

How to buy wristwatches

Canny watch sellers employ a logical Italian dictum: a well-dressed man or woman owns at least three timepieces

The Day Watch is the most important: it’s the timepiece that suits your occupation or quotidian activity. If you’re in finance, dressy sobriety is all your watch must offer beyond the time. If you work in the media or the arts, you can be eccentric. If your occupation involves specific tasks, from ambulance driver to insurance broker to 787 pilot, just like Apple said without a hint of irony, “there are watches for that.”

For the second in the triumvirate, you have more scope. This is your dress-down timepiece, worn everywhere from the beach to the ski slopes, puttering around in the garden or garage. Whether a sub-£100 Swatch, or a close-to-unbreakable Rolex, it allows you to not worry about a quick dive in the pool, a round of golf or a drinking session that might get out of hand. This is your Casual Watch.

Last is the Dress Watch. If you find yourself wearing black tie/cocktail dress more than once a year, or if regularly-occurring events involve film premieres, opera or restaurants with 15-year verticals of Flaccianello, your Day Watch may be too business-y or too lacking in occasion. For this final part of the watch wardrobe, you may go one of two ways: classical, with a slim, time-only gold dress watch, or – if you’re a music entrepreneur, footballer or other sort of incurable vulgarian – blatantly bling-y. The mere presence of diamonds will accomplish this.

Where to start? One’s first watch is often a gift, from a Timex or Casio on up, received for school graduation, con-

firmation or Bar Mitzvah, 18th birthday or other special occasion. It will never be what you want, but you will wear and cherish it from your teens until your first pay check. Then you will be seduced by what will be your first status watch, as understood in today’s horologically-savvy era.

Buying wisely is the key to both a satisfying watch trio or a multitude of timepieces if the watch bug bites you. It’s not as tricky as you might think. As master watchmaker Peter Roberts observed, “There really are no bad wristwatches out there, because they all have to perform the same basic function and perform it well: they have to tell the time with accuracy. Manufacturing standards are impossibly high, so you should buy according to your budget and your taste.”

Established brands offer watches that will keep you reliably informed of the time for the rest of your life. Quality mechanical watches start for under £1,000, from makers such as Tissot, Seiko, Christopher Ward, Certina, Hamilton and many of the new wave of “micro-brands”. Up the budget and you’re in the market for Tudor, TAG-Heuer, Doxa, Zodiac, Longines and others, but be warned, especially if you’re planning over time to upgrade watches by trading in your current model: Quartz is simply infra-dig, so keep that for your unbreakable, throwaway Casual Watch – the one you wouldn’t lose sleep over when it’s stolen while you’re having a swim.

If purchasing a watch that makes a statement, a modicum of exclusivity begins above £5000. To taste the mid-

Right:
Day watch / Casual
Watch / Dress Watch





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to-high-end of watchmaking, expect to part with at least £8000-£10,000. This is the sector where Omega, Rolex, Cartier, Panerai, Zenith and other great names become accessible. On the other hand, should you want to wear something unlikely to be seen on the wrist of a fellow guest at a dinner party, start thinking £25,000 and above, or consider buying a vintage timepiece.

Established high-end houses of long standing, some measured in centuries, include A. Lange & Söhne, Breguet, Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, Audemars Piguet, Blancpain, IWC, Bvlgari, Chopard, Hublot, and others. They have been joined by many of the brands which were founded by then-young watchmakers during or after the Quartz Crisis of the 1970s, including Greubel Forsey, MB&F, Richard Mille, Daniel Roth, Parmigiani Fleurier, Jacob & Co and dozens of others, where six-figure price tags are the norm.

For the extra outlay, you acquire more in the way of “complications,” the watchmaker’s term for any function beyond displaying minutes, hours and seconds. The most common and useful are date, followed by day of the week, month and year, while the most popular among collectors are dual time-zones, moon-phase and chronographs. It’s a given that the cases will be in one of the golds or in platinum. Above this, where the cognoscenti prowl, prices reach seven figures for the most rare of perpetual calendars, tourbillons and minute repeaters.

Because survival rates vary, and because you cannot simply walk into any watch store or log onto any selling site for out-of-production wristwatches, they have their own innate exclusivity. A mint 1940s Universal Genève Tri-Compax chronograph outclasses – at least in terms of style – any of the new watches aimed at oligarchs because it shows imagination, individualism and effort. You have to hunt for such treasures, so they possess the same savoir faire as a vintage Alfa Romeo over a brand-new one.

“Pre-owned” is the euphemism as-new, second-hand watches, while “vintage” is arbitrarily applied to anything over 25 years old. As with modern supercars, a client probably bought an esoteric watch, grew bored and traded it in after a short period. Unlike cars, though, most watches (unless they’re on waiting lists) do not appreciate in the short term. Thus, you have dealers such as David Duggan and The Watch Club able to sell you pre-owned watches, with boxes and papers, for truly substantial savings. The only downside is that you are not buying as-new from a “main agent” but dealers of that calibre provide warranties of their own.

As for the unique exclusivity of vintage watches, these are acquired only by being in the right place at the right time. However much your heart may be set upon a 1930s rose-gold Rolex Bubbleback, you cannot go to your nearest dealer and buy one as you would a Datejust. As for spares for servicing, don’t even consider a vintage watch unless



you have deep pockets and access to a master watchmaker. If your watch needs a part which cannot be ordered from the manufacturer, it will have to be made from scratch. And that means a costly repair.

