas – he even considered making an offer for the GDR's public VEB Glashütter Uhrenbetriebe (which was about to be either closed or sold) – he decided to start out on his own.

“When I studied Glashütte's history I discovered a watch company called Nomos that existed in Glashütte from 1906 to 1911. I considered the brand name to be perfect for a watch company: Greek for ‘order’, ‘fair distribution’ or ‘law’. What else could describe the nature and working principle of a watch better than that?”

Build quality

But even with an economics degree, he found starting the company nearly impossible without

a strong investor, yet he continued to look for a watchmaker and a designer to help develop Nomos according to the concept of the German *Werkbund* (a predecessor of the *Bauhaus*), which tried to bring the quality-oriented attitude of craftsmanship into industrial production. One of their more important ideas was the insight that everything that fulfils its function is more or less automatically beautiful, hence the understated design of the products: superfluous embellishments are just that – superfluous.

And it is not just design that occupies the Nomos watchmakers. Nomos are aiming to break free of external suppliers: “One of the most important German watch journalists stated recently that he really likes the Nomos attitude of not calling ourselves a *manufacture* but working like one. All key aspects of our work are done in house, such as the thermal blueing of the screws, the solar cut (sunburst decoration) and the assembly of the individual parts.” Although there are some parts Nomos cannot yet produce, like balance-springs, main coils and hands, Roland is keen that Nomos should, in time, become a complete movement maker.

The watches

Via their R&D department, or rather their “constructing watchmakers”, Nomos are constantly working on new complications and modifications for their movement. Two such complications are the ultra-flat date mechanism for the Swiss-made Peseux 7001 ébauche and the power-reserve indicator for the new version of the Tangente, due to be released later this year.

Nomos' philosophy is to build mechanical watches of superior quality at a reasonable price that last for a long time – both mechanically *and* aesthetically – though this becomes more and more challenging as the brand progresses. And because their focus is to create watches that are going to be worn day in, day out, there are unlikely to be any museum pieces just yet. “The collectors will decide if and when our watches are invaluable. In some cases we create limited editions that have the potential to be ‘rare’.” One such limited edition was created when the design chief of Expo 2000, Rainer Schilling, was interested in a Nomos watch being part of a range of high-quality German products. After many meetings and design changes, the Expo 2000 special edition was born.

Currently, Nomos watches are available in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the US, UK, Taiwan and Japan. However, the areas that Roland sees as the company's best bets for growth are the UK and the US. “Given our origins and

(Left) Nomos have added many innovations to their base movement, including this ultra-flat calendar mechanism.

(Right) The power-reserve indicator for the new Tangente, to be released later this year, demonstrates a new approach to the indication of mainspring energy.



the reason I started the company, it is extremely important for us to have a partner in each country who understands Nomos and is able to adapt the brand to the local culture and needs.”

The way forward

So, what does the future hold for Nomos? “The next goal is to produce 15,000 watches (up from 12,000 in 2002). We will stay with our strategy of offering a small, inimitable collection, with careful development of our basic models. Until 2 years ago we increased turnover by 25%, but since the global economic downturn we have experienced a mild slowdown and are planning

conservative growth.” Roland is keen for Nomos not to be seen as a conveyor-belt company, churning out mediocre watches for the masses: “My plan is to keep production numbers at less than 20,000 watches per year, aiming to maintain quality, prestige and allure. We hope to be there before 2013.”

Perhaps it is their belief in an end-product that sets them apart. I own two Nomos time-pieces; they are amongst the “cheapest” watches I own, yet they are worn the most often. I also feel that I truly own a special piece of history. Glashütte history. ◉

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