

Ten-Day Wonder

Was Patek Philippe's new Tourbillon worth the wait? Theodore Diehl finds out



It all started at the turn of the century with the power-reserve race, when a number of watch brands each attempted to outdo each other in the battle for the longest period of autonomy. This was later followed by the tourbillon anniversary craze that spread across the watch market; a celebration of Abraham Louis Breguet's famed invention dating from 1801.



Patek Philippe, I believe, won the first battle hands down with their magnificent reference 5100 10-day chronometer, the first and only watch in the world to store a full 10 days of power. However, as regards the latter phenomenon, many collectors commented on the fact that the tourbillon's 200-year anniversary seemed to have totally bypassed Patek Philippe's attention despite the fact that tourbillon construction was obviously well within their expertise and history. (For many years now Patek have offered tourbillon escapements, but only in certain Grand Complications models such as the 3939H minute-repeater or the 5016 minute-repeater with perpetual calendar). Daniel Roth combined both of these themes with the introduction of their tourbillon wristwatch with 200-hour (8-day) power-reserve in 2002. However, Patek collectors continued to wait, wonder and check the rumours. This year their patience has been rewarded with the arrival – as the grandest exercise in total and complete understatement imaginable – of the Patek Philippe reference 5101P 10-Day Tourbillon wristwatch.



Simply a superior type of escapement, or a jewel to be protected from the perils of ultraviolet radiation? There is no doubt that Patek's decision to make their tourbillon visible only from the back certainly adds a level of intrigue.

Understatement

I would not be in the least bit surprised to hear that many people who visited BASELWORLD this year walked right past the Patek Philippe stand and glanced at this exceptional timepiece without even batting an eyelid. At first glance, its rectangular form could allow it to easily be mistaken for a variant of the 10-day power-reserve wristwatch mentioned above. Indeed, both watches share a similar basic architecture. The fact that it is a tourbillon at all is only evidenced by the word "tourbillon" that is printed above the series number within the seconds subdial. Whereas every single brand in the market that offers such timepieces makes the greatest effort to allow one to view the workmanship and rotation of the tourbillon escapement from the dial side, here the tourbillon itself is nowhere in sight. In actual fact, Patek went to great lengths during the development of this new movement just to *hide* the tourbillon escapement so that they could place it in the back of the movement.