Another route for finding unusual or out-of-production watches is the watch auction. Watch auctions are increasingly popular, and the rules apply as with any other type of sale: study the catalogues, know your financial limits and attend viewings before the auction. Advantages outnumber the risks if you have a bit of knowledge and self-control. Recent watches will sell for substantially less than in stores that stock used pieces. If you find yourself bidding for a new watch with little competition, you could snag a bargain.

Ultimately, if you are buying with an investor’s mindset, only two brands are immune to fashion and will never depreciate in the long term: Patek Philippe and Rolex. But if you want only one watch to keep you happy forever, suitable for all situations regardless of the occasion, there is a timepiece which is immune to snobbery, criticism, taste, the passage of time, depreciation, obsolescence or quality issues. It’s the Zippo lighter/Montblanc pen/BMW 3-Series/Fender Stratocaster of wristwatches. Buy yourself a stainless steel Rolex Air-King and never look back.

Do’s and don’ts of purchasing

- 1 Buy only watches you’d want to wear in the first place, so you’ll never feel like you’re “stuck with it.” There’s little quite so sad as a watch sitting in a drawer, unworn and unloved.
- 2 Buy from an established retailer. Whether it’s part of a major chain or a well-established independent, the reputation will ensure that you’ll enjoy decent back-up. Also, it’s the ONLY guarantee that you’re not buying a fake; some modern counterfeits are so convincing that only a watchmaker could spot the difference, often by having to take it apart. (The biggest victims of faking are Rolex, Cartier, Breitling, Patek Philippe, and Panerai, but no brands are immune to the practise.)
- 3 Be nice. If you form a rapport with a retailer, that store will look after you over the years, even helping you to upgrade or trade in watches without you having to feel too much of the “sting” of depreciation.
- 4 If you’re terminally insecure, look to the established brands. Patek-Philippe, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Audemars Piguet, Vacheron Constantin, IWC, Cartier, Omega and other venerable marques didn’t survive one or more centuries through luck. Their products be-



“A fine watch on a strap beats a mediocre one on a bracelet — especially when every penny counts”

come family members, heirlooms which survive from generation to generation. You will also enjoy better re-sale value if you need to part with the watch.

- 5 If in doubt, be conservative. Nothing dates more quickly than a radically-styled watch. Ask any vendor to show you a selection of watches from the Decade That Taste Forgot, and he'll pull out a tray full of unsalable 1970s atrocities. (On the other hand, lovers of kitsch adore early digital watches. Go figure.)
- 6 Don't buy quartz watches except for knock-around sport purposes, raves or passing out at Glastonbury. Regardless of the price, from £2.50 to £2,000,000, quartz movements and watches are disposable, and – after a certain period – irreparable, even from the great houses.
- 7 If funds are limited, choose a watch with a strap over one with a bracelet. Bracelets can add hugely to the cost, and a fine watch on a strap is better than a so-so watch on a bracelet for the exact same financial outlay.
- 8 When buying new, keep all the paperwork and boxes. This provides support for proof of ownership, for accessing warranties, and for resale.

- 9 When buying vintage, ensure that there is a guarantee of at least 6 months if the watch is being sold as serviced. “As seen” is a red flag telling you not to buy it if you don't have a competent watchmaker at your elbow to advise you. If possible, get someone who knows about watches to examine the timepiece before you make your purchase. The inside of a watch will tell a repairer how many times it was serviced during its lifetime: the more, the merrier.
- 10 When buying at auction, attend the viewing beforehand, to handle and see the target of your bidding. Some houses will provide a condition report a few of weeks before the auction.

Do's and don'ts of ownership

You've just purchased a mechanical wristwatch. Like anything filled with minuscule moving parts, a wristwatch – new or vintage – should be treated with care and respect. If they're used and maintained with love and affection, they can provide many lifetimes' worth of service. Here are some basic guidelines to help you get the most from your latest acquisition:

Always set the hands in a clockwise direction. Some experts argue that this prolongs the life of the watch; others think that it's pure paranoia. Better safe than sorry – after all, it doesn't take much effort.

Don't believe the words “waterproof” or “water-resistant” unless your watch features a screw-back and a screw-down-crown. Even then, if it's pre-owned, it may not have been waterproofed after its last service. If in doubt, buy something cheap and cheerful, like a Swatch diving watch, for underwater duties. Unless, of course, you're actually scuba-diving, in which case a genuine diver's watch is required to ensure that you live past your dive. You can't go wrong with a Rolex Submariner or Sea-Dweller, certain Omegas and Certinas, any Panerai, most Tudors and Doxas, etc.

Try to wear your watch regularly. Just sitting there in a drawer does it no good.

Have your watch serviced. If you use it every day, a service every three-to-five years will suffice. Occasional use? Aim for servicing every five years.

Wind your watch carefully. If your watch is a manual wind model, you can feel when you're reaching a “full wind”, so don't force it. Over-winding often means a repair. Do not wind your watch when it's on your wrist – it puts too much strain on the winder. (Some experts reckon that you should wind your watch at the same time every day.) This doesn't apply to self-winding watches.

Don't believe the term “shock resistant”. A car is shock resistant, too, until it hits a wall. Dropping any watch onto a hard surface can be a costly accident.

Beware of magnets. Unless your watch is specifically designed to survive proximity to magnets, e.g. Rolex's Milgauss, IWC's Mk 11 or Ingenieur, etc, keep it away from fridge or freezer doors, hi-fi loudspeakers – even the headphones on your nightstand. ●