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## A watchmaker's paradise

4 hours ago From the section Magazine



In the Joux Valley, in the south-west corner of Switzerland, the traditional craft of watchmaking is flourishing. It's not just leading companies that have workshops in the Jura Mountains but also highly skilled, independent craftsmen, as John Laurenson discovers.

The most complicated watch ever made was unveiled in Geneva in September before being whisked off to its mysterious buyer in New York.

The buyer paid an estimated \$9m (£6m) for a watch that has 57 special features and 2,826 parts. It gives you the chimes of Big Ben, the phases of the moon and the Hebrew calendar but you can't actually wear it as it weighs 2lb (900g) and is the size of a Big Mac.

"Sometimes people say it's stupid to create a mechanical watch with so many complications," says Vincent Jaton, director of the Joux Valley's Espace Horloger watch museum. "But when you create such a piece, you innovate for the future. You invent something you will maybe produce later on for a large public."

Along the valley, with its lakes, its cows and its towering pine trees, I go to meet one of Switzerland's watchmaker-innovators. There's a brass plaque on the door marked Philippe Dufour, Horlogerie Compliquee - Complicated Watchmaking.

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Inside, in a workshop full of ancient machines and hand tools in their hundreds many of which he made himself, Philippe Dufour, a magnifying glass screwed to his right eye, is burnishing the hour hand of his latest watch. When he's finished, he'll heat it, he says, to get that nice blue steel colour.

Switzerland produces 3% of the world's watches but that 3% is worth \$24.3bn a year - almost as much money



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as the rest of the world makes with the other 97%

The workshop is quiet enough to hear a watch tick.

"Did you make that hand yourself?" I ask him. "Uhuh," he replies.

In fact, on this watch he invented called the Grande Sonnerie or Big Ringer, he makes almost every one of the parts himself. One watch takes nine months to make. "Like a human being."

As soon as he finishes one of these, he sells it, he says. He's made nine of them, most of which have been bought - for several hundred thousand dollars each, he won't tell me the exact amount - by collectors in Japan and Singapore.

The Grande Sonnerie Minute Repeater, in white gold (internal view above)

He's still got "the mother" though - the first Grande Sonnerie he made. A pocket-watch version. He winds it up and the tiny cogs turn behind its glass case and the bells ring out as clear as a carriage clock.

Outside his workshop's windows, the snow will soon be turning the green valley white.

Watchmaking took off in Switzerland in the 16th Century. Reformer Jean Calvin banned jewellery so goldsmiths had to turn to a different craft. At the same time Protestants fleeing persecution in France brought their watchmaking skills to Geneva, and together they built Switzerland's reputation as a centre of excellence.

But the industry took root in this particular valley because of the snow.

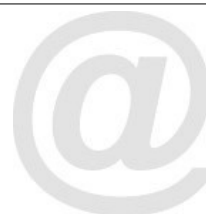
"We are at about 1,000m high," says Dufour. "In winter, it was closed because of the snow and people were stuck in that valley. And what did they have to do - milk one or two cows? In winter there is nothing else to do! So little by little they got organised. In nearly every farm you had a workshop and everybody used to work - the kids, the grandparents."

The result is that today almost all the big names in Swiss watches are here - Breguet, Longines, Audemars Piguet, Patek Philippe, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Blancpain, Vacheron Constantin as well as independent watchmakers like Philippe Dufour - making some of the most valuable watches in the world.

Switzerland produces 3% of the world's watches but that 3% is worth \$24.3bn (£16.3m) a year - almost as much money as the rest of the world makes with the other 97%.

Rubies are used in luxury watches because they don't wear out

The industry provides a lot of jobs. The Joux Valley has a tiny population - 6,500 people in all. But thanks to legions of French people who cross the border every day to work in Switzerland, 4,500 people are employed here making watches.



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At the Joux Valley's century-old Ecole Technique watchmaking school, which produces 50 new Swiss watchmakers a year, director Fabien Graber tells me there are two candidates for every place.

In a classroom where students in white overalls are quietly dismantling and reassembling watches, I get talking to a couple of them, Fabrice and Stephane, and ask them what drew them to watchmaking.

"The precision," says Fabrice. "The order, the cleanliness and also the calm. It's a very calm job." It is, thinks Fabrice, a perfect world.

"Because of the history principally," says his friend Stephane. "In the valley there were a lot of expert watchmakers so this is the best place to learn watchmaking."

Fabrice - learning the craft of watchmaking in the Joux Valley

"And do you like the fact that this is a Swiss tradition?" I ask him. Yes he does, and he's proud of it too.

But Fabrice and Stephane are lucky there still is a Swiss watch industry.

In the 1970s and 80s it almost went under. "The Quartz Crisis" as it was called, cut Swiss watch industry jobs from 90,000 to 28,000 because of competition from Japanese battery-powered watches that the Swiss themselves had pioneered.

The threatening-sounding advertising slogan of the all-conquering Japanese brand Seiko was "Someday all watches will be made this way" and many believed it was all over for mechanical watches.

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But it wasn't.

Thanks to the invention of the Swatch brand at the low end of the market and the return to favour of mechanical watches at the high end, Swiss watch jobs have now bounced back to 50,000.

Revenues from Swiss watch sales to big markets such as Hong Kong, the US, China, Singapore, Germany, France and the UK have almost doubled since 2000.

Little matter, it seems, that nobody actually needs a watch any more because we all have the time on our mobile phones.

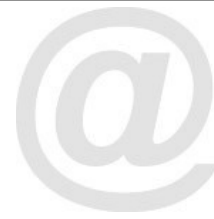
Back in his workshop Philippe Dufour winds his watch, holding the mechanism up to his ear.

"There are lots of things we don't need. But that," he says, smiling as he hears the rapid tick, ticking, "you can't replace."

Photographs of the Grande Sonnerie Minute Repeater courtesy of Philippe Dufour.

The Magazine keeps time

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Getty Images

A watch for blind people

The man who makes £100,000 watches

The story of what was once the 'most complicated' watch in the world

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