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TIME OUT :: Lifestyle

Time to show off

by S. Indra Sathibalan

RUSSIA is known for her long freezing winters and her world-renowned ballet, literature, music and arts. But not much is known about her people's watch-making skills.

While the Swiss have long marketed themselves as masters at making timepieces and the Japanese are fast catching up with digital technology, the Russians have concentrated on making collectors' items.

The art of making clocks (horology) first arrived in Russia in 1404 when the first chiming clock was built for the Kremlin Tower by a Russian monk. The first watch schools in Russia only appeared in 1929, with renowned watchmakers such as First State Watch Factory Poljot.

Apparently, Josef Stalin himself approved Poljot's first watch design name, Pobeda, which means victory. This home-grown brand was worn by the Russian elite and any watch connoisseur going to Russia knew that he had to get one.

"Russian mechanical watches shot to fame when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin wore the Sturmanskie (Navigator) watch to space," said Julianna Aloressa Chair, managing director of Red Army Watches Malaysia. That was in 1961.



"For more than 60 years, all of Russia's cosmonauts and military officers have been using Poljot improvement watches, and it is a tradition that is being practised to this very day." Even Japanese and Chinese astronauts have started using Poljot Sturmanskie watches in space.

Chair added: "With such implicit trust and faith in Russian-made watches, it comes as no surprise that brands from Russia soon had a large global following. Fans of mechanical timepieces appreciate the fine craftsmanship and exquisite precision of Russian watches."

Now, lovers of these Russian masterpieces no longer have to travel all the way to the motherland for them. Red Army Watches, with stores in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, not only carries Russian brands such as Poljot International, Alexander Shorokoff, Buran, Aviator, Sturmanskie, Moscow Classic, Soyuz, NauticFish and Denissov but also German brands like Schaumberg, Junker and Zeppelin and the French brand Lip.

Though Red Army Watches has been around for only a short time, it has already gained attention for its unique timepieces. Most of the watches it sells are mechanical pieces and any diehard collector will appreciate the skill it took to come up with each piece of this work of art.

Red Army Watches opened its first store here at Tropicana Mall, Petaling Jaya, last December while its second store was opened at Pavilion KL in October this year.

Red Army Watches executive director for Malaysia Soemantri Kusumadi said that of all the brands they have, Poljot International remains their most popular. "Poljot's designs are really classic and classic designs are always popular."

Sturmanskie watches are not far behind. "We were quite surprised [to discover] there were quite a few collectors here for these types of watches," said Soemantri. "They are especially interested with the Yuri Gagarin [watch] and the whole history part. This was actually the first watch in space."

He added that people are surprised to know that as the brand is quite unknown here.

Except for Junkers and Zeppelin brands, the other brands are exclusively sold at Red Army Watches. The prices range from RM850 to RM1,500 for battery-operated watches and from RM900 to RM20,000 for the mechanical ones.

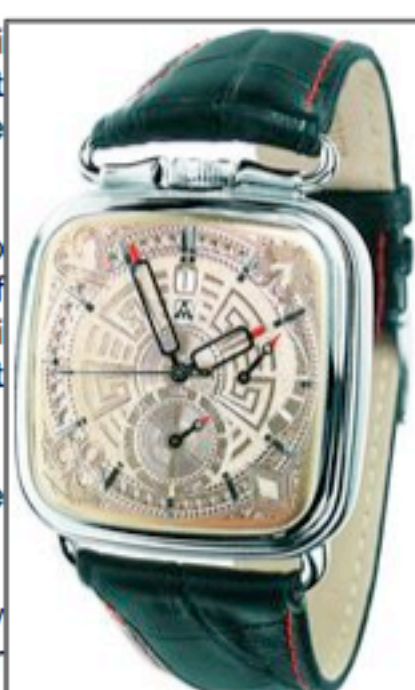
Right now, about 25% of the stores' customers are women but Soemantri is confident that the number will grow as more women are becoming attracted to the bigger sized Red Army Watches.

The watches come with leather straps but you can also opt for metal ones. However, Soemantri advises leather straps for mechanical watches as the straps will help absorb excess moisture from our wrist to prevent it from affecting the watch's mechanical parts.

The stores offer watch straps by Hirsch from Austria which fits different wrist size.

Red Army Watches stores are located on Level 4, The Pavilion Kuala Lumpur, and Level 1, Tropicana City Mall, Petaling Jaya.

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