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Which Entry-Level Rolex, Omega, and Grand Seiko Is for You?

Affordable automatic models from three of the biggest brands in luxury watchmaking go head-to-head.

By Jon Bues, Jack Forster, and James Stacey

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We're back with another installment of Three On Three, our series of comparative reviews of three watches that belong in a single category. This time around, we're going head to head to head with entry-level, in-house automatics from three of the biggest brands in luxury watchmaking.

Our lineup of watches covers a price range of \$3,800 to \$5,400, meaning that these are watches that would, in theory, be solid contenders for someone's first nice automatic watch. Of course, new mechanical watches can be had for less, but there are real advantages to spending a bit more for a watch with an in-house movement from a respected manufacture. The watches we have here today are, we feel, three of the best values in contemporary watchmaking.



Source: Hodinkee

So, just what do you get by buying into the entry level at Rolex, Omega, and Grand Seiko that you wouldn't get with a comparatively less expensive watch with a supplied movement? As you'll see, each of these three brands provides you with something special and compelling, even if you're only buying their most affordable timepieces, so choosing which of these three watches to add to one's collection is no easy decision.

Despite the fact that these are among the most affordable options from each brand, the personality of each watchmaker manages to come through clearly— whether it's Omega's use of advanced technologies and certifications for its movements, or Grand Seiko's painstaking attention to finishing details, or Rolex's legendary capacity to make products of steadfastly robust quality at scale. Without further ado, here's your Three On Three.

The Grand Seiko SBGR253
BY JON BUES



Source: Hodinkee

First Impressions

This is about as basic as a Grand Seiko can be. But what really impresses me about the SBGR253 is not only that the watch looks and feels every bit as good as pricier Grand Seikos, but that it compares favorably with any number of luxury watches currently coming out of Switzerland or Germany. While more and more watch lovers are being won over by Grand Seiko, I think that the high quality that these watches deliver still remains less known than it should be to the vast majority of the general public. I'd be lying if I didn't cop to getting a certain amount of satisfaction from knowing that some people must see the name on this watch, and write it off out of hand.



Source: Hodinkee

The Dial

It's been only a couple of years since Seiko repositioned Grand Seiko as its own brand, and I have to say that the new dial design, which eschews the Seiko branding seen on the previous generation of watches, is an aesthetic improvement. The watches now have a super clean look that was previously belied somewhat by what I have to call out as redundant branding.



Source: Hodinkee

If you've ever owned a Grand Seiko, then you know that dials are where this watchmaker really shines brightest, and this model, the entry point for a Grand Seiko mechanical watch, is no exception. You get the same diamond-polished hands and indices on the SBGR253 that come on the pricier models. I'd put this Grand Seiko's hands and indices up against those found on most of Switzerland's high end watches with confidence that they are as good or better than most of what's out there. Over the course of this review, I found myself gently turning my wrist to see how light would play off the hands. This is really the kind of watch that you find yourself admiring over and over.

While I know that date windows are among the most polarizing of watch design choices, I think that Grand Seiko should be given credit for their approach. They make their date windows with a reflective metal frame that matches the quality of their hands and indices, and I think the overall effect is a date window that works extremely well.

The Movement



Source: Hodinkee

Another area where Grand Seiko tends to show its mettle is with its movements. Though unlike Omega, which has fully embraced new materials and technologies in its movements, or Rolex, which has done so to a somewhat lesser degree, what you get with Grand Seiko is a pretty traditional high-end automatic caliber. Inside the SBGR253 is the caliber 9S65, an automatic caliber beating at a standard 4 Hz (28,800 vph) and coming with 72 hours of power reserve. Grand Seiko lists this movement's accuracy at +5 to -3 seconds per day when static and +10 to -1 seconds per day with normal usage. But it's been my experience wearing this and other Grand Seiko timepieces that these watches tend to overdeliver on what I consider to be extremely conservative guarantees of accuracy. As has become my habit when wearing any watch, I synced this guy up to the atomic clock display on the HODINKEE app when I started my review. By the fifth day, I noticed that it was running only about two to three seconds fast.

The Case And Bracelet



Source: Hodinkee

In a few words, the case is very nice, and Grand Seiko is well-known for using proprietary techniques to polish its cases, but the bracelet is one important element that Grand Seiko could improve. I don't feel like this bracelet stands up to the high bar set by the case, the movement, and most certainly the dial. As a pure matter of the personal taste, I am not a fan of the ribbing on bracelet links, and I think that Grand Seiko's less expensive quartz watches actually come with a better-looking bracelet. As I say in the video portion of this story, I think the bracelet is nice to have, but would switch this one out for a strap. And with the drilled through lugs, that ought to be a very simple fix.



Source: Hodinkee

Final Thoughts



Source: Hodinkee

I think all three of these watches represent an appealing value, but the Grand Seiko (particularly in this smallest size) has just leapfrogged right to the front of my favorite watches from this brand. If I were to add a second GS to my collection, it would almost certainly be this one. Grand Seiko totally understands what is so appealing to consumers about its style and its brand, and they make sure to deliver these elements across the entire collection. Sure, the SBGR253 may be the most affordable watch in this episode of Three On Three, and by a considerable margin at that,

but it doesn't feel "less than" the Rolex or the Omega, and that's a real testament to the value that Grand Seiko offers with its watches.