

The earliest Mondaine Swiss Railway Watch was not produced for the Swiss railways. The idea was originated by Mondaine and the watch's launch was in 1986. The seconds hand on this first model flowed smoothly around the dial, but later versions enshrined the railway clock's famous halt just before 12 o'clock, with which those who have stood on Swiss railway platforms will be familiar.



# Mondaine 16

Swiss Railway Watch



Since 1946 the distinctive clock designed by railway engineer Hans Hilfiker has been a standard feature on Swiss platforms, as well as in station halls (second from top), where it provides a traditional meeting point.



The clock has become an object of such national pride that it has appeared on Swiss postage stamps.

The large range of variants of Mondaine's Swiss Railway Watch includes a fridge magnet.



**Opposite**  
Back and front views of an early version of the Swiss Railway Watch; the watch has only ever had a quartz movement.



Swiss railways are renowned around the world for keeping most strictly to their timetables. In most railway stations in Switzerland travellers can clearly see, from a distance, the time of day in hours and minutes, in the full knowledge that their trains will be arriving and leaving with absolute punctuality. The design of these uniform clocks was the work of the railway engineer Hans Hilfiker (1901–1993) in 1946; the early models had no seconds hand. Forty years later Mondaine had the idea of bringing this beautifully clear design to the dial of a wristwatch, and the Swiss Railway Watch was launched in 1986.

First-time travellers on Swiss railways today should look out for a unique characteristic of the platform clock: the steps of the sweeps seconds hand are very slightly shorter than a full second. But when the hand arrives at precisely 58.5 seconds it halts for one and a half seconds, in order to check itself against a signal from a remote caesium clock, and then jumps forward to the correct position.

However, Mondaine's standard quartz movement wristwatches do not have this halt. Customers complained to Mondaine, and the company then introduced a modified (and more expensive) quartz version enshrining the familiar halt. Mondaine has now produced many variants of the Swiss Railway Watch, including a desk clock and a pocket watch that is also an alarm clock.

The watches feature a white enamel face with black hour and stick minute hands and seconds markers, while the seconds hand is a bright red pendulum shape. There are two dial sizes, 33 mm (1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.) for men and 26 mm (1 in.) for ladies. These watches undoubtedly have a cult following, and the trail now leads all the way to the Design Museum in London, the Museum of Modern Art in both New York and San Francisco, and the Guggenheim in Bilbao, where they proudly have their place among outstanding twentieth-century designs.

The French word *mondaine* means 'fashionable' or 'worldly', and was the name chosen by Erwin Bernheim (born 1925) when he was looking for a trademark for his small watch company in Brazil in 1951. He was not satisfied with the quality of his imports, so he took over two small watch manufacturers in Switzerland and began producing low-priced wristwatches. In the 1970s the firm developed some of the world's first digital LCD watches, programmable versions with microprocessors and, the company claims, the first solar quartz watch with both analogue and digital displays.

The 1980s saw the arrival of Mondaine's M-Watch. The 'M' stood not for Mondaine, but for Migros, the supermarket chain and much else (and Switzerland's largest employer), who had placed a large order for the watch. It is on record that Erwin Bernheim's son Ronnie developed the



#### POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS BY THE MILLION

Switzerland's first railway line was opened in 1847 and ran the 23.3 km (21 miles) between Zurich and Baden to the north-west. The Swiss federal state was created the following year, and the necessary unification of train times was implemented. Within three years the fledgling Swiss network had carried over a million passengers, and by the turn of the century the figure had risen to 100,000,000. One of the most splendid main railway stations in the country, completed in 1871, is to be found in Zurich, at the head of Bahnhofstrasse.

The Schweizerische Bundes Bahn (SBB) is the successor to Swiss Federal Railways, which was created on 1 January 1902 with the nationalization of the eight largest private railway companies. Today the SBB is run over about 3000 km (1864 miles) of rail track. The system is the densest in the world, as it consists of 122 km for every 1000 sq. km (about 75 miles per 1196 sq. yards). Each day some 9000 trains travel over the network, handling a total of over 250,000,000 passengers each year.

A desk clock version of the Swiss Railway Watch.

The pocket watch version of the Swiss Railway Watch can act as a bedside clock, and incorporates an alarm function.



M-Watch in a remarkable twenty-eight days. It was launched in 1983, powered by a conventional ETA quartz movement. It has gone through more than 2000 variations in its case and mounting treatments, and more than 6,000,000 have so far been sold. And now there is an M-Budget model, which is proving just as successful. Today Mondaine is still a family company, based in Zurich and run by Erwin's sons, André and Ronnie.



**Top row**

A Mondaine M-Watch from 1983, the year the watch was launched. There have been more than 2000 variations in the M-Watch's case and mountings treatments.

A recent M-Budget model. Like the earlier M-Watch, the 'M' stood not for Mondaine but for the supermarket chain Migros, which had ordered a large number.

**Bottom row**

Mondaine's first solar quartz watch (1970s) featured both analogue and digital displays.

The Digi-Quartz, a Mondaine model of the 1970s.