



70th

Fifty Fathoms

70th anniversary

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BLANCPAIN
MANUFACTURE DE HAUTE HORLOGERIE

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70th Anniversary

Act 2 – Tech Gombessa

Blancpain continued the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the Fifty Fathoms from the Rangiroa Atoll in French Polynesia, where the Tamataroa mission is taking place. Blancpain opened a new chapter in the history of the first modern diver's watch by unveiling a new model designed to meet today's technical diving requirements. Featuring an innovation co-developed by Marc A. Hayek, President & CEO of Blancpain, and Laurent Ballesta, founder of the Gombessa project, this instrument named "Tech Gombessa" makes it possible for the first time to measure up to three-hour immersion times. Its release commemorates the 10th anniversary of Gombessa, an initiative that Blancpain helped create by becoming the founding partner of the project from its inception in 2013. It also marks the launch of a new line in Blancpain's diver's watch collection.



Seventy years ago, an icon was born: the Fifty Fathoms. The watch that would revolutionise watch-making by becoming the first modern diver's watch was conceived by a passionate scuba diver, Jean-Jacques Fiechter, then CEO of Blancpain. A pioneer in a discipline that was in its infancy, he understood the imperative need to track time while underwater. The instrument he designed to meet his own needs was immediately embraced by the oceanic community, becoming an unfailing ally of elite divers and underwater explorers. By enhancing safety in diving, the Fifty Fathoms contributed to the development of the sport and promoted the discovery of the ocean world.

The year 2023, which marks the 70th anniversary of the Fifty Fathoms, also resonates as a reboot of its birth through the arrival of an innovative anniversary diver's watch. Since the 1950s, diving has experienced a major evolution, notably characterised by an obvious extension of immersion times. While the 1953 Fifty Fathoms met the requirements of Jean-Jacques Fiechter and the most experienced divers of the time, those now capable of spending several hours underwater have new requirements for time measurement.

Such is precisely the case with Blancpain's current President & CEO, who is also an avid scuba diver and has been accustomed to highly technical closed-circuit dives for a number of years. Drawing on the invaluable heritage of the 1953 Fifty Fathoms, but also and above all on his own experiences, the CEO embarked on the design – alongside diver, photographer and underwater biologist Laurent Ballesta – of a new mechanical instrument. It was intended to meet the needs of all extreme divers, starting with the members of the Gombessa Expeditions whose research work involves long-duration deep dives. With Blancpain's support, these deep-sea adventurers have joined forces in the multi-year Tamatara mission. Dedicated to the study of the behaviour of the great hammerhead shark, *Sphyrna mokarran*, in French Polynesia, this project is led by a committee of passionate deep-sea divers, including Marc A. Hayek and Laurent Ballesta. Observation and information gathering regarding this species continued through technical dives on the Rangiroa Atoll, aimed at contributing to the implementation of management measures promoting its conservation.





It is in this context that the latest addition to the Fifty Fathoms collection was presented for the first time: the Tech Gombessa watch designed to measure the duration of up to three-hour-long tech dives or exits from a saturation system. Conceived five years ago by the two divers, this watch has been extensively tested. In 2019, after a year of

conceptualisation, Blancpain began the development of the project, starting with the two key elements represented by the movement and the unidirectional rotating bezel. Unlike the bezels on conventional diver's watches, the bezel on the Fifty Fathoms Tech Gombessa has a three-hour scale. It is linked to a special hand that completes one



full turn in three hours and whose material and colour – a white luminescent coating with green emission – match those of its markers. This device invented jointly by Marc A. Hayek and Laurent Ballesta is a world first for which a patent has been filed. It is the heart of the 13P8 self-winding movement, based on the same criteria of reliability and

robustness that have made the Fifty Fathoms the ultimate diver's watch for 70 years.

Once the combination of bezel and movement was defined, it was time to tackle the exterior of this new watch designed to plumb the depths. The brief was clear yet meeting it proved tricky: the Fifty Fathoms Tech Gombessa had to look like a Fifty



Fathoms while exhibiting distinct tech attributes. Blancpain's designers therefore opted for a bezel inlay in black ceramic – instead of the traditional sapphire – which they decided to endow with a stronger curve and tilt it towards the dial. The latter's legibility is optimised by a spherical crystal that eliminates any visual distortion. To ensure the best possible readability in

the dark, the dial has a new finish: absolute black, whose structure is able to capture almost 97% of the light. In the same vein, the hour-markers are formed by luminescent block-shaped appliques, this time in orange with blue emission – colour codes picked up on the hours and minutes hands to differentiate between time-related information and diving times.

