

This vintage Longines is criminally affordable – but that's not why we want one...

The Longines Ultra-Chron is a slice of history: when it was released in 1967 it was the world's most accurate watch...

By Adrian Hailwood

12 January 2021

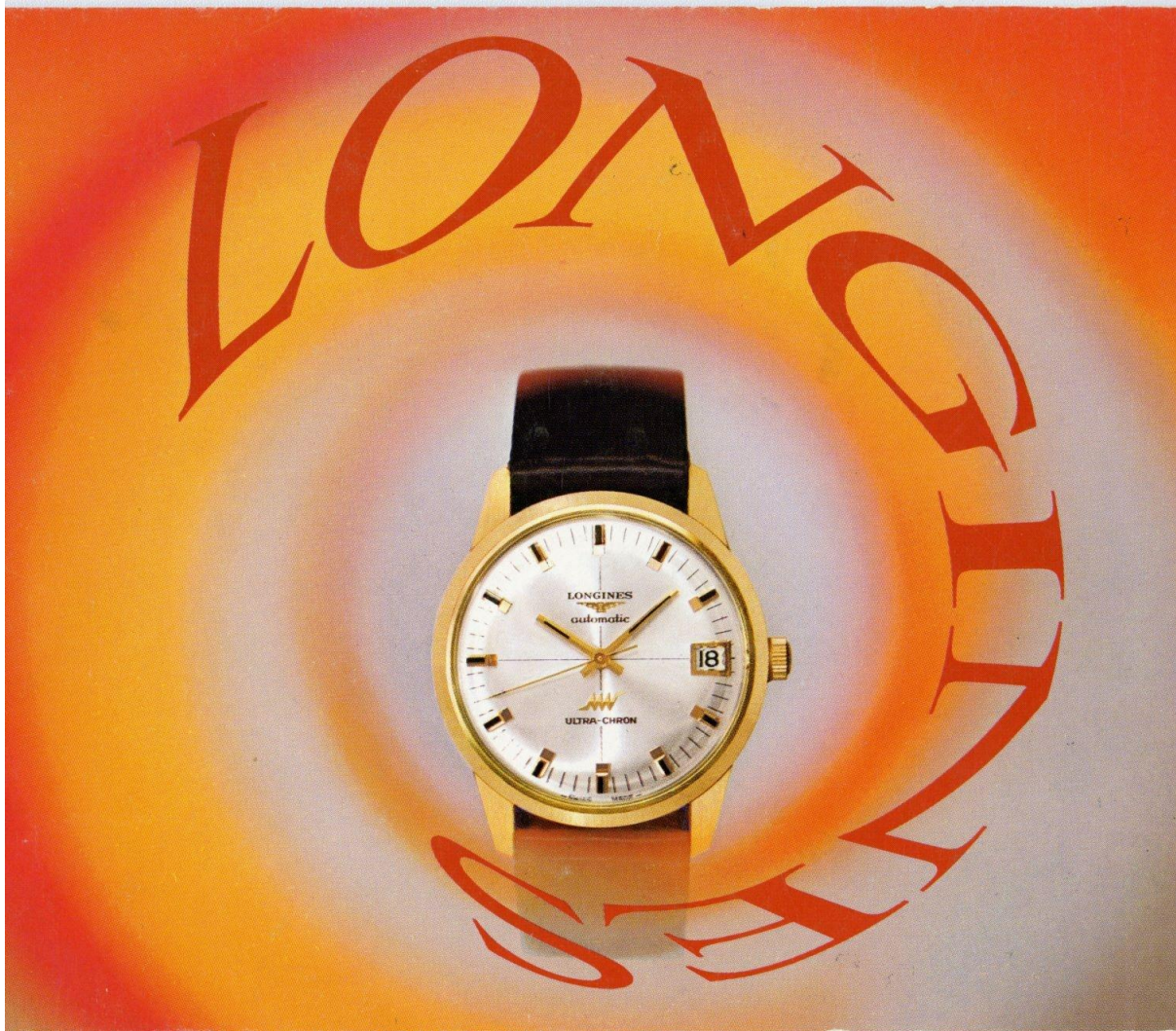


The watchmaking industry in the late 1960s must have been an odd place to work. There were technicians beavering away feverishly to develop quartz timekeepers, not knowing whether the idea was viable but desperate to be first if it was. Meanwhile, just down the hall, innovative mechanical movements were being designed, giving watches greater stability and accuracy than ever before – all of which would be surpassed when quartz finally arrived.

Those mechanical movement makers had their own races to win. 1967 was all about hi-beat movements – meaning those featuring a seconds hand ticking ten times per second rather than five or six. That year, Seiko produced their first such calibre, the 5740C, with which it equipped the “Lord Marvel” range, while in Switzerland Longines produced the Ultra-Chron. Mention has to be made of Girard-Perregaux who built the first hi-beat in 1965, but this early attempt was plagued by power reserve issues and was not successful until later updates.

The point of going “hi-beat” was that a faster oscillating balance was believed to be less vulnerable to shock, helping it keep better time, but it also supplied a visual treat as a bonus: a silky-smooth seconds-hand sweep. It wasn’t just a case of tweaking the gearing. Yes, the escape wheel had 21 teeth instead of 15, but at 36,000bph

everything changes. More power is needed, so the mainspring has to be stronger and the barrel has to grow to accommodate it. All the wheels are under more tension, so precision in manufacturing becomes crucial. With the balance revolving at such a rate, conventional oils could literally be thrown off the components, a problem Longines solved with a new “dry” lubricant: molybdenum bisulphide.



Original marketing imagery for a Longines Ultra-Chron

Launched as a celebration of Longines' centenary, the Ultra-Chron was billed as “the world's most accurate watch... guaranteed to within a minute a month”. This is equivalent to +/- two seconds a day, which is an impressive claim, although the asterisk at the end of the wording on the poster makes one wonder what caveats hid in the fine print. The Ultra-Chron did not come with a chronometer

certificate but the advertised accuracy far exceeds COSC specifications.

The Ultra-Chron line ran for eight years and encompassed a broad range of case styles from dress to diver, so, for the collector, there is something for every taste. Later models embraced 1970s flamboyance, so the case dimensions are more in line with contemporary expectations. For a steel dress watch, expect to pay £600 to £800 for a good example. Dive models are around £1,200 to £1,400, with 18-carat-cased examples running to about the same. Given the demands on the movements, aim to get a service and warranty either with purchase or immediately afterwards. But even factoring in this cost, it is criminally little for the pinnacle of 1960s watchmaking – and a very cool dial logo.

CONDÉ NAST BRITAIN