



The Favre-Leuba Bivouac is the ultimate vintage watch for adventurers

Launched in 1962, the Favre-Leuba Bivouac offered an innovative new complication: an altimeter for mountaineers. And original models are enticingly affordable...

By Adrian Hailwood

22 February 2021



We all love a “tool” watch, those rugged, stripped-back, no-nonsense timepieces that provide purposeful functionality when we are engaged in death-defying pursuits... even if only in our imagination. But most tool watches only offer timekeeping, either with three hands, a GMT function or a chronograph. Should we demand more from our tools? Back in 1962, Favre-Leuba thought so and launched the world’s first wristwatch with a mechanical altimeter and barometer.

Favre-Leuba has had a complicated history. Laying claim to being the second oldest Swiss watch brand after Blancpain, it achieved early success developing important markets in Europe, India and East Asia. The company bought and sold the Bovet brand, then cohabited with Jaeger-LeCoultre as part of the Saphir Group before essentially vanishing, only existing to produce watches for Dior. Recent acquisition by the Indian Tata group has seen it reborn and rediscovering its old innovations.



The 1962 Favre-Leuba Bivouac

Favre-Leuba's most recognised creation, among a number of innovative watches, was 1962's Bivouac. Aimed at climbers, it provided a mechanical indication of altitude (which also warned of sudden changes in the weather) via an aneroid capsule held under the case back. As the external pressure dropped, the capsule would expand, pressing down on a lever, which in turn drove the indicator hand around the dial. As pressure rose, the capsule contracted and the spring-loaded hand was allowed to move back. Zeroing the scale on the rotating bezel to a known altitude at the start of a climb would allow the hand to indicate progress. This was not only useful but potentially lifesaving. If, while stationary or climbing, the pressure indication was seen to drop dramatically, it was a clear indication of bad weather, possibly a storm approaching – time to hunker down or get off the mountain. Trailblazing climbs on the Grandes Jorasses, Eiger and Matterhorn, as well as Antarctic expeditions, afforded Favre-Leuba's new complication considerable publicity.



The 2017 Favre-Leuba Raider Bivouac 9000

Of little practical use to the daily wearer (unlike a 1,000m-rated dive watch with a HEV – obviously!) the complication fell out of fashion. Other than an eye-wateringly expensive and commercially doomed effort in the form of the Brevia Genie 01, Favre-Leuba has had the mechanical altimeter world pretty much to themselves. The original could measure up to 3,000m but the 2017 Raider Bivouac 9000 aims to record up to, well, 9,000m – easily managing a trip to the top of the world. Should you feel the need to track your altitude on a daily basis, or present hourly weather reports to your friends and family, a vintage Bivouac will cost you around £3,000 to £3,500 at auction or around £4,000 from a dealer. The latest and possibly more reliable model, a touch more at £6,900.