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Pure Tour, Part II

Our tourist visits Audemars Piguet, Renaud & Papi and Jaeger-LeCoultre in this second part of his travelogue.

It was a picturesque morning drive through the dewy mountains of the Vallee De Joux to the Hotel des Horlogers. The hotel is situated right next to Audemars Piguet, the prestigious manufacture

I came to visit. After a quick walk from the hotel, the most flattering sight I had seen in a long time widened my eyes: The Singaporean flag, flying at Audemars Piguet headquarters (I live in Singapore.).

I couldn't believe my eyes as the very warm CEO, George-Henri Meylan, came out to welcome me, adding to the honor.

The tour of the company's museum that followed was very humbling.



In the warm interior of the building the beauty of stunning wrist watches and pocket watches from hundreds of years ago teased me behind glass display cases. It was here that I developed a crush on the triple complication and was infatuated with the star wheel pocket watch. They were simply so gorgeous, and mechanically even more beautiful. I only wished that I could take them out for a day or two...

The next department in the building was the restoration gallery. This is where all the most complicated pieces are restored and parts are rebuilt from scratch. The people in this department then brought out some magnificent pocket watches.

I saw a minute repeating split-second chronograph dating back more than a hundred years. The unparalleled level of finishing and enamel dial work just added to the awe that I already held in my facial expression. Not only were these pieces incredibly difficult to make more than a century ago, but this and others I saw were made by the hands of Mr. Audemars and Mr. Piguet themselves.

Renaud & Papi

The next part of the trip that Audemars Piguet organized was a day trip to the high-tech workshops of Renaud & Papi. These were the people in charge of most of Audemars Piguet's grand complica-

tions. Using nanotechnology, they produce some of the smallest parts ever made for haute horology.

Giulio Papi was my guide to the world of minute repeaters, split-second chronographs, tourbillons and other such grand complications present in Audemars Piguet watches. Audemars Piguet long foresaw the potential in the work of R&P, and it wasn't long before they bought into the company. Audemars Piguet is now a majority shareholder of this young team of inspired watchmakers. The firm produces some of the world's most ingenious and complicated watch movements. These include the Audemars Piguet Concept watch, the ultra small ladies' carillon minute repeater and the rutile quartz crystal tourbillon in the Edward Piguet case.

The avant-garde workshop had a very young feel to it. There were young people in every department working with gusto, and you could almost touch the thick enthusiasm for watchmaking here.

From department to department, I witnessed things like Giulio Papi making plastic models of levers, gears and cams to a room full of older men bent over their tables working "atelier" style at triple complications. They were driven.

I was most unwilling to leave and almost had to be dragged out at closing time. If not for the promise of the Jaeger-LeCoultre factory visit the next day, there would have been almost no chance of my leaving without putting up a fight.

Jaeger-LeCoultre

Jaeger-LeCoultre, of course, is the company that has made more calibers than any other manufacture in the world. Not only does it produce at least one or two calibers yearly,



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but also holds the title to having more patents in mechanical watch-making than any other company. Jaeger-LeCoultre also has the added strength of maintaining the closest thing to a complete self-contained manufacture.

Upon stepping into the factory, I was immediately surrounded by many small doors leading to their respective departments, and what better way to start a tour than by visiting and admiring the works done by two of the world's best enamellers, Miklos Merczel and Sophie Roche? I personally liked "The Little Prince" painted miniature on enamel painting on the back of a rose gold Reverso.



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Master watchmaker Sylvain Golay was our next guide. Despite how busy he was, he still took the time to show us around his workshop and explain what his department does. The department includes the development of future movements and calibers. He would go back and forth between the storeroom and his bench until a specific part was found or made.

The engravers followed immediately after. I watched as they effortlessly removed consistent bits of

metal with a graver and their hands.

It was with lack of skill that I took ages to get a screw fitted into the balance wheel, and applying perlage on the base plates of movements to decorate them was even harder to do without a robot. However, the huge number of ladies present in the workshops applying perlage to the base plates quickly yet consistently was incredible. Trying my hand at it, I produced a baseplate so badly done that I knew that these artisans had been doing it for years. I couldn't

get an even distance between pearls and the edges of the baseplates. This result, I thought, shows first that indeed a lot of skill and love goes into making these watches. Secondly, it shows that advanced machines are still nowhere close to replacing humans when it comes to movement decoration.

Finally, I am even more happy to know that the manufactures I visited make a conscious effort to keep the old-fashioned spirit of watchmaking alive. ☺