Hide and seek

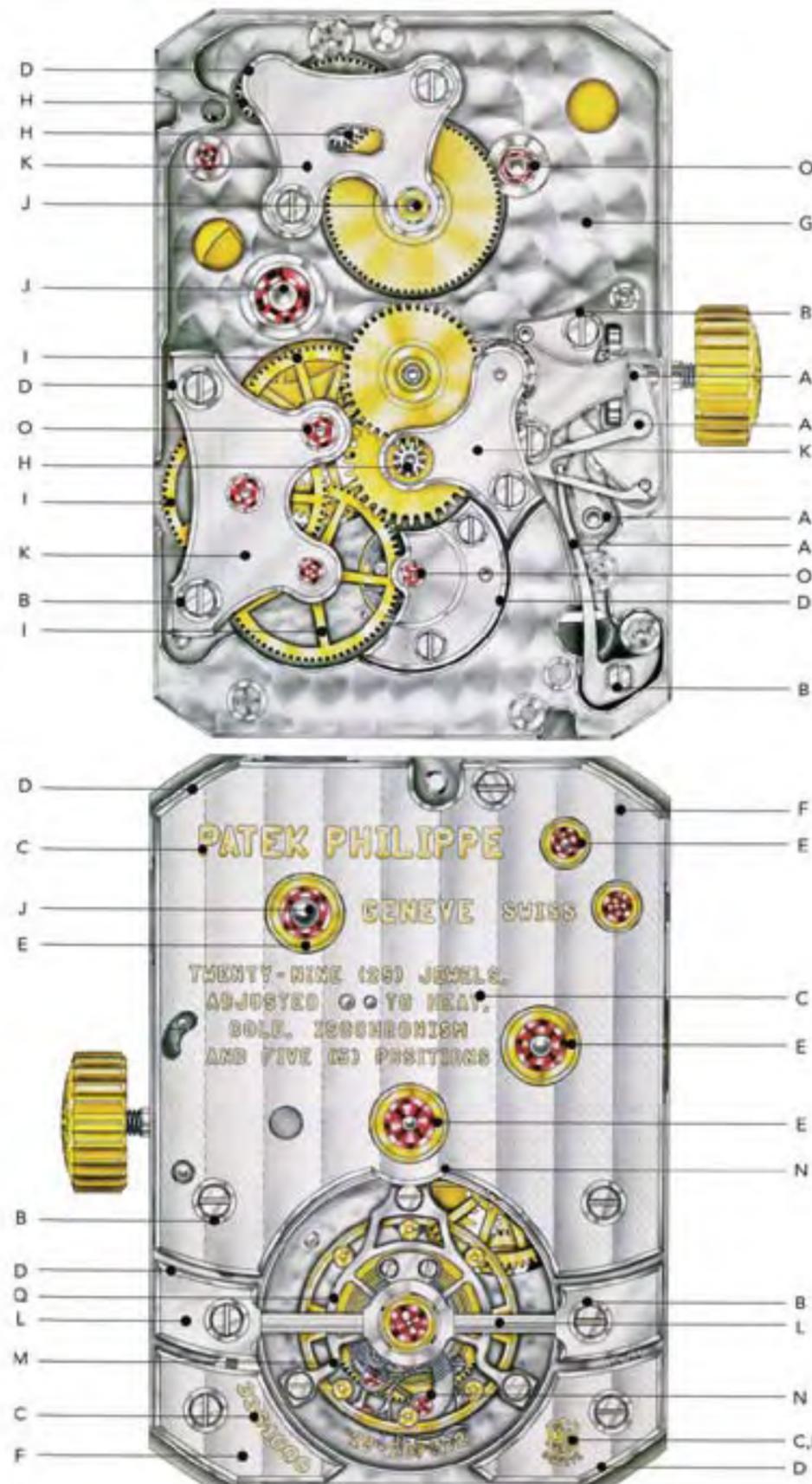
Officially, Patek claim that the placement of the tourbillon on the bridge side of the movement is to protect the oil lubricating the tourbillon from degrading via the effects of ultraviolet light, which could affect timekeeping. This is theoreti-

cally true, but the fact remains that the vast majority of tourbillons function quite well in spite of any extended exposure to sunlight. The real reasoning behind this decision can be found in the horological aesthetics of times past. Although skeletonised watches with completely visible movements did exist during and long after Breguet's lifetime, it was not in the least bit customary to show off the tourbillon itself through the use of a cutaway opening or other similar method. It was simply seen as a superior type of escapement used in certain movements, and the aristocratic owners of such watches at that time would have been greatly dismayed or even horrified by any such "lowly" mechanical considerations disrupting the visual beauty of the dial itself (just imagine a Silver Shadow with a glass bonnet!). Patek Philippe were keenly aware of this tradition, and indeed it is part of their history as well. They therefore consciously chose to show their approval and continuation of this historical aesthetic in this, their first pure tourbillon wristwatch to appear for more than 40 years.

At the same time, however contradictory it may sound, they wanted to show *more* to the owner of such a timepiece. So, whilst the front exudes aristocratic decorum, the back of the watch is sapphire glass, allowing a full view of the movement and the tourbillon escapement itself. But that is not all. In a normal tourbillon the third, or minute, wheel somewhat obstructs a clear view of the tourbillon. For the 5101P, the entire going-train was moved to the dial side just to allow an unimpeded view of the tourbillon's rotation and working. This singular attention to detail typifies the way Patek Philippe approach even the most straightforward horological issues.

