

BETA

Down on the Swiss watch farms

A tranquil valley is the unlikely heart of fine Swiss watchmaking

William Cook 29 November 2014



Vallée de Joux

In a cosy attic above Junod, Lausanne's oldest watch shop, there's a museum which charts the story of Switzerland's obsessive quest to create the perfect wristwatch. There are all sorts of timepieces here, including one of the world's largest collections of Omega watches, but it's the timeline on the wall which grabs the eye. Pretty but practical, intricate yet efficient, Switzerland and the wristwatch were made for one another. They've been making watches here for centuries, and the heartland of this cottage industry is still where it's always been, in the wooded hills above Lausanne.

Funnily enough, Switzerland owes its watchmaking prowess to two age-old handicaps: religious bigotry and rotten weather. When France expelled its protestants, they fled to this French-speaking part of Switzerland, bringing their watchmaking skills with them. In this Calvinist corner of the country, no other jewellery was allowed and so watchmaking prospered. In the long hard winters, there was little else to do but milk the cows, so farmers doubled up as watchmakers — a workshop in the attic and a cattleshed below. Many of these 'watch farms' are still going strong today. There are dozens in the Vallée de Joux, barely an hour by train from Lausanne. I'd heard you could do a bike tour around some of them. It sounded like a great way to see the other side of Swiss watchmaking, far from the glitzy showrooms, in the spit and sawdust places where the world's finest watches are made.

Surrounded by dense forest and smothered in snow throughout the winter, the Vallée de Joux feels like a world away from cosmopolitan Lausanne. It's a paradise for hikers and cross-country skiers, but it's largely undiscovered by foreign sightseers. This is the Jura, a rugged borderland between France and Lake Geneva. If you want to escape the coach parties, this is the place to come. I took the train to Le Sentier, hired an e-bike at the station and set off in search of the watchmakers that time forgot. As you tootle around Lac de Joux, drinking in the view, you realise that finding them is half the fun. These watch farms aren't open to the public but, through an outfit called Bespoke Switzerland, I wangled introductions to two of them. The first was Philippe Dufour, who works in the old schoolhouse in Le Solliat, a sleepy village above the lake. 'I could never work this way in town,' he says, as he shows me his homely workshop, filled with the simple tools he's been using all his life. Some of them he made himself, some he inherited from his grandfather, also a watchmaker. His daughter went to school here. Today, she's a watchmaker, like most people around here. 'I never invented anything,' he tells me. 'I just took inspiration from what was done before.'





Master watchmakers — David Candaux's father, Daniel and Andrea Krieg

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Philippe makes every watch himself, the whole thing, from start to finish. He rarely makes more than a dozen editions of one timepiece. He once spent an entire year on a single pocket watch. 'You know the Swiss — we have to take our time,' he says, with a smile. Generally, he makes fewer than 20 watches a year. Modest and self-effacing, like all truly talented and creative men, his work embodies what makes a handmade mechanical watch so different from a mass-produced automatic. 'A quartz watch is very accurate, but it's dead,' he says. He shows me his favourite watch, the Simplicity: 'pure, functional — nothing fancy'. The name sums up his classic, understated style. 'It's alive,' he says, as he hands it to me. As I hold it and feel it tick-tock, I know exactly what he means. It's like a little beating heart. With more customers than he can cater for, it's no wonder his watches sell for five to six figures. It sounds like a lot, but you could spend that on a sports car and one of his watches will last a lot longer. 'If everything is done properly, it'll live forever.'



Master watchmakers — David Candaux's father, Daniel and Andrea Krieg

Around the corner, husband and wife team David and Caroline Candaux are restoring an old watch farm with such subtlety and discretion that it's hard to tell what's original and what's brand new. 'We can feel the other watchmakers,' says Caroline, who's alive to the historic resonance of this handsome building. Downstairs is still a building site, but their attic workshop is already up and running. Beneath ancient wooden beams, David plans his latest timepiece on a swish computer, yet the craftsmen around him still work in much the same way as their predecessors, a hundred years earlier. 'We are strongly linked with the roots of watchmaking,' says David. David's dad works here, too. He's been a watchmaker all his life.

David's creations have pride of place in the Espace Horloger, a sleek modern watch museum in a fine old factory built by the Swiss watchmaker Zenith in 1917. 'A watchmaker is like a painter,' says the museum's director, Vincent Jaton, as he shows me around. 'You have an *oeuvre d'art* on your wrist.' This hidden valley is the cradle of watchmaking. A few miles

away is the tranquil HQ of Blancpain, the world's oldest watchmaking brand, founded here in 1735. Breguet, Audemars Piguet and Jaeger-LeCoultre also make watches here. Along the road, at the Ecole Technique, the next generation of watchmakers are learning the trade of their forefathers. Students sit hunched over their desks, eyes down, working through their lunch hour. They pay me no attention. They're too busy to look up.

Back in Lausanne, with time to kill before my homebound train, I walk along the waterfront to the city's chic Olympic Museum. Framed by a ring of snowcapped peaks, Lake Geneva has never looked more lovely. Inside is a new exhibition, about the relationship between sport and time. As I stroll back into town, I try to work out what makes the Swiss such brilliant watchmakers. Maybe it's the fresh air? Or the mountain light? Or perhaps it's the patience and ingenuity that come from surviving — and prospering — in this beautiful but inhospitable Alpine landscape? I'm damned if I know. I reach the station with a few minutes to spare. My train arrives bang on time.

Bespoke Switzerland arranges watchmaking tours as part of their luxury experiences concierge service
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