

## Attire Club in Talk with David Henderson-Stewart, CEO of Raketa

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Raketa is an old Russian watch manufacturer, which has had a long and complicated history, but always being ahead of the curve in terms of watchmaking. Nine years ago, it was rebranded by David Henderson-Stewart, who saw great potential in it. David had a legal background; he graduated from the Sorbonne and from Oxford University with a Master's Degree in European Law. Being part of the French bar and activating as a lawyer, he worked in the Moscow branches of French law firms and had no background in watchmaking, but decided to take on this old factory and bring a new wind into it.

Currently, the watches offered by Raketa are very fascinating and we wanted to learn more about them and about David's story, who was very kind in talking to us about the brand and how he turned Raketa into a household name.

### Going Further



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The story of Raketa goes back many years to Soviet times. Many of the watches designed in that period were a reflection not so much of the politics of the Soviet Union, but rather of the technical ambitions this had. In this sense, many of the models that were invented, and which are now remade, were professional watches and were destined for the



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Raketa "Avant-garde"

most interesting of professions, such as polar explorers, astronauts or sailors. Because form follows function, Raketa has become known for its 24-hour movements, which are a mandatory feature to have on a watch if you are to go to the North Pole, in space or underwater, where you can't get the light you would usually see in order to know whether the time indicated by your watch is AM or PM. Because the watches were made with these trailblazers in mind, their aesthetic also combine the roughness and sturdiness of these people with the unique aesthetic experiences they have in the unexpected and rather uncommon places they go. And so, to this day, Raketa watches empower and inspire people in their lives.

Recently, the company has launched a re-edition of the Polar watch, for which they took out all the old watercolor drawings and the hand-made technical sketches, but to which they added slight improvements – for example, the water resistance was improved. “It is a 98% exact copy of the initial model”, David explains. The watch was very well received, especially given that there were not many models left from the initial release. The reason for that, as David explains, is because these were made for a very select group. The new release is produced by the exact factory that made it 50 years ago. What is even more fascinating is that the head of the engineering department is a lady who, at the time of the interview, had celebrated her 80th birthday the day before and she was also part of the team which created the original watch, having the development of the 24-hour movement under her care.

This type of continuity is part of the Raketa story. Even though there was a massive regime change in Russia, the factory never actually closed its doors. “Even during the most difficult times in the ‘90s, when there was a lot of chaos in Russia, the factory never closed. It never stopped”, David explains. “When I first visited the factory 9 years ago, many old people were working at the factory and some still work here. However, during these 9 years, they have transmitted their know-how to the younger generations. There is a strong continuity in the production and, concerning the design, each model is based on the Soviet design.” The brand is always inspired by its history, but many contemporary watches are remakes or reinterpretations of the watch.

### A Complicated History



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What is rather intriguing about Raketa is that, while it maintained much of the Soviet design aesthetic, the watches are not political at all. Not even the people in Russia associate them with the communist regime. Maybe the reason for this is because they did not focus on any political events. Yes, they were Soviet and of course, made in the aesthetics of the time, but they were focused (mostly) on the technical achievements of the people and thus told stories that were very personal. Raketa does celebrate these personal stories and does not see them as a collectivist thing, which is perhaps why these watches are so appealing to so many people these days. The current customers of the brand come from very different walks of life and include many young people who see in the watches a symbol of resilience and power, which they feel they need to put out in their own lives in order to gain great results, regardless of what these may be. Raketa has managed in a way to bridge the ages, but, according to David, “it hasn't been very easy because when we started, if you talk about the Russian markets,

[stewart-ceo-of-raketa/soviet-polar-re-edition/>](#)

Soviet Polar (re-edition)

people looked more towards Western brands because for 70 years they had not been allowed to buy Western brands and suddenly they were allowed to. Today, many people remember their roots and think of the fact that their parents and grandparents wore Soviet watches and they remember that Russia also did interesting things, so they come back to Russian watches. 8 years ago, we were contacted by a Polish distributor, and we were surprised that he wanted to sell Russian watches, but he said 'look, this has nothing to do with politics, it's just that we remember that our parents and grandparents wore Soviet watches and we like them.'

