

Raketa: A Rocket for the Wrist



by Michael Weare (<https://www.watchuseek.com/author/mweare/>) on July 23, 2019

Guest contributor Jacob Casper provides an in-depth examination of the modernization and increasing international sophistication of Russian brand Raketa.

Raketa has long been a celebrated name in watchmaking. Not just in the Soviet-era when the brand was established but in modern international collector circles too. The Petrodvorets Watch Factory launched the brand “Raketa” (meaning rocket) in 1961 to commemorate and celebrate the successful first launch of a human into space, Russia’s Yuri Gagarin.

Outside of Russia, it is a little-known fact that Peterhof wasn’t always home to a watch manufacturer. Established in 1721 by Peter the Great, the factory Raketa now calls home has produced myriad goods over its centuries-long history including the marble blocks for Lenin’s Mausoleum, the ruby stars of the Kremlin, and during WWII, valuable war waging equipment that ultimately helped Russia secure victory over the Nazis.

During Soviet times, the brand started making timepieces for the people. All of Russia shared the success of Gagarin and all the people could wear a rocket on their wrist to remind them of their country’s historic achievement. Under this direction, the workhorse movement, caliber 2609, was born. A reliable, robust, and well-sized movement, the 2609 lent itself well to the watches Raketa was producing for anyone who wanted one, at a price almost anyone could afford. In fact, Raketa was so prolific that an entire town sprung up around the factory including hospitals, schools, and universities. To this day Raketa maintains a watchmaking school to continuously train the next generation of Russian watchmakers. The factory continued to produce watches up to and past the fall of the Soviet Union without interruption.

In the decades that followed, more complications and functions were added to their base movement. Days, dates, 24-hour, and even a perpetual calendar were added and today Raketa says it has produced tens of millions of 2609-based movements and variations thereof.



Beginning in 2009 and proceeding through 2012, Raketa underwent a restructuring and brought in foreign talent to assist them in broadening their global appeal. This talent sweep ushered in top-ranked Swiss watchmakers to assist in modernizing the aging factory and most notably included Jean-Claude Quenet, the former escapement development leader at Rolex and former director of production at Franck Muller.

In 2014 the brand launched their new automatic movement, and in 2015 Raketa began to phase out production of the caliber 2609. As of this writing, Raketa has stated that the 2609 will only continue to be produced for limited editions, parts and service, and as customer calibers to small brands as they focus exclusively on their automatic movement "Avtomat" Caliber 2615 moving forward across all references.



The 2615 Avtomat (automatic) isn't actually a new movement but a refined version of the same caliber designed in the mid-1970s. Due to the economic realities for most Russians during this time many were unable to afford wristwatches, not to mention the additional cost necessitated by the winding system and the movement. They were quietly shelved in favor of the less expensive manual-winding movements. Raketa has merely brought this caliber back, albeit with modern equipment, finishing and tolerances. The 2615 utilizes a 2609 base caliber with an automatic winding system integrated into the movement.

Despite its inauspicious origins, Raketa has not stopped refining and reworking their revived caliber. This past year, in 2019, Raketa has further slimmed the movement to enable thinner profile cases another 2mm, bringing the total height of their movement down to only 6.8mm.

This is especially impressive considering the movement contains 242 parts. They have also established a dedicated finishing department this year, staffed with experts who decorate the movements seen through the caseback – another first for Raketa which had previously never offered exhibition backs as an option on their watches. Techniques such as “Perlage” and “Cotes de Neva” are present along with less traditional finishing such as laser engraving.



In an unusual and surprising move, as many brands have fled from Baselworld's traditional trade show model, Raketa has attended and indicated its desire to continue to attend the annual watch and jewelry show. Showing only one new model, Russian Code, this novelty displays the time in reverse to demonstrate a "different way of thinking." In a tribute to the movement of the solar system as it traverses the universe in an anticlockwise fashion, so too do the hands of the watch. Time is displayed as a normal 12-hour dial with only 3 hands, albeit moving in the opposite direction. The movement, dubbed 2615R (for Reverse Time), was actually re-engineered to achieve this feat.

Rather than add wheels to the gear train, which would have increased the thickness of the movement (and therefore have been considered unacceptable), the gearing of the entire wheel train was reversed from the start making a unique and wholly original movement and watch pair.

Raketa claims this is due to their desire to only produce watches that fit their uniquely Russian perspective on life. For example, the brand claims they would never consider a golf-themed watch since golf is not a Russian sport.

Indeed, the DNA in Raketa watches in some ways is completely hidden to customers who are not familiar with some facets of Russian culture. The color red is a much respected, old, and noble color that to Russians indicates beauty. Homes would have a "red corner" in which an icon of worship would be placed in Eastern Orthodox homes.

The Kremlin has walls of red and is adorned with ruby stars, the color implies its status as the "beautiful citadel" or "beautiful castle" as well as its respect as the seat of power for the Russian government. It sits on Red Square and is surrounded by red buildings. You may be forgiven for not noticing or not thinking much about brand script "Pakema" on the dial being red or the red dot on the end of every crown. This is Raketa signing each watch as a thing of beauty, passion, and being distinctly Russian.

Looking to the future, Raketa is celebrating the 50th anniversary of their Polar Explorer line of watches, originally released on December 20th, 1969 after strict instruction by the Kremlin to equip Soviet polar explorers. The re-release is expected to be offered in a true-to-the-original 2609 hand-wound movement with the famous 24-hour dial.

Collectors living in the Western Hemisphere will be happy to learn that beyond their service offerings in Russia and France, Raketa is expanding again to include a North American Service Center to provide top service without the hassle of having to send watches to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean for replacement parts and service as the watches age. No timetable was available for this new center, but Raketa indicated it was working "quickly" to make it available as collectors become increasingly familiar and interested in the brand.



Uniquely, Raketa is one of the only vertically-integrated wristwatch manufacturers in the world. Raketa possesses the unique ability to design, develop and manufacture all aspects of their watches under one roof. Even items commonly purchased by high-end movement makers such as the hairspring and escapement are produced in-house in the small factory in Peterhof. Coupled with younger management, a fresh marketing direction, and great-looking watches, Raketa is poised to go from antique and vintage collection circles and enter the global market as a worthy competitor at a desirable entry-level price point.

Raketa watches are available at a handful of boutiques worldwide or on their website at <http://www.raketa.com> (<http://www.raketa.com>). Every watch leaves the factory distinctly Russian.

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