

Swiss watchmaker says it's time to make luxury sustainable

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ID Geneve brand co-founder Cedric Mulhauser works on a watch movement.

Vegetal leather and recycled stainless steel melted in a solar oven are among the materials a Geneva watch brand is using in its quest to make sustainable luxury timepieces.

The small ID Geneve start-up launched in 2020, vowing to make high-end watches with a climate- and environmentally-friendly circular production approach using non-traditional materials.

"It is out of the question to use boxes made of Amazonian wood that will be left to gather dust in a closet," Nicolas Freudiger, the company's 35-year-old co-founder, told AFP.

Instead, the 620 watches the company has made so far have been presented in compostable packaging made from algae, which can dissolve in water and be used as garden fertilizer.

ID Geneve, which sells pieces for between 3,600 and 5,000 Swiss francs (\$4,200-\$5,800), has already made a splash in the world of Swiss watchmaking.

And the buzz has grown louder since US actor Leonardo DiCaprio came on board as an investor last October.

Freudiger, a graduate of Lausanne's Hospitality Business School who previously worked at Coca-Cola, came up with the idea to make a sustainable luxury [watch](#) brand after attending a circular economy seminar.



Stainless steel recycled from scraps left over from the manufacturing of watches and medical materials goes into the sustainable luxury timepieces.

'Credible luxury alternative'

He discussed it with childhood friend Cedric Mulhauser, a watchmaker trained at the prestigious Vacheron Constantin brand, and a designer friend, Singal Depery Moesch.

The three decided to create "a credible luxury alternative", Freudiger said.

For their first model, Circular 1, they used [stainless steel](#) recycled from scraps left over from the manufacturing of watches and medical

materials in Switzerland's Jura region.

They also snapped up unsold watches from larger brands, which had been destined for destruction, for components.

And for the delicate wrist straps, they turned in part to an Italian company that uses grape marc—the solid residue left after pressing—and also to a British start-up that makes vegetal leather from green waste gathered in London parks.

The trio also went to the French Pyrenees mountains to test a solar oven, returning with recycled steel ingots, melted down without using fossil fuels.

They are soon hoping to move that part of the production to Switzerland, amid plans for a new solar oven in the northwestern town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Jura mountains.

During the ChangeNow innovation fair in Paris last March, the trio discovered a healable composite technology developed by doctorate students from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL).



Plastic-free compostable material is recycled for a vegan strap.

The students, who launched a start-up named CompPair, say their technology allows for the simple and rapid repair of carbon fiber materials used in fields like aeronautics, wind power and sports equipment.

ID Geneve and CompPair decided to team up, using recycled carbon fibers sourced from wind turbine production scraps to make dials that can be repaired with a heat gun if scratched or dented, with no chemicals needed.

Sustainably 'sexy'

"We want to show that it is as sexy to wear a watch using CompPair technology as a watch made with 18-carat pink gold," Freudiger said.

For now, these watches appear to appeal to company executives and engineers specialized in environmental materials, who are seeking "a jewel to reflect their values", he said.

Analysts say ID Geneve may have found a niche.

"There is definitely a part of the market looking for these sorts of products," Jon Cox, an industry analyst with the Kepler Cheuvreux financial services company, told AFP.

"Surveys consistently say that... consumers of luxury want more sustainably-sourced products."



The company is ramping up production this year.

British luxury retailer Watches of Switzerland agreed.

"The next generation of watch buyers are more environmentally conscious now than ever," it told AFP in an email.

The watches have been a hit in Europe and North America "with pieces being sold immediately after launch", it said.

Luca Solca, a luxury goods analyst at asset management firm Bernstein, hailed the company's "very clean and nifty attempt to stand out" as a newcomer in a very established industry.

While it may face swelling competition as others, including the big, established brands, follow suit, by then ID Geneve may "no longer be so small, and may have carved out a niche for itself", he said.

The company is ramping up production, aiming to make 1,000 watches this year.

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