Today, in many parts of Eastern Europe, there is a cultural shift. A lot of people, especially young people are beginning more and more to celebrate the positive parts of their cultures, of course, not forgetting the negative ones. David was, in a way, part of this movement. Living in Russia, he noticed that there were no big Russian brands that people from around the world like to buy and wear. This was how he realized the massive potential that Raketa had. Russia has a history that is just as culturally charged as France for example, and yet, there are no famous cultural brands coming from it. "Russia has had a chaotic history, which has destroyed a lot of things, but I have always believed that it has the legitimacy to have luxury brands and I started looking", David recalls, "and soon enough I discovered that Russia had a long history with watches. I found out that there was one factory left in St. Petersburg and, when I went there, I was surprised that they were still making watches by hand, using old-school technologies and that there were people who had all this incredible know-how, but who were fighting to keep the field alive".

It did not come as a big surprise that the factory was not selling too many watches. "A watchmaker is an enthusiast", David explains, "he is someone who is very passionate about his work and all these people who had continued to work were doing it only through enthusiasm. When I visited, there were only 20 people working there, 15 years before there had been several thousand." The passion of the watchmakers and their personal involvement in the watches was what drew David to the brand and he decided to learn about watchmaking, as he was not an expert in the field and to rebrand Raketa. The label already had enough personality, that was not the hard part of the process – the difficult task was to convince people that they can enjoy something that is Russian. Odd as it may sound, after 1990, in Eastern Europe and, especially in Russia, many people were ashamed of their countries and cultures because of what had happened and thus, someone like David had to convince people that they can allow the positive aspects of their (recent) past and culture in their lives, as few as these may be. At first, many distributors did not want to sell their watches, as they all wanted only Swiss brands, but little by little things changed.

Working with changing mentalities was indeed a hard task for David, who, besides having to convince people that Russian watches are not an embarrassment, had to also convince them that they are also not cheap, bad products.

### Going for the Stars

Developing the new Raketa, David also uncovered that there was a



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Raketa "Russian Code"

tremendous Russian know-how in terms of watchmaking. They did invite many people from Switzerland to come and bring their expertise to the brand, but many times, they did not follow their advice and did it as they knew. The Swiss told them to throw away their old machines and to buy new, Swiss machines, but they refused and many of the old, Soviet machines are still used today. Talk about a time capsule!



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Raketa "Seaman"

And so, the Russian watchmakers still use old-school production methods today, instead of programming computers and robots. "We've had many people from Switzerland come and they were amazed that we were still doing things the way they were doing them 50 years ago. We've even had a journalist come last month, and he said 'Please don't change anything', as he visited the factory", David recalls.

With so much talk about history and heritage, one may fail to see that Raketa is a brand that is also very much looking towards the future and that has generally a very original and personal twist on watches. Many models have something that makes them special. Probably one of the most special watches is the Russian Code, which goes counter-clockwise. For Raketa, this is actually the most normal way to read the dial. Maybe in the future, all watches should show the time like that. The reason why we read watches from left to right is not clear, but the most likely explanation is based on sundials. Back in the day, you would put a stick in the ground and depending on where the shadow would fall, you would know what time it was. Basically, the watchmaking convention was probably established based on the replicating of the movement of the sun and of the shadow. However, this is an illusion: the sun does not turn, it is the planets and moons that turn. The planets actually turn counter-clockwise around the sun and the planets also turn counter-clockwise around their own axes and the Moon also turns counter-clockwise around the Earth, so basically, the natural movements of the planets is the counter-clockwise movement. "In that sense", explains David, "it would be more natural to read the time in harmony with the movement of the elements in the solar system. If you project yourself 200 years in time, when we will be living on other planets, you can imagine that when you will visit your relatives on another planet, you will want to have a watch on your wrist that will replicate the movement of the planets you will be seeing from the spaceship." In the end, Raketa has the idea of space at its core; the brand was founded in 1961 when Gagarin went to space. "It was a shock to everyone", David says, "everyone was living on Earth and, all of a sudden, there was a man in space." Thus, the brand is very avant-garde in nature and looks to a bright future. Currently, they are even working on a collaboration with Roscosmos who will provide them with metallic parts for the movement and the case from rockets that have actually been to space.

The future looks good for Raketa, as the brand is now taking off and reaching new heights, which the lonely watchmakers of the early 1990s would not have dreamed of. The spirit of the brand is reflected not only in its watches, but also in its stories: strength, determination and style are what have driven Raketa to the forefront of Russian watchmaking.