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Raketa: Watches With Russian Soul

Last month's Geneva Watch Days event gave us a chance to discover first-hand, the watches of the Saint Petersburg, Russia-based brand, whose watchmaking heritage, in-house movements, and cool designs make for a potent combination.



(<https://www.watchonista.com/steven-rogers/home>)
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Last month, Geneva Watch Days once again showed that there is still a place for in-person watch fairs when done well. For the second year in a row, the decentralized, self-managed format successfully gave collectors, retailers, and journalists the chance

to check out more than 20 brands' latest releases and chat with their representatives, in addition to learning from roundtable discussions and attending exciting after-hours events.

Aside from giving horology enthusiasts a chance to see what the big group-owned companies and familiar independents were doing, the fair was also a great platform to discover watches from, and meet the people behind, a few lesser-known brands;

Raketa ([http://www.raketa.com/?](http://www.raketa.com/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article)

[utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article](http://www.raketa.com/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article)) being one.

Quintessentially Russian

Raketa is a Russian watch brand making quintessentially Russian-designed and manufactured watches, operating out of the imposing Petrodvorets watch factory in Saint Petersburg, one of the oldest factories in the country.

The factory was established by Peter the Great in 1721 and started with cutting diamonds and stone for royalty, the church, and public spaces, before being employed for the production of Kremlin Stars, watchmaking rubies, and, during World War II, components for the military.



Peter the Great establishes the “Imperial Peterhof Factory”

In 1961, the facility began making watches under the Pobeda and Raketa names, with the latter brand moniker – meaning “rocket” in Russian – being inspired by Yuri Gagarin’s record-breaking journey into outer space that year.



“Pobeda” watch — the first watch to go to space

The Good Times and the Hard Times

The company grew, reaching its peak in the 1970s when an 8,000-strong workforce manufactured over five million watches each year, exporting to nearly 40 countries. Soviet polar explorers wore Raketa's 24-hour watches during their expeditions, while the company was also entrusted with making the official watches of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.

In the 1990s, Raketa weathered the transition from communism to capitalism as the Soviet Union disintegrated. But, when the current managing director, David Henderson-Stewart, first visited the Raketa factory in 2009 with the idea of taking over the business, he found the company on its knees, with a dozen elderly workers operating old machines in poor condition, making cheap timekeepers destined for the tourist market.



Factory produces the official watches of the Soviet Olympic Games

A Franco-British lawyer of Russian ancestry based in Moscow, Henderson-Stewart felt that, with a large dose of TLC and some fresh designs, he and a handful of investors might be able to return Raketa to its former glory.

While there have been obstacles along the way, with wealthy locals needing some convincing that a Russian company could create luxury products to rival the quality of foreign-produced ones, Henderson-Stewart and his team made progress towards achieving that feat.



David Henderson-Stewart

Revival Tactics

Behind the brand's revival were a few key decisions, one being the choice to carry on making an in-house calibre, as opposed to ordering movement parts from elsewhere and assembling them.

To make this possible, Henderson-Stewart not only retained the semi-manual tools and machines which remained in the factory from the decades before but also kept on and added to the dedicated group of workers that he encountered upon his initial visit, offering them much-improved working conditions and an exciting vision.

Rebuilding a Team and a Calibre

Today, Raketa employs a 100-strong workforce, which includes many of those workers in the autumn of their careers, who pass on their know-how to apprentices and new recruits via an onsite watchmaking and mentoring school.

They make 4,000 watches per year, all based around an updated version of one of the brand's calibre from the 1960s, the robust and reliable Raketa-Avtomat. The brand either leaves this hour-minute-seconds movement as is, slows down the hours to make a 24-hour complication, or reverses the mechanism for a whimsical backwards way of telling time.



The Raketa Team

Barring the rubies, the Raketa-Avtomat is, quite impressively, all made in-house, including the hairspring that is machined from a “secret Soviet alloy.” The Raketa finishing specialists ensure the movement looks the part as well, through frosted matte decoration or Russian-style guilloche work. The hands and some of the simpler

dials are also made in the Petrodvorets factory, while straps and other parts are sourced locally to uphold the brand's "Russian manufactured" tagline.



Raketa-Avtomat movement

Classic Collection

Having got a lot right since its rebirth in terms of movement development and nurturing its workforce, it's no surprise to learn that Raketa is making some pretty cool watches, inspired by the brand's historical designs, as well as episodes and achievements throughout Russian history.



