

Like Clockwork:

JS Watch Co. Reykjavík has time on their side

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In a world in which big-box stores and mass production have long since become the norm, the idea of opening a small, family business specializing in limited-edition, handmade products may seem more like a nostalgic daydream than good business sense. Nevertheless, in 2005, friends Sigurður Gilbertson, Júlíus Heiðarsson, and Grímkell Sigurþórsson decided to take a leap of faith and found JS Watch Co. Reykjavík, Iceland's first watch manufacturer, and, they joke, 'probably the smallest watchmaker in the world.'

The idea may have been idealistic—Iceland certainly doesn't have a long tradition of quality timepiece production—but the founders had good reason to be optimistic. They would be joined in their endeavour by Sigurður's father, Gilbert Guðjónsson, a master watchmaker with nearly 50 years of experience. Gilbert started apprenticing as a watchmaker at the tender age of 16 and soon discovered a real passion for the craft, often electing to skip summer holidays and work long night and weekend hours in order to hone his skills. So many years later, once Gilbert had long owned and run his own successful watch repair shop in Reykjavík, the

idea of launching a brand of Icelandic-designed, Icelandic-manufactured specialty watches didn't seem so crazy. In fact, it seemed like a lot of fun.

Weathering the storm

Starting as something of a luxury brand, JS Watch Co.'s first collection was made in an exclusive batch of just

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100 watches. It sold out in less than six months. Following this success, Gilbert and his partners went on to successfully design, manufacture, and sell out of five more limited-edition collections. JS Watch Co. pieces were designed with longevity in mind—they were made to be heirlooms, Gilbert explains, durable watches that could be passed from one generation to another—and the shop's



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attention to craftsmanship and quality manufacturing were quickly making the brand a household name in Iceland.

And then, disaster struck. The 2008 global financial crisis hit, and Iceland's once-flourishing economy collapsed. But where the financial sector suffered, JS Watch Co. was able to weather the storm, finding that its products excited the attention of many foreign visitors who were suddenly flooding Iceland's shores, drawn by the country's stunning natural wonders and, of course, its newly favourable exchange rate. JS Watch Co. watches found themselves on the wrists of jet-setters, collectors, and fashionistas worldwide, and the company went on to garner commissions from such diverse public figures as Tom Cruise, Yoko Ono, King Constantine II of Greece, and even the Dalai Lama.

Sailors, Vikings, and Volcanoes

Today, JS Watch Co. Reykjavík offers a dozen elegant and classically styled



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watch collections, each of which was designed by master designer Grímkeill in cooperation with the team and then hand-constructed by Gilbert and Sigurður in their workshop at Laugavegur 62 in downtown Reykjavík. All of the collections offer their own unique detailing and specifications, and are suitable for wearers in various walks of life. For instance, there's the Sif North Atlantic Rescue Timer (Sif N.A.R.T.), which is actually the official watch of the Icelandic Coast Guard. Still stylish with its custom decorations, blue screws, and Rhodium-plated finish, this is a practical piece, too: it features luminous numerals for easy visibility in poor weather and is water-resistant at depths of up to 1000 metres.

Another standout piece is the Frisland Goð Special Edition, which puts a rather epic spin on the idea of 'Icelandic design.' The steel watch case is hand-engraved with ancient Viking Höfðaleitur (or 'Head Letters'), a special font that was once used for ornate wood and horn carvings. (Being somewhat hard to read, was often used to transmit messages of particular secrecy or importance.) And, in a nod to the power of Icelandic nature, the watch face contains real ash

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from the Eyjafjallajökull volcano. This watch is only made by special order, allowing the future-wearer to even customize the Höfðaleitur lettering to their specifications.

All of the company's timepieces do have some things in common: for one, their custom-decorated Top Grade Swiss movements, produced by renowned Swiss manufacturers Soprod and ETA, according to JS Watch Co.'s own specifications. Moreover, after construction, all of the movements go through two weeks of testing and quality control to ensure that every single piece is up to the com-



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pany's exacting standards.

And in the end, it's this patient attention to detail and quality that ensure that JS Watch Co. Reykjavík's clientele will keep coming back. Eleven years after their first collection launched, time is still definitely on their side.

1. 1919 Svart Rautt
2. Details of Frisland Goð Special Edition
3. 101 Blue
4. Frisland Goð Special Edition
5. Sif North Atlantic Rescue Timer
6. 101 Studio Session
7. Frisland Classic