

After an eventful trip to Indonesia in 2014, Stuart Swan brought back from his adventures a fresh outlook on life. Instead of rejoining the rat race, he created a business that revolves around the core concepts of harmony, sustainability and quality.



Marking time with Capetonian watchmaker Stuart Swan

BEING A TRUE CAPETONIAN, SWAN appreciates balance in his personal and professional life – so, after a hard day's work, he can be found riding the waves on surfboards he has made himself. His lifestyle is reflected in his wooden watches, mixing high-quality stainless steel, carbon fibre and natural wood into an accessory that is suitable for any occasion.

Bettél watches are not only environmentally responsible, but have the added bonus of style. Swan, an engineer by day, has developed a durable product which is tried and tested.

His vision is to design labour-intensive products that can be manufactured in South Africa to create jobs and utilise the amazing resources this country offers. His hope is to inspire people to harness their passions and use their talents in the most efficient and empowering ways possible.

Tell us about your life prior to becoming a watchmaker. Were your creative talents evident at an early age?

Since I could walk, I was always in my dad's workshop tinkering with whatever I could find. As I got older, I started making wooden toy boats, cars and various contraptions. When I was about 15, my dad bought me my first motorbike, which I restored and sold at

a profit to buy another bike. I did the same with that bike and repeated the process a few times to buy the motorbike I really wanted. I also got into making wooden surfboards. After finishing school, I studied mechanical engineering at the University of Cape Town. During my time there, I designed and made a carbon-fibre water rocket which broke the world record for the highest altitude of a water rocket – 823 m.

When did you decide you wanted to make watches?

When my ex-wife and I were flying back from a few months in Indonesia. I was looking at the in-flight magazine and saw a beautiful wooden watch. It had been made somewhere in Europe and was a real work of art. That inspired me and



I actually started designing wooden watches in my notebook for the rest of the flight home. As soon as we got back to Cape Town, I started making the first prototype.

How did you acquire the skills?

To make my first watch, I bought a cheap metal one and used its parts to fit into the wooden case I had made. I used a pair of bathroom tweezers to assemble the watch. Once the first watch was complete and I'd worn it for a few months, I bought basic watchmaker's tools, some movements, hands and crowns to create a few more designs.

Do you still remember the first watch you ever made?

Yes – it looked like a matchbox! It was definitely the most unique watch I've ever made and I was very proud of it at the time. However, when I look at it now, I cringe. Then again, if you're new to something, you have to start somewhere and improve from there. I guess the hardest part is starting. I keep that first watch hidden away because it was a really amateur design and I don't want people to see it.

What sparked your interest in making watches from wood?

I'd always been interested in watches because of their precision and tiny complexity. Wood was easier to work with than metal and required less expensive tools, so it was more accessible.

How do you source your materials?

I source the woods and leathers from local merchants. Most of the watch cases are made of kiat hardwood. For the costlier watches, I use more expensive hardwoods like African blackwood and wild olive. Movements and standard parts are imported from either Switzerland or Japan.

Working with wood surely entails special considerations. What kind of woods, treatments or techniques are involved? Does wood have particular benefits?

Yes, working with wood does entail special considerations. It's not like metal because it's always changing shape, even if it's only by fractions of a millimetre. Machining the wooden cases is the hardest part – we do this on our CNC machine. Special cutters are used to ensure the cases are cut to the right tolerances so that everything fits together. Not all woods can be used for our cases. Some hardwoods have a very high internal stress once they're

dried and they distort badly once they've been machined because of the energy stored in the grain of the wood. As a result, you get an oval watch case instead of a round one. Wood also moves with changes in moisture, so it has to be sealed properly.

How are your watches received internationally?

We were profiled once on BBC News, which resulted in many online sales to Europe and the USA. At the moment we export to Switzerland, but we're looking to expand more into other areas of Europe.

What do you do in your free time?

I love anything outdoors, especially surfing. I walk on the beach before and after work on days when I don't surf. Otherwise, I enjoy spending time with my family and friends.

Do other interests influence your watch-making?

Given my background in mechanical engineering, I've worked a lot with carbon fibre. It's one of my favourite materials to work with and I've used it in many of my watch designs. Surfing has also

influenced my designs by inspiring me to create waterproof wooden watches.

Do you remember the first watch you ever owned?

It was actually a stopwatch that I hung around my neck. I wore it everywhere!

If there were no Bettél, what watch would be on your wrist right now?

Probably nothing!

What is more challenging: coming up with an idea or abandoning one?

Probably abandoning one. I'm creative, so coming up with ideas is very natural to me. However, once an idea has been conceived and time and effort have gone into its development, it's hard for me to drop it if it isn't viable. I can sometimes be too persistent in trying to make something work when it simply isn't viable.

What do you enjoy most about making watches?

I love the scale of it – everything's very small and precise, yet extremely accurate and functional. It's where art and function meet. Watches are also among the most sentimental possessions people own. Every watch has a story behind it and I like that.

Who or what could you not live without?

My daughter and the ocean.

What does the future hold?

I want to design more artistic pieces – once-off creations using beautiful Swiss automatic movements for people who really appreciate what I do. I love being able to really spend time making a watch and perfecting it. Once-off creations allow me to do this because I can charge enough to make it viable for me. ■

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