



Cover Story
Carl F. Bucherer
takes it up a gear



WATCH BUSINESS MAGAZINE
EUROPEAN EDITION

N°329 1/15 FEB./MARCH



CHF12 / €10 / US\$12

A YEAR OF CONTRASTS

Geneva Week – SIHH special reports
The paradoxes of independence (Part I)
After-sales service: a ticking time bomb?

THROUGH THE HUSHED AISLES OF THE SIHH

by Pierre Maillard

**SUNDAY 18 JANUARY, 4 P.M.,
IN A LOUNGE OF
THE HÔTEL DES BERGUES...**

It's a glorious day. The air is crisp, the Pont du Mont-Blanc is lined with the white flags of the SIHH, and the powers that be at Geneva's City Hall have turned on the tap of the Jet d'Eau, which cascades down elegantly into the green waters of the lake. In front of the Hôtel des Bergues (which for the past few seasons has also sported an international Four Seasons label) limousines jockey for position. The SIHH opens tomorrow.

The only blot on this idyllic landscape: just three days ago, the Swiss National Bank announced that it was removing the ceiling on the Swiss franc to euro exchange rate. The effect was immediate: the price of Swiss watches jumped 20 to 25% from one moment to the next. "A tsunami for Swiss industry," spluttered Nick Hayek in Biel. What will happen? What strategies will the groups and big brands settle upon? Will they cut their margins or pass on the costs? It's the elephant in the room, but the huddle of people heading for the salon where Christophe Claret is about to present his Aventicum is keen to put this burning issue out of their minds for a moment, and take refuge in antiquity.

2000 years ago, Avenches was the capital of Roman Helvetia. It was to remain so for 300 years. During this period the Romans undertook some major construction works, including an amphitheatre that remains in very good condition today. An amazing hydraulic organ was also discovered there, bearing testimony to the opulence of the city, which was destroyed in 258 A.D. by the Alamanni hordes.

In 1939 a treasure of rare splendour was discovered in a drain: a perfectly preserved gold bust of emperor Marcus Aurelius. Reduced to a height of just 2.8 mm, it now presides over



△
AVENTICUM by Christophe Claret

the centre of the Aventicum watch. Placed in the exact centre of a minuscule mirror in the form of an inverted dome, the microscopic bust carved from gold appears to thrust out from the bottom of the dial. But it is a hologram: the bust is topped with a second parabolic mirror with a hole in the centre, which generates the optical illusion. The light waves reflected off the bust are magnified, making the holographic bust appear almost twice its actual size. This magical effect, which is sometimes used in children's toys, is called a mirascope. But achieving such miniaturisation was anything but



△
The magnificent Bâtiment des Forces Motrices

child's play. "It requires cutting-edge and meticulous construction techniques, as the effect cannot work unless the two minuscule mirrors are precisely curved. At that size, it really matters," explains Christophe Claret.

Step by step, the watchmaker is clearing land hitherto largely unexplored, that of playful Haute Horlogerie. After his delicious Margot with its falling petals, and the occasional foray into poker and roulette, Christophe Claret is off playing again. He just can't help himself. The back of the Aventicum features an oscillating weight in transparent sapphire¹, which bears five numbered Gallo-Roman racing chariots. A flick of the wrist sends them racing around, and the chariot that stops over the letter 'A' in 'Aurèle' is the winner.

This playful object, 120 of which will be made each year, costs CHF 49,000 or, at today's rates, 49,000 euros. At this price level, exchange rate fluctuations certainly seem less of an issue... A factor we came to appreciate as the week went on.

7 P.M., NEAR THE AIRPORT

While the Aventicum's chariots race, the roulette wheels are spinning at the Geneva Casino, next door to the airport, and consequently, to the SIHH. A flash of the credentials and I'm crossing a room filled with solitary punters mechanically feeding coins into slot machines; up a flight of steps, I arrive at a more elegant salon with large gaming tables. Look left, look right, and there is the SIWP, as the Swiss Independent Watch Pavilion is somewhat inelegantly known.

The brainchild of the dynamic Amarildo Pilo (Pilo & Cie), this new exhibition hall brings together some of the leading lights of independence: small but excellent watchmakers. It probably has more winners of the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève per square metre than anywhere else in the world. Kari Voutilainen, Vincent Calabrese, Vianney Halter, Ludovic Ballouard, Emmanuel Bouchet, Peter Tanisman and others are here, manning their booths. Antoine Prezioso, his triple tour-

billon in hand, celebrates his return to watchmaking after a pause for reflection. "Live happy, live small!" he enjoins, as a saxophonist invited to animate the opening launches into a riff, and the first champagne corks of the week are popped.

How will the week go? At least one person here is not the least bit worried. Kari Voutilainen, like his friend Prezioso, is keen to stay small. "I get by, and I do quite well. I produce 50 watches per year with 17 staff. I make practically everything myself. The majority of it goes in direct sales. As I rarely travel, my clients come to me. That's the key: do everything yourself. But be careful: you have to have the courage of your convictions." Wise words, but not everyone concurs. Some have different concerns. [For more on the SIWP, see the round table for independents, organised for the occasion by Europa Star Première.]

8.30 P.M., BY THE RHONE

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of the SIHH, the CEOs receive their guests in style at the magnificent Bâtiment des Forces Motrices, now an annex to the Grand Theatre, Geneva's opera house. Against the post-industrial backdrop, guests in evening dress greet each other with a handshake or a kiss on the cheek, press toward the Best Workers of France, who man the buffet, or signal for the World's Best Sommelier to come and suggest some wines. "Swiss franc... euro... dollar..." the words jump out above the laughter and the general hubbub, but that's not really what they're talking about. Clearly, no one has a clue what to think. Rumours are making the rounds: so-and-so has decided to put his prices up by 15% with immediate effect; another is offering handsome discounts; and a third swears he won't budge an inch. So let us move on. "Good evening! How are you?" But it wouldn't do to stay up too late; another Geneva Week starts in the morning.

¹ Reproduced under license from a patent registered by Vianney Halter