Grade 23 titanium was chosen for the case. Recently introduced to the Blancpain collections, this metal also known as grade 5 ELI (extra low interstitials) is the purest type of titanium available. It is distinguished by exceptional strength and anti-allergenic properties, while being remarkably light. This material ensures that the watch is comfortable to

wear and guarantees a barely-there feel on the wrist despite the 47 mm diameter. This is especially true since the watch features – in a first for Blancpain – central lugs attached from the inside of the case middle and integrating the strap. Water-resistant to 30 bar (approximately 300 metres), the case is equipped with a helium valve. During saturation

diving in a hyperbaric chamber, helium manages to seep into the watch. During the decompression phase, unscrewing the valve facilitates the evacuation of the helium (a manipulation that has no effect on the watch's water resistance). The notches of the helium valve are identical to those of the winding and time-setting crown that enables simultaneous setting of the hours, minutes and dive-time hands. As with all Fifty Fathoms timepieces, the crown is screwed down and associated with a crown guard that now features a new trapeze-shaped design ensuring visual consistency with the lugs.

Nothing has been left to chance either on the back of the watch. The lower part of the case middle is bevelled rather than the rounded 'bassine' shape characterising the other Fifty Fathoms models. The notches used to screw in the case back have also been reworked, in the same spirit of robustness. The anthracite-coloured oscillating weight, stamped with the Gombessa Expeditions logo, features an innovative shape dominated by three large openings through which to admire the movement. The black rubber strap is screwed to the back of the lugs. It has an internal titanium reinforcement, guaranteeing ideal long-term shape, and is teamed with an extension for wearing the watch over a tech-diving suit. The buckle with its extremely wide and ergonomic pin has been designed to reinforce the hold of the watch to the wrist and to facilitate fastening the extension.

The Fifty Fathoms Tech Gombessa comes in a special Peli™ presentation box that is water-resistant and shock-resistant as well as reusable and configurable. The case houses a rest for the watch, the strap extension, a travel pouch, a magnifying glass,

as well as a set of dividers and cutting tools offering the possibility of compartmentalising it for any future use.

While all the details of the Tech Gombessa appear to have been smoothly combined, they have in fact involved numerous adjustments resulting from a multitude of tests in real-life conditions. Marc A. Hayek personally tried several different prototypes of the watch during his dives. The same is true for Laurent Ballesta and the divers of the Gombessa Expeditions, who tested the watch throughout its evolution. Four prototypes were worn on the wrists of aquanauts for an almost 50-day trial period at a depth of 120 metres as part of the Gombessa V and Gombessa VI missions. Conducted in the Mediterranean in 2019 and 2021 respectively, these expeditions combined saturation diving with closed-circuit rebreather diving for the first time. Having lived for an entire month on both occasions in a 5 m² hyperbaric chamber from which they emerged daily to explore the depths, the divers tested several versions of the helium valve.

The Fifty Fathoms Tech Gombessa watch has been able to satisfy the most demanding requirements of the Gombessa divers, who have adopted it as the official timepiece of their expeditions. Its launch honours the Fifty Fathoms' 70th anniversary and sets the seal on ten years of collaboration between Blancpain and Laurent Ballesta – whose Gombessa project was born in 2013 thanks to the involvement of the Manufacture as founding partner. The arrival of this instrument in the Fifty Fathoms collection also inaugurates a new line, the Fifty Fathoms Tech, which will encompass all Blancpain watches dedicated to technical diving.



ABOUT THE FIFTY FATHOMS

Launched in 1953, the Fifty Fathoms is the first modern diver's watch. Created by a diver to meet the needs of underwater exploration, it was chosen by diving pioneers and elite marine corps around the world as a professional timekeeping instrument. With its water resistance, robust doubled-sealed crown, self-winding movement, contrasting dark dial with luminescent indications, unidirectional rotating bezel and anti-magnetic protection, the Fifty Fathoms has become an indispensable instrument for divers on their underwater missions.

These key signature elements that established the Fifty Fathoms as the archetypal diver's watch continue to define the identity of such timepieces for

the entire watch industry. Bearing witness to the past while simultaneously looking firmly to the future, contemporary Fifty Fathoms models incorporate modern movements renowned for their robustness and reliability. They feature numerous technical innovations derived from Blancpain's longstanding experience in the field of diving, its risks and its imperious necessities.

The Fifty Fathoms has played an essential role in the development of scuba diving and the discovery of the ocean world. It has enabled Blancpain to forge close links with the ocean community that have been consistently strengthened over the past 70 years. The Fifty Fathoms is the catalyst for Blancpain's commitment to ocean preservation.

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