



# Perks of Being an A-List Collector

When timepiece enthusiasts spend big, luxury watch companies pony up the star treatment, from Cannes access to all-expenses-paid trips to hush-hush Swiss factories **By Laurie Kahle**

**A**T THE CANNES FILM Festival, you might spot a few strangers who seem more preoccupied with what's on people's wrists than with what's playing. That's because they're watch enthusiasts — each year fest sponsor Chopard lifts the velvet ropes for its most important collectors and grants special access to parties and premieres. “It’s really a red-carpet treatment for the client,” says the brand’s U.S. president and CEO, **Marc Hruschka**.

In the world of luxury watches, collecting has its privileges. Many top brands give their best clients access to the most expensive limited editions, stage elaborate events with sports stars, or, perhaps most exciting to the true watch geek, offer full immersion in rarefied watchmaking factories in Switzerland, most of which are closed to the public.

How does one land on the horological A-list? It often boils down to developing personal relationships with retailers, and not only spending big — top collectors can plunk down \$250,000 to \$1 million a year on tickers — but also buying multiple watches from one company. According to one collector, purchasing as many as five top-of-the-line Audemars Piguet (which can run seven figures) can score a collector an all-expenses-paid trip to the brand’s Swiss workshops. “However, some of our clients only travel with their private jets,” says **Frederick Martel**, vp sales and marketing, North America.

Access to limited-edition pieces is the biggest get. “A dealer may give those few watches to their favorite clients or perhaps deny them to someone they don’t like as much,” explains **Paul Boutros**, a New Jersey engineer and collector. According to Breitling marketing director **Lisa Roman**, a collector who bought an example from every limited-edition series was rewarded by having

his favorite edition number reserved on future models.

Patek Philippe is known for being particularly selective about who can acquire its most elaborate watches. “They are called application watches,” explains Beverly Hills jeweler **Martin Katz**. “You apply for the opportunity to buy them. They want to see how many and which watches you already own, and how long you’ve been collecting. I’ve been denied on applications. I didn’t own enough Pateks. They weren’t ready to give them to me.”

In addition to tickets to Cannes or the Oscars, which Chopard also provides, brands arrange to bring star endorsers and top clients together. Breitling recently hosted a 10-guest dinner with New York Jets quarterback **Mark Sanchez** at its Manhattan boutique, and Breguet threw a dinner party at violinist **Joshua Bell**’s New York penthouse.

Lavish dinners are one of the most popular ways to make an impression with current and would-be clients. Last year, when it opened its boutique in New York, Vacheron Constantin transported a few collectors via Rolls Royce from the Madison Avenue boutique to an uptown townhouse, where Michelin-star chef **Sergi Arola**, flown in from Madrid, prepared a custom meal. The gift bag included an iPad.

But there’s no substitute for the



Royal Welcome

A-list Patek Philippe buyers can travel to pick up their watch directly from head technicians at the Swiss factory.

experience of visiting the exalted Swiss workshops of top brands. At Jaeger-LeCoultre’s headquarters in the village of Le Sentier, visitors might get to see the handiwork of **Muriel Job**, currently the only person capable of producing the spherical hairspring in the new \$560,000 Gyrotourbillon 3. Such a visit may begin with a stop in the Maison d’Antoine, a luxe library inaugurated this year when **Clive Owen** visited. It includes a classroom, equipped with watchmakers’ benches, where a master craftsman teaches how to dismantle and

reassemble a watch movement.

If you’re willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for a Patek Philippe minute repeater, the brand will arrange a visit to its manufacturer on the outskirts of Geneva to meet head technician **Laurent Junod**, who will personally present the highly complex musical timepiece. “He walks them through setting the watch, operation and care,” says Patek Philippe U.S.A. president **Larry Pettinelli**. “It is a very special piece for which people might wait as long as two years. We make a celebration of it.” **TJR**



Exclusive Villa

Visitors to Chopard’s manufacturer in Fleurier, Switzerland, may be invited to stay in the new Chopard Forum, an 18th-century guesthouse near the headquarters.



Private Showings

Those invited to Jaeger-LeCoultre’s new Maison d’Antoine get peeks at the newest offerings, such as the \$560,000 Gyrotourbillon 3.