

PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE

by Mark Hacking

Many of the clichés about Switzerland resonate strongly and for good reason. The hiking and skiing are wonderful. The cheese and chocolate are decadent. And the banking and insurance industries remain rock-solid. But there's more to Switzerland than just dairy-fueled foods, mountain life and impenetrable business practices.

There's time.

The Swiss, you see, take their time very seriously. The trains departing from major hubs such as Geneva or Zurich or Lausanne leave on time and leave unsuspecting tourists flabbergasted. On a tram running through the cities, announcements will be made when it's running just one minute late. Then, there is the finest example of them all—the entire Swiss watchmaking industry.

Of course, if you happen to want a piece of the Swiss watchmaking industry, it's as simple as dropping by your local watch boutique or visiting a collector website; you don't even need to visit Switzerland. But these options represent the road more travelled, particularly when compared to constructing your own mechanical-

movement watch using instruments and techniques developed centuries ago.

This is the premise behind the "Centre d'initiation à l'horlogerie," a watchmaking workshop situated right in the heart of the industry.

Over the course of just a few days, the proprietor, Olivier Piguet, immerses the erstwhile apprentice in the art of Swiss watchmaking. The workshops take place at his watchmaker farm in Le Sentier, a small town in the Vallée de Joux, some 50 km north of Geneva. Situated in the shadow of the Jura Mountains, this area is also home to a number of storied watch brands, including Audemars Piguet, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Vacheron Constantin.

Despite the fact that the course is expensive, demand is high; the waiting list can stretch to well over a year, depending on how many students M. Piguet wishes to fit into his decidedly relaxed schedule. Years ago, he sold the family business, the top watch boutique in the centre of town, which saw him working long hours finding the perfect pieces for clients from around the world.



photography: mark hacking



(In all this time, to his own amused consternation, he has yet to find a link between his family and the Piguets of Audemars-Piguet.)

The course attracts mainly serious watch aficionados; those who already have a few choice timepieces in their collection,

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those looking to add something new and unique. The workshops run from between two and five days. In the abbreviated course, the one experienced by yours truly, there's little time to waste.

Day one is a mixture of theory and practice as we take apart a movement and learn all about the inner workings: the transformative power of the mainspring, the delicate precision of the balance wheel and the dual nature of the escapement mechanism.

We gain insight into the methods of the professional watchmaker: the need for careful attention to detail and immaculate organizational habits. M. Piguet mentions that a top watchmaker can build five complete watches in a single day; as I watch the yoke spring of my movement fly off the workbench and into the Swiss ether, my status as a rank amateur in the field is cemented.

The first day ends like Christmas morning: M. Piguet produces a selection of movements, watch faces, hands, dials and bands. It's a heady moment; I agonize over the individual elements that will comprise my own one-of-a-kind watch. Ultimately, I land on my choices and then second-guess myself for hours afterwards.

On the following day, the real work begins: The objective is to disassemble the chosen movement, wash and lubricate all the key moving parts, reassemble them again, place the movement within the casing and apply all the finishing touches. The morning, the time allocated for the disassembling process, ambles along without concern; the afternoon is another story altogether.

The mistakes are myriad. I install one wheel upside down. I lose one tiny screw, lose a second, and mar the royal blue finish

of two others. Yet another screw, the only one in the movement that tightens in a counter-clockwise direction, is mistaken for a traditional screw. It's maddening.

At various stages, I'm encouraged to spin the watch crown to test that the wheels turn smoothly. More than once, my wheels lock and I'm forced to retrace my steps and correct something. It's a source of tremendous frustration when M. Piguet has to step in to fix my errors, but he reminds me that I'm attempting to absorb his 25 years of watchmaking experience in just one weekend.

The perfectionist in me relents.

Some four hours after the process begins, all 60 pieces fall into place—the movement functions. I'm surprised by the emotion of the moment and immensely pleased, despite knowing that it was only possible through the persistent help of my instructor. An expert watchmaker, I will never be. But the act of placing the movement in the watch casing is still the proverbial pièce de résistance on what is an extraordinary learning experience. ♥

Overleaf: A student focuses on the task at hand. Top row: The pastoral setting that is the Vallée de Joux, home to the first watchmaker farms. Right: Instructor Olivier Piguet reverses the errors caused by erstwhile watchmakers.

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