The Raketa Classic Big Zero 0219

The brand's **Classic Collection** (https://raketa.com/w/en/shop/assorted-raketa/classic-en/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article), for example, features a contemporary interpretation of a Raketa icon, the **Big Zero** (https://raketa.com/w/en/product/raketa-classic-avtomat-0217/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article), which, like all Raketa watches bearing Arabic numerals, has a "0" instead of a "12" at 12 o'clock, on a minimalist black or white dial featuring a pattern of embossed squares.



The Raketa Classic Big Zero 0217

The original Big Zero was made famous thanks to former Soviet Union president Mikhail Gorbachev, who once wore the watch to an international summit in Italy. When asked to explain the political and economic reforms of Perestroika in simplified terms, he pointed at his wrist and said: *"it's like on my watch – the Russian people want to start everything from zero."*



The Raketa Classic Big Zero 0249

Curiosity Collection

Raketa's **Curiosity** collection (https://raketa.com/w/en/collection-curiosity/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article) celebrates Russia's contribution to the arts and sciences, with the triangular hour hand and indices, circular minute hand, and distinctive numerals of the **Avant-Garde 0279** (<https://raketa.com/w/en/product/raketa-avant-garde-0279/>) taking noticeable design cues from the works of Kandinsky.



The Raketa Avant-Garde 0279

Another stand-out Curiosity model is the **Copernic 0265** (https://raketa.com/w/en/product/raketa-copernic-0265/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article), whose anti-clockwise indications are inspired by Copernicus' theory of the universe. Its large, circular minute hand symbolizes Earth rotating around the sun in one year, while the small, circular hour hand represents Jupiter rotating around the sun over 12 years.



The Raketa Copernicus 0265

While Copernicus may have hailed from Royal Prussia, the heliocentric symbolism of the indications is directly taken from Raketa's vintage "Copernicus" watch, launched in the early 1980s

Tool Collection

Finally, Raketa's **Tool Collection** (https://raketa.com/w/en/collection-tool/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article) typically makes use of the brand's 24-hour indication that is handy in environments where it is tricky to tell night from day: space exploration, polar expeditions, long-distance military flights, and submarine missions.



The Raketa Leopard 24

One of the more recent additions to this collection is the **Leopard 24** (https://raketa.com/w/en/product/raketa-podvodnik-leopard-24/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article), whose bezel is made out of steel from the hull of the Leopard K-328 submarine, while its dial and hands resemble those of a submarine control panel gauge. The watch was even developed in collaboration with Captain Valery Dyakonov, who was commander of a Leopard K-328 for over a decade; and there is nice video of him going to the Raketa factory to pick up the watch.



(<https://www.youtube.com/embed/wKb7Tgo4rdA>)

That video is one of several Raketa has published on its **YouTube channel** (https://www.youtube.com/c/RussianWatchesRaketa/videos?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article), displaying the brand's sound understanding that in the modern era of watch marketing, authentic storytelling, backed-up by cool content, is the way to go.



The Raketa Leopard 24

Branching Out

While Raketa's customers are still mainly Russian – locals account for two thirds of its clientele – its watches are gradually being sought out more and more by international collectors, either through Raketa's **online shop** (https://raketa.com/w/en/shop/watches-raketa/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article) or six retail partners in France and Switzerland. The brand is even opening a Raketa boutique in Geneva's Old Town in the coming weeks.



The New Raketa Copernicus 0230

It's easy to understand Raketa's appeal, as they offer something a bit different: legitimate watchmaking heritage, well-made and well-decorated in-house movements, and interesting, locally-inspired designs, each telling a good story. What's more, all of that comes at an appealing price: the Big Zero, Raketa's least expensive watch, retails for just €750 (~\$870), while prices across all three collections do not exceed €2,000 (~\$2,300).



The New Raketa Copernicus 0230

To find out more about Raketa, please visit the **brand's website** (https://raketa.com/w/en/?utm_campaign=Watchonista&utm_source=website&utm_medium=article).

(Photography by Pierre Vogel, images © Raketa)

Watches



(<https://www.watchonista.com/raketa/home>)

Raketa "Copernic" 0230 (<https://www.watchonista.com/raketa/watches/raketa-copernic-0230>)



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