

# ROYAL INDULGENCE

*In an exclusive interview, Saif Ali Khan opens up on his craze for watches*

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PHOTOS: JANAK BHAT

**I**t is an unusually dark, rain-blown afternoon in Mumbai. Just the perfect day to sink into a cushy couch with a big mug of steaming coffee, gaze into the hot silver sky belting out raindrops the size of olive pits and soak in memories—of a starry childhood, love, loss and happy addictions.

Gearing up for a long, work trip to Los Angeles, Saif Ali Khan is glad to be at home. Even if it is just for a day. Lounging around in a crisp white kurta-pyjama, Khan welcomes us into his gaily-lit apartment in Bandra.

As the chilly haze of rain spreads into the evening sky, we settle down with our mugs of coffee to tickle Khan's happy addiction. Films? No. Watches.

Actually both, for it was Khan's passion for films that led to his obsession with watches. A reserved watch collector, Khan is hardly spotted in the much-coveted luxury circles, thrived by brand ambassadors and free-loaders hoarding anything coming their way. His love for watches is a private affair and this, we

are told, is the very first time that he has agreed to talk watches and give outsiders a glimpse of his grand collection.

"My first watch was one that my father gave me in school, and I lost it. It was a mechanical watch with Roman numerals and a leather strap," he recalls in his trademark soft, clipped way of speaking. "So then, I pretty much didn't have a watch worth talking about till I joined films. It was a mixture of making a tiny bit of money and indulging in something in a world that valued accessories like watches."

Like most impressionable 20-year-olds who ape big stars and aspire for everything that Bollywood offers, Khan was exposed to the idea of well-to-do men collecting watches in the early 90's. "When I joined films, I was influenced by stars like Sanjay Dutt, who had a massively amazing watch collection. He used to wear big, gold Rolexes. Now he is seen wearing diamond-studded watches, too," says Khan.

The very first timepiece, which con-







Saif Ali Khan's watch collection





Saif sporting his enamelled Vacheron Constantin watch from 1947

tributed to Khan's solid collection of four dozen watches today, was an Omega Constellation. "I bought it for \$1000 at the Geneva airport while I was going off to shoot my first film."

That was in 1992. Over the past 20 years, Khan feels he has sort of become an addict. Such is his fixation with watches that for every project he does, he invests in a timepiece that complements the film and suits the character.

"The collection has grown with the films I have done, especially over the past six to ten years. For Parineeta, which was a period film, I bought a Vacheron Constantin Patrimony and a 1962 vintage Omega," he says. While the Rolex watches are his Race memorabilia, he wore Jaeger-LeCoultre in Love Aaj Kal and Cocktail. "I didn't get paid much for Being Cyrus, so the film's producer, Ambika Hinduja, gifted me a Panerai Luminor as a token. And it was the Breitlings in Agent Vinod."

Blessed with sartorial elegance and an imperious charm, Khan is a prince, of course, but not a stuck-up blue blood. His prized possessions from A.

Lange & Söhne, Patek Philippe, Jaeger-LeCoultre, IWC, Breitling, Chopard, Ulysse Nardin, Piaget, Omega, Rolex, Bulgari and Cartier, share a happy co-existence with humble timepieces from HMT, Swatch and Casio.

"They all have their places. I wear the rugged, cool Casio G-shock to the gym and my favourite Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso to most places. Different watches suit different occasions and activities," he says. "Sometimes, just sitting at home, I change my watch three times a day. I like to open the box, clean my watches and admire them. I have a few, chunky gold ones that go well with long hair, a dark sun tan and white pair of shorts. But usually, I like very simple watches with leather straps."

Besides the new-age sporty watches, Khan also has a couple of vintage masterpieces—a 1953 Rolex Explorer, a 1947 enamelled Vacheron Constantin, his dad's Piaget Ultra Thin and his grandfather's Swiss-made Unviersal. "While the Rolex Explorer was given to me by someone who inherited the watch from a team member of the Everest expedition in 1953, the Vacheron Constantin was commissioned by the Maharaja of Kashmir in 1947. It was given to my grandfather who won a Polo match against England in India," says Khan, who got the piece restored at Vacheron Constatin's manufacture in Geneva.

Some of Khan's favourite watches have been gifted to him by Kareena, who isn't a watch enthusiast but has a keen eye for unique timepieces like the Patek Philippe Nautilus, A. Lange & Söhne's Grand Lange 1 and the Jaeger-LeCoultre Valentino Rossi.

Partial to cleaner dials and classic designs, Khan is not a big fan of skeleton dials and tourbillons, which are a rage these days. "Sleek, old-world designs appeal to me. As I am getting older, I am finding smaller faces more interesting than big, chunky ones. I love the IWC Portugese. At the same time, I also like something like the Brietling Emergency. It is quite unique, as the



Saif and Kareena at Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso's 80th anniversary bash at Paris in 2011

second watch face on the strap is the analog one. This is hard to come by these days. I saw the Breitling Emergency I in a magazine during a skiing trip in Switzerland. I got one from Singapore from a dealer who just had one piece—strapped on his wrist. I took it off him," says Saif, with a glint in his eyes.

Khan's bent towards classicism is not just limited to watches. His plush apartment, which he shares with Kareena, their dog Elvis and a helper, exudes the typical old-world charm. A mini museum of photographs, paintings, books and exquisite carpets, Khan's little abode transports you to a different era.

"I like doing up my place with old photographs and, though I don't get the time to read as much as I want, I like being surrounded by books. You are never lonely as long as you have your books with you. So I travel with them, even in the age of Kindle. New hotel rooms become warmer when you unpack some books," says Saif, whose library in the living room has got Byron, Tennyson, Jane Austen, Dan Brown, J.K. Rowling, Stephen Hawking, Miguel de Cervantes, Umberto Eco, Richard J Evans and more.

Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso with the Pataudi family crest, presented to Saif in 2011



## SOME OF KHAN'S FAVOURITE WATCHES HAVE BEEN GIFTED TO HIM BY KAREENA

Khan got interested in films at the age of 18. Not that he didn't love cricket, which was a probable career choice for the son of India's first cricketing superstar, but the idea of leaving Delhi and doing something in Mumbai fascinated him. "Although I can play cricket decently, I'm not sure if I have the mental discipline. Moreover, if I had been a cricketer, my career would have been over seven years ago; it is just getting going as an actor," says Khan, who has also started producing films recently.

As the co-owner of Illuminati Films, Khan has produced some hits like Love Aaj Kal, Cocktail and Agent Vinod, and is now looking forward to taking it a notch up with films that would make it to international festivals. "I want to make a documentary on my father and release it internationally. As far as acting is concerned, some people are into films to make artistic statements. I am not anymore. Anybody with a successful career has done both—roles that need to push the envelope in some way, and roles where one has the box office muscle to pull off a ₹100 crore film. That is the kind of superstar you should be. ₹100 crore is a ridiculous figure; our films should make ₹500 crore. And that will happen soon. There will be a time a top star would charge ₹50 crore for a film. I hope I see that time, and then I can retire happily," says Saif, with a sort of blank-eyed, pin-down stare.

Khan's bucket-list is full to the brim—experimental roles, documentaries, a cricket museum and a charity hospital in Pataudi, and, of course, some more exclusive timepieces. "I'm desperate to have Jaeger-LeCoultre's Polaris in titanium and Audemars Piguet's 'End of Days' limited edition." ○



Saif likes to catch up on reading whenever his schedule permits