



the last call

THE REAL-LIFE BIRD ISN'T FEATURED ON THE ENDANGERED LIST, BUT AUTHENTIC CUCKOO CLOCKS FROM GERMANY'S BLACK FOREST ARE IN REAL DANGER OF DISAPPEARING.

Writer Rick Bannister Photographer Julia Schauenburg

THE SMELL OF LINDEN WOOD HANGS HEAVILY THROUGHOUT THE 100-YEAR-OLD WORKSHOP, ITS SWEET PERFUME THICK LIKE TREACLE. THE SOFT TIMBER RESTS IN PIECES BOTH LARGE AND SMALL ON EVERY BENCH AND SILL. SOME OF THEM UNTOUCHED, OTHERS PARTIALLY CARVED.

A yellow carpet of shavings on the floor, created by thousands of tiny chisel strokes, adds an undertone of fresh *melonen*. In the summertime, when the sun has been baking through the picture windows to the north for a few hours, opening the door for the first time delivers a sublime mix of natural scents. Unfortunately for Christophe Herr, who has literally grown up here, this simple pleasure is lost.

“When people come here for the first time they always mention the smell and how beautiful it is,” Christophe says. “But the thing is I don’t smell it anymore, because I’m here every day. I’ve smelt it my whole life and so I don’t actually pick it up. It’s the same with the cuckoo’s call. All the time in my house they’re making their calls, but I don’t hear them. It’s like when you live on a highway, after a while you don’t hear the traffic. Or if you live near a train station, you don’t hear the train’s whistle.”

Christophe is a fifth-generation carver of cuckoo clocks from the Black Forest in Germany. His forefather was a cattle farmer in the region, who in the winter of 1868 decided to try his hand at

something new and make a clock. It’d help pass the days and maybe give the family an opportunity to make some money, if he could sell it.

“Around this time a lot of families in the Black Forest started doing the same thing,” Christophe says. “In the beginning, it wasn’t a carved cuckoo clock, it was only painted. So they would make a lot of clocks throughout the winter and when summer came they would take a backpack and walk around and sell them.”

Looking more rock musician than quintessential craftsman, Christophe was given the freedom to pursue whatever career he liked, but there was always an expectation he would join the family business. “I had a lot of choice, but I chose this,” he explains. “We have the house we live in and then behind that is the workshop. So when I was a small boy, like around three years old, I was always playing out there. I can remember when my grandfather was carving the clocks and my father was on the next station. So by the time I was five years old I was on the third station trying to carve. That’s when I started to learn. Even when I started working here fulltime, we were three generations in one room for about 10 years.”

Scanning the finished clocks on the walls, patiently awaiting their final coats of stain and wax, it’s hard to imagine a bunch of farmers inventing objects of such technical finery and detailed beauty. “I know what you mean,” Christophe says. “But these farmers were very intelligent people. Not only would they make the clock face, but they would also build the

mechanism inside the clocks. This was really complicated, especially as all the wheels were made out of wood and they did it all by hand. No copying machines. It’s really amazing. But I think the people of this time were very different to people today. They had so many different skills.”

One of the earliest makers of the cuckoo clock was Franz Anton Ketterer, who founded the industry in the Black Forest in 1730. There are written reports of similar clocks from earlier days, but it was Ketterer who took the idea and perfected it, taking what had been a simple piece of folk art and transforming it into an object that would go on to be collected around the globe. Of course this migration was helped after World War II when soldiers from the United States and Canada started buying the clocks to take home as keepsakes. “They went crazy for them,” says Christophe. “They took them back home all over the world. This was the explosion of the cuckoo clock and this was how it became mass-produced.”

Back then, every second person in the Black Forest was a carver or was involved with making the clocks in some way, but as they became more popular production was increased, which eventually saw them being manufactured in neighbouring countries like Romania and Poland. Of course as the numbers went up, the overall quality spiralled down, which might have been OK for those who valued profit over quality. But this was Germany – a nation that had spent decades building things with exquisite engineering and an overall level of excellence.

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SUPERMODEL CLAUDIA SCHIFFER. ROYALTY FROM SAUDI ARABIA. THE KRUGER FAMILY OF SOUTH AFRICA’S KRUGER NATIONAL PARK. STAR PLAