



XGT

Jaeger's Big Idea

by James Gurney

"Jaeger-LeCoultre release new Reverso." It is not exactly a headline in the "Man bites dog" mould, so why organise a 3-day press conference in Shanghai to announce the launch? Were Jaeger making the media the message? Jerome Lambert, CEO of Jaeger-LeCoultre since last year, disagreed, making the point that the new XGT-size Reverso is a highly important release for Jaeger-LeCoultre and is intended to add diversity to both the Reverso range and the company. "We travelled to Shanghai to demonstrate and communicate the new dimensions added to the Jaeger-LeCoultre brand by the XGT, the first new departure for the Reverso since the Gran'Sport in 1998. This watch represents a growth in the technical dimension, with more focus on complications. We also wanted to communicate the increased internationalisation of the brand; for example, Jaeger is now present in 14 cities in China".



Jerome Lambert is keen to see that Jaeger opens itself to the world more fully than it has done previously, and that it is recognised for its position among the most prestigious watch-making houses. Over the last decade, Jaeger has transformed its manufacturing capability and nearly doubled its workforce. At the same time, the Reverso collection has altered radically, with offerings ranging from the highly jewelled Florale and Neva to the Gran'Sport chronograph. As a company that has generally shunned celebrity endorsement and relied on the essential quality of their offerings, it is, perhaps, appropriate that they should go to great lengths to communicate themselves to the media. In this light, a launch in a city so far from the Vallée de Joux as Shanghai seems less bizarre. Shanghai itself has a further link with Jaeger that made the choice more appropriate in that it has also been so busy transforming itself over the last decade that the business of communicating to the outside world was left far behind – a process that is now a high priority.

Divergence

Since Jaeger-LeCoultre's resurgence in the early 1990s, the company has covered much of the established ground in terms of complicated watches, with perpetual calendars, chronographs, a tourbillon and even a minute repeater being fitted into the confines of the Reverso case. Many of these were part of the biannual series of pink-gold limited editions that began with the 60°, a pink-gold recreation of the original 1931 design. However, for the most part, these watches accounted for a tiny fraction of Jaeger's output. The anniversary series were produced at a rate somewhat under 250 a year, the majority of the company's watches being simpler watches altogether – but with the added cachet of actually being made in-house, which very few other companies could truthfully boast. The main thing about the Reverso, at least in the public's perception, was still its looks: a classic design born of the inter-war art deco movement.

The important change came in 1998 when two events coincided that were to propel Jaeger-LeCoultre to expand the Reverso's potential along two different paths. The first was their introduction of the Gran'Sport, a deliberately contemporary variation on the theme. Being, at least nominally, a sports watch, it had a larger than normal case in which it was possible to fit an automatic movement, a first for the Reverso case. The event was the appearance and growth of a move to ever larger cases, a fashion spearheaded in part by Officine Panerai's Luminor watch. In turn, this development meant that Jaeger-LeCoultre would be assured that there would be market acceptance for the new family of larger-cased Reversos.



These larger cases were to be the extra dimension Jaeger needed in more ways than one. For one of the few companies able to claim true 'manufacture' status (that is, able to make watches and movements from start to finish), Jaeger-LeCoultre produced a relatively low number of complicated watches, particularly in the Reverso case. A desire to rectify this is largely behind the new XGT. Unlike earlier Reverso complications, the XGT is conceived as a 'series' production model as opposed to a limited edition, and the movement has been created as a base for future complications. Despite the large date and double winding-barrel, there is clearly room left over in the movement for further modules to be added to the mix. Another reason for Jaeger to feel that a larger case was needed was that an 8-day power reserve was deemed to be an essential part of the plan for the XGT. This was because the vast majority of the competition use automatic movements – not a practical option for

the Reverso, as even a micro-rotor as used in the Gran'Sport would not leave enough room for future complications. Traditionally, power reserves of 40 hr or so are deemed sufficient.

The Grande Date

The first of the watches to be shown in Shanghai was the Grande Date. Its precursor appeared last year as the Septantième anniversary limited edition, and had essentially the same movement but with the addition of a day-night indicator. The critical difference as far as Jaeger are concerned is that the anniversary piece was not a series production watch.

Those familiar with the Reverso design will need no reminding of the art deco antecedents of the design – an approach that is adhered to as closely as possible by the designers for this series, the intention being that the design should not overshadow the technical dimension

The new 8-day calibre represents a substantial investment in the future by Jaeger-LeCoultre. The two driving considerations that Jaeger's designers had to take into account were the need to incorporate a barrel arrangement capable of holding 8 days' power reserve and the need to leave sufficient room for complications such as the large date mechanism or the reverse power reserve indication in the two current models.



The Grande Réserve's whimsical method of displaying the remaining running time relies, nevertheless, on a complicated setup below the case back. The diagram shows the arrangement of clicks and wheels required to ensure that the disc jumps into place as the power reserve declines or increases with winding. There is also a mechanism to prevent the disc going beyond eight when winding.

embodied in the watches. With the Grande Date, the intention was to present a clear indication of the power reserve and the large date without interfering with the legibility of the time or the classic feel of the Reverso. Flipping the case reveals the new calibre 845, which is laid out to reveal both the balance assembly and the central wheel that transmits power from the twin barrels. A glance past the reflections of highly polished bridges reveals a surprising amount of spare volume, clearly making this movement a launch pad for future complications. This is also the reason for choosing a twin-barrel approach to achieve the stated aim of an 8-day power reserve. A larger-than-normal single barrel would have meant a less flexible and less space-efficient layout of the movement.

The Grande Réserve

The other of the new watches presented at Shanghai – the Grande Réserve – is a rather more curious affair. Apparently unexceptional for a Reverso on the front side of the case, the reverse has a plain back except for a small window similar to a jump hour display but which, in fact, displays the power reserve in whole days. A slightly whimsical arrangement, it is in line with Jaeger's approach of offering complications that have some utility rather than existing merely to gratify the movement designer's ego. Egos are, admittedly, something of a rarity among watch-makers, but they are not unknown.

Impressions

So, was Shanghai just a smoke screen? Is the XGT a revolution or just another Reverso? As for the visit to Shanghai, Jaeger-LeCoultre could have chosen no more suitable city in the Orient to announce their arrival; there can surely be no city on Earth that is developing at the pace Shanghai is. With skyscrapers rising on every spare plot of land, the city must be virtually unrecognisable from only 10 years ago, and is well placed to attract a high proportion of the enormous wealth that China will generate over the next decades.

For the XGT series, the significance of the two models launched in Shanghai will only become apparent as the watches reach the stores. These watches certainly have the essential qualities to turn over the slight most frequently thrown at Jaeger, which is that while every collector should have a Reverso, few collect them in the way that people collect Rolexes or Pateks. The qualities that count here are evident in the spare space apparent under the Grande Date's sapphire case-back. The XGT is clearly intended to house further complications, and this, combined with the fact that these watches are series produced rather than limited editions, should mean that the world outside begins to see Jaeger-LeCoultre for the company it wants to be and recognises that it has a technical dimension to match the best. ○