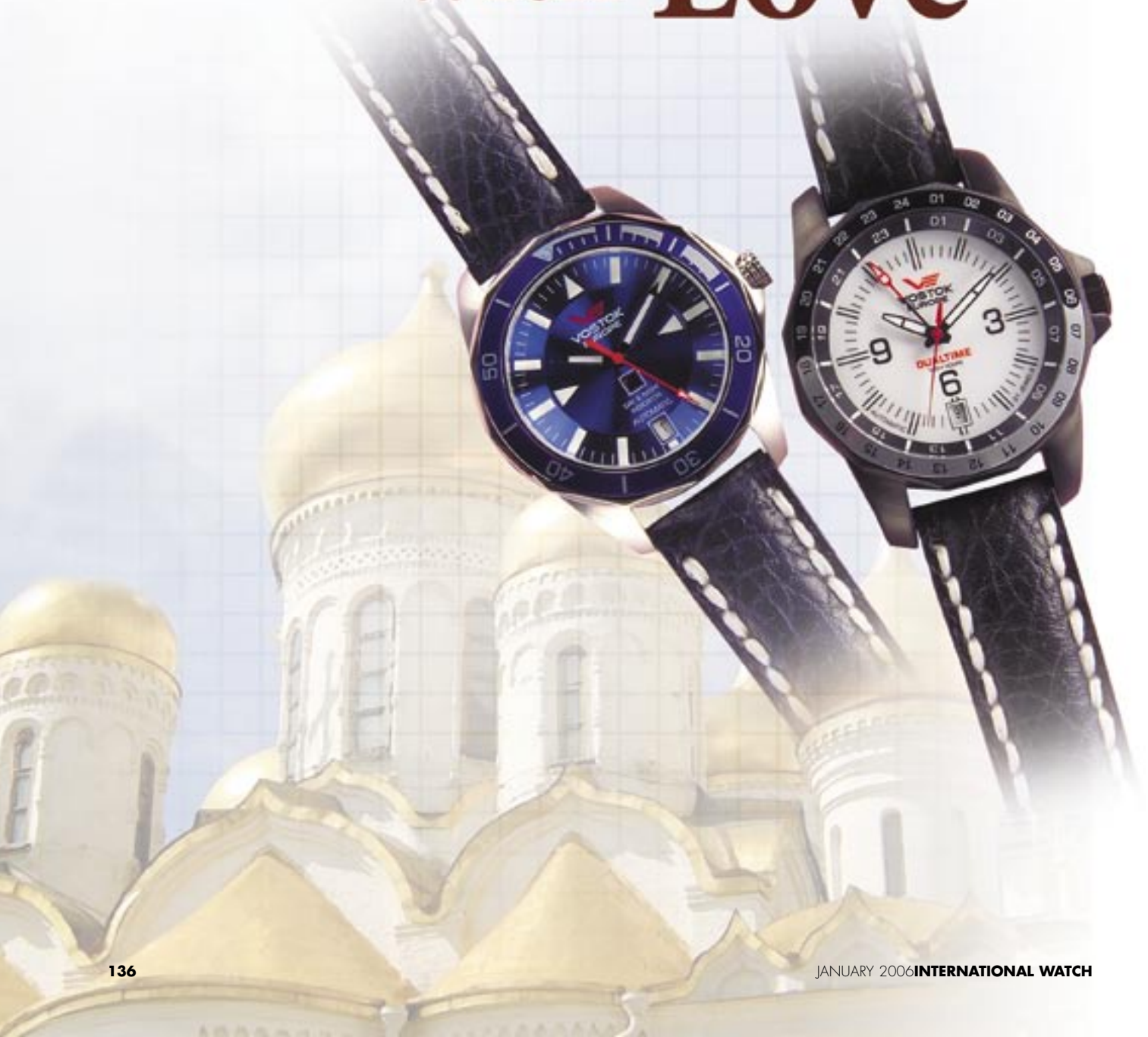
BY JONATHAN BUES

Vostok-Europe's newest has the potential to shake up the nascent market for low-price automatics

From Russia with Love



Opposite page, left to right: The K3 Submarine and Rocket N1.

Left to right: The Icebreaker Arktica and the AN-225 MRIYA

Vostok-Europe, a subsidiary of the Russian watch company Vostok, is new to the Western market and has positioned itself to fill a niche that has been ignored (or is impossible to reach) by almost every manufacturer selling in Europe and the United States. Vostok-Europe's self-proclaimed raison d'etre is to sell automatic watches in the $150 to $250 range.

The new line of watches being sold in Europe and the United States is the result of a collaboration between Vostok, an old Soviet manufacture that for many years sold ebauches to China and other eastern markets, and Koliz, a Lithuanian firm that started trading watches in 1992. Vostok-Europe designs, assembles and distributes the watches; Vostok supplies the movements.

The two men at the center of this venture are Igor Zubovskij, CEO of Koliz-Vostok (Vostok-Europe), and Vladislaw Tsyvilin, CEO of Vostok. Their new venture has real potential to shake up the low-to mid-range automatic watch market, which in this sector includes primarily Swatch, Invicta, Timex and the range of Chinese-sourced pieces.

The pair understands that there are hurdles to be cleared regarding quality control, an issue that has generated negative impressions from many watch enthusiasts regarding some Russian products. The other is the perception that Russian business practices are unfamiliar in the West. Vostok has tried to address both of these problems by founding an English-language school at its facilities in Chistopol, Russia, and by raising monthly salaries to between 15,000 and 20,000 rubles ($480 to $640), excellent pay by Russian standards.

These long-term investments in human capital indicate that Vostok is willing to address quality concerns and take the steps necessary to develop trust among wary Western consumers.

Vostok automatic movements are finished with blued screws and are visible through the clear casebacks.

First watches

The first generation of Vostok-Europe watches, designed and released for BaselWorld 2004 and now expanding into the United States, presents an interesting, albeit simple, range of mechanical watches, all of which feature the 2432 Vostok automatic movement or the similar 2416 Vostok automatic movement. Both come standard with thirty-one hours of power reserve, thirty-one jewels, a date calendar, and a day/night indicator. An abundance of blued screws are visible through the see-through case backs of Vostok-Europe's eleven lines of watches.

As for accuracy, all of Vostok-Europe's models advertise a mean daily deviation rate of -10 to +30 seconds per day. (An unofficial test conducted by this writer, in which I synchronized a Vostok K-3 Submarine to my cellular phone's atomic clock mechanism, found that the watch ran about fifteen seconds fast per day, which is not bad at all, considering its retail price of $149.)

Our test model ran 15 seconds fast per day, not bad for $149

The collection's names are inspired from Russia's proud achievements in technical and military innovation, such as the K-3 submarine, the first Soviet nuclear sub; the Icebreaker Arktika, the first surface seafaring ship to reach the North Pole; and the Rocket N1, the worlds biggest rocket, with a length of 105 meters and a weight of 2,756 tons.

While the names are intended, one must suspect, to hark back to the days when Russian technical skill was respected all around the world, there is a Cold War feel to them. But, one's inner ear should remind itself that in the spirit of its newfound Western-style capitalism, Vostok-Europe has extended something better than an olive branch–a remarkably affordable alternative to an automatic watch market whose prices exclude many potential consumers.