



The author Khoo in Glashutte with a statue of F.A. Lange, left, nearby Dresden; below, Glashutte Original's flags in its parking lot and, at bottom, the firm's four-story lobby



BY DOMINIC KHOO

# Pure Tour

Our tourist (and Purist) visited several watch company headquarters this past summer. His first stops were in Germany.

**W**hat started as an idea to travel with a backpack and visit watch manufactures all went out a beautifully framed window when my gracious hosts A. Lange & Sohne checked me into the Bulow Residence.

Instead of sleeping in a tent, I slept in a five-star boutique ho-

tel, arguably the best of its class in Dresden. This certainly showed one thing: that Lange believed very strongly in offering the very best.

Katrin Meusinger, public relations manager at Lange, personally drove me to the manufacture in Glashutte after breakfast to start what would be the first of many

watch factory visits in Germany and Switzerland.

## A. Lange & Söhne

The Lange manufacture had a certain “lo and behold” feel to it. When I walked through the security doors into the production facilities, I could feel how seriously this company takes its watches.

Static-free rooms, expensive precision engineering machines, watchmakers both young and old working together on tiny mechanical wonders—it was all too much to take.

The first room that really took my breath away was the complications department. Of course, Lange fans and enthusiasts would know that this meant that I would be where legendary watches such as the Datograph and Double-Split were made. Piece by piece, watchmakers bent over their tables gingerly and placed ridiculously small levers, gears and pinions into their rightful places. The parts had already been through a number of departments, including manual polishing and bev-





Glashütte Original's new building is just one of several that belong to watch firms in this, the center of Germany's horology industry.

eling, to achieve the finest finish in mechanical watchmaking.

What amazed me was that the watchmakers still managed to maintain their sanity at the end of the day, and return the next!

To make each Lange truly unique, the engraving department showed us just how skilled its artisans are. In a finished watch, Lange's hand-engraved balance cock is simply stunning. Putting a "raw" balance cock under the microscope, the engraver almost magically grinded bit by bit of German silver away until the desired pattern was formed. Why this seemed so magical was the fact that the engraver seemed not to move her hands at all. Yet the video screen showed that she was indeed taking away bits of metal with the daintiest of hand movements. My dropping jaw did nothing to distract her from completing her job in minutes and

examination under a 50X microscope showed machine-like perfection.

And as if all this wasn't enough, Meusinger ended the tour with a gesture that really made me feel like a kid in a candy store. Every single Lange watch, past and present, was brought out for my viewing and touching pleasure. I could not get my hands off the Langematik Perpetuals and the Double Split. I literally had to be presented with my door gift before I finally got the hint that the factory had to close for the day. Leaving was painful.

#### **Glashütte Original**

However, I knew that I had at least one more candy store to visit in Glashütte, and CEO of Glashütte Original Dr. Frank Muller gave me a high horological honor when he personally invited me to visit the prestigious German manufacture.

The very first thing that struck me was how clean and modern the building looked. We've always read about 200-year-old buildings with archaic embellishments being the true homes of watchmakers, but the designers of this building clearly had different ideas.

Enter sharp, clean lines and energy-saving shapes. It looked truly as if the company was now more prepared than ever to face the rapidly changing future of watchmaking. As I walked in, I was faced by a large group of people waiting for a tour to begin. Assuming that the tour wasn't going to start so quickly, I explored the boutique to our right that showcased every single Glashütte Original watch ever made. The Julius Assmann. The Alfred Helwig. We also saw a hand-painted Meissen collection. All this and more distracted us from the



A close look at the finely blued hands made by A. Lange & Sohne in Glashutte.

approach of our tour guide for the afternoon—Muller.

Of course he was knowledgeable in all aspects of the business and he carried with him a magic key that brought us behind closed doors to explore every single department of the manufacture.

Our first stop was the milling department where the base plates are made. CNC machines lined the room, each churning out base plates as we watched. Coolants were sprayed, the heavy chinking of gears and metal parts filled our ears. There were crates of raw metal and schematic diagrams everywhere. Frank explained how each machine worked, pointed out how the base plates were designed and then manufactured in that workshop, and even gave us a each a small present in the form of an unfinished base plate.

#### Blued Screws

The next station was one of the most interesting I'd seen during the trip. Muller explained that being a true manufacture, Glashütte Original also has tools that make other tools. From these workshops, one of the tools that it produce is a

device that holds many tiny screws together on the same plane so that many could be polished at the same time. This contraption made a lot of sense, especially when we got to the finishing department. There, a technician held her hands in the most graceful of motions as she rubbed that very tool face down over diamond-dusted paper. The result? Beautifully mirror-polished screws ready to be blued.

The screw polishing however, was not a short procedure. In fact, she had been rubbing the same set of screws over and over again on the diamond-dusted paper since the morning. This ends the argument about which takes longer to make, polished or blued screws, because Glashütte Original mirror-polishes its screws first before the bluing process begins. The right amount of strength and speed has to be exercised in order for the screws to be consistently polished, and even though the wearer would never see many of these screws. This



With this device, many screws can be polished at the same time.

almost senseless dedication to perfection really speaks for the people of Glashutte Original.

### Getting Complicated

The next department did absolutely nothing to help us get over our amazement—the high complications department. Watches like the PanoRetroGraph, the PanoMaticChrono and the tourbillons are assembled, regulated and worked on by eight dignified master watchmakers in this room at the uppermost floor of the manufacture. Just by looking at the way they worked, you could tell that they were very proud of what they

were doing, and that getting the watches done right was more than just a job.

Piece by piece, one master watchmaker steadily took apart a traditional Glashutte flying tourbillon movement that needed regulation. All these tiny parts weight a total of less than 0.3 grams, and the master watchmaker managed to strip each part with utmost confidence.

Not only did he have to deal with parts that would be incredibly difficult to find if dropped, but also the rapid shutter speed of my camera going off in his ear. And yet, he and his fellow men-of-complications continued to work unfettered. I re-

alized that I could not do what they were doing; that is to sit at a table for so long working on something so small for such long periods of time over many years. What these people do is truly special.

As I tore myself away from Glashutte, I prepared for the next part of my journey, a visit to several Swiss manufacturers, which you can read in the next issue of *International Watch*. ☺

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