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COMMEMORATIVE
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SINGAPORE CLOCK & WATCH TRADE ASSOCIATION
SINCE 1929

GENERATION NEXT

ONE IS A SINGAPORE-GROWN SWISSMADE WATCH MARQUE, THE OTHER A WATCH RETAILER TOUTING AN INNOVATIVE CONCEPT. MEET THE MINDS BEHIND THE AZIMUTH WATCH COMPANY AND RED ARMY WATCHES, STAR DENIZENS RECONFIGURING THE WATCHSCAPE HERE

Text: Gary Tan, Photos: Maurizio L / Maurice Cooil Bar

BORN LOCAL, GROWN GLOBAL

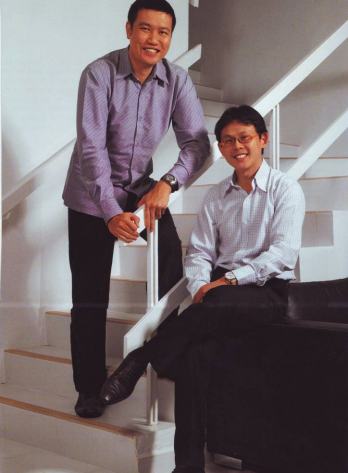
ALVIN LYE AND CHRISTOPHER LONG ARE THE PROUD PARENTS OF AZIMUTH

Who would have imagined five years ago that two Singaporeans could successfully design, produce and distribute Swiss-made watches to more than 20 countries and fly Singapore's flag on the international watch scene? But that's more or less the case with Christopher Long and Alvin Lye, founders of home-grown Azimuth Watch Company.

Azimuth's humble beginnings started with a single watch design – the Bombardier – a 'brandless' vintage timepiece inspired by a generic German pilot watch. Five years on, they've added to the number with no less than six product lines that combine innovation with Swiss watch-making tradition, culminating in avant-garde mechanical timepieces. And since 2007, Azimuth has been exhibiting annually at the prestigious BaselWorld watch and jewellery fair in Switzerland. A huge coup for an infant brand by any count, its entry into, arguably, the world's most important horological trade and media fair has been by no means serendipitous but sheer hard work.

"If we had known all the challenges that lay ahead of us, we'd never have started making our own watches," jokes Lye. "Upon hindsight, it's truly an achievement for us to come this far and survive unscathed from the economic crisis," adds Long.

Putting their heads together, Long and Lye usually come up with the concept for a watch design in the comfort of their local office (they moved into the Holland Village location mid 2009) – typically featuring a mechanical movement and high-tech complications – and then work with their own atelier based in Bielna, Switzerland to bring their creations to life. From a production of about 200 pieces in the first year, they now manufacture about 1,500 watches a year, with a price range of between \$2,500 and \$7,000. They are also able to produce one-off timepieces at one-off prices of \$100,000 and up for hard-core collectors.



ALVIN LYE & CHRISTOPHER LONG
CO FOUNDERS, AZIMUTH WATCH COMPANY

'We do everything from A to Z, from concept to design to marketing strategy and our own manufacturing facility in Switzerland,' says Long, who started his love affair with watches by scouring weekend flea markets for vintage pieces as a teenager. And his time at Sincere Fine Watches as a brand management executive further fuelled his desire to launch his watch business. "I had this bold notion of being the first Singaporeans to design and manufacture Swiss-made watches. It was a refreshing business angle."

"Our strength is in making a unique design, not a me-too product," says Long, whose concepts have been inspired by, among others, a detail from a high-performance supercar, the head of a vintage tin robot toy and even a roulette wheel. "Our design DNA results in a watch that looks different," he says. "The craftsmen in Switzerland turn my ideas into reality. We also come up with the complications that support the aesthetics of the watch."



Azimuth at Mandarin 2008, Singapore

Azimuth watches are distributed in 20 countries, with the biggest overseas markets in the US, Japan and Hong Kong. "Down the road, we have to expand the business, invest in facilities and so on. My goal is to build up brand equity so that everyone will know what Azimuth is about," explains Lye.

Going it all alone with a brand new 57-sqm standalone boutique of the refurbished Mandarin Gallery retail space and a web presence that has generated a growing buzz among young collectors, Azimuth has achieved glowing international recognition within a short five years. Basking in the title as Singapore's first-ever mechanical watchmaker, Long says: "Azimuth is happy to remain a niche brand."



A brand new Azimuth standalone-boutique at the refurbished Mandarin Gallery