Rectangles are here to stay

Although the reference 5100 10-day wristwatch was a limited edition, Patek Philippe made it clear that the new 28-20/220 movement it used would join the ranks of their calibre stall. The 10-Day Tourbillon, utilizing an altered version of that original calibre – the 28-20/222 – clearly demonstrates the fact that this is the first of more new models based on the 28-20/220 to come, so lovers of rectangular watches can rejoice. Both watches



- A. As stipulated by the Geneva Seal criteria, all steel parts (leaf springs, yokes, levers) are angled and polished; their flanks and upper sides are burnished by hand.
- B. The countersinks of screw bores are polished. The screw heads and slots are angled and polished.
- C. The engravings on the plate and bridges, as well as the Geneva Seal, are gold plated.
- D. The angling of the movement bridges, executed by a watchmaker, is deliberately more pronounced than traditional angling, which gives the manually wound mechanical calibre of the 10-Day Tourbillon inimitable aesthetic appeal.
- E. Six of the 29 jewels are set in 18-ct. gold chatons.
- F. The bridges are angled and polished, and their flanks are burnished. The upper sides are decorated with Geneva striping. The undersides are delicately circular-grained.
- G. The plate features fine circular graining.
- H. Every tooth of each wheel and pinion in steel is polished individually with a rotating hardwood disc.
- I. The brass wheels are gold plated and their spokes are angled.
- J. The ends of the staffs and arbors are rounded and polished.
- K. The bridges are angled and polished; their flanks are burnished. The upper sides are burnished and rubbed, and the undersides are delicately circular-grained.
- L. The steel bridge of the tourbillon cage is mirror-polished by hand; the flanks are burnished by hand.
- M. All of the steel parts of the tourbillon cage are angled and mirror-polished by hand; the flanks are burnished by hand.
- N. The six re-entrant angles are finished by hand, an operation that requires the utmost in precision and the steady hand of a highly experienced watchmaker.
- O. The countersinks of the jewels are polished.
- P. Geneva Seal hallmark.
- Q. The tourbillon cage is manually balanced by the watchmaker who assembles it.

Patek Philippe apply their typical attention to detail even to the most straightforward of horological issues.

use double barrels with a special coupling system, allowing extremely even and regular energy expenditure – an absolute prerequisite to accurate timekeeping over such a long period. Whilst many watches with long power-reserve periods aren't really functional during the last and most critical hours of the residual winding energy being released, the 10-Day truly supplies 10 days of power – not 9.5 or 9. This means that the actual reserve energy has to be even greater than the 10-day period shown on the power-reserve indicator.

Interestingly, the dimensions of both calibres are identical, with the exception of height. The tourbillon's raw movement height comes in at 6.30 mm compared with the original 10-day wrist-watch's 5.05 mm – an appreciable difference. If you are lucky enough to own both, you will notice that the tourbillon actually looks the sleeker of the two. This is because the extra thickness of the tourbillon movement disappears when cased, amounting to only 12.20 mm compared with the original 10-day calibre's 12.80 mm, and this slightly lower height is visually accentuated through the use of an art deco-inspired case design in platinum with 3-tiered, stepped sides. Both have 29 jewels gracing the movement – a rather high number for a watch that shows only the hours, minutes, seconds and power reserve. This is due to the fact that a number of these jewels are an absolute necessity in dealing with the tremendous forces at play within the two winding barrels and going-train.

Approximately 100 turns of the winding stem are required to reach full 10-day autonomy.

The case – only available in platinum – was inspired by art deco watch cases from the 1930s and, despite the 50-mm+ span from lug tip to lug tip, fits the wrist quite snugly due to its curved silhouette; again, carefully researched by Patek to ensure that a small wrist size could be no impediment to purchase. It goes without saying that the dial-side glass also follows the curvature in two planes in order to prevent optical distortion while viewing the vintage rose-coloured 18-ct. gold dial. The leaf hands and Breguet-styled numerals are made of black oxidised gold, creating a harmonious whole with the subtle shading of the dial. And of course, Patek Philippe's requirement that a diamond be set at 6 o'clock on their platinum-cased watches has also been adhered to.

If you are ever close enough to one in order to read the word "tourbillon" written on the dial, then you must certainly be on intimate terms with the person who is wearing it. That means they will probably not mind talking it off their wrist in order to let you gaze longingly through the case back at the tourbillon, with its 72 individual parts, elegantly turning once a minute. With only a few dozen to be made each year, it will indeed be a remarkable sight to behold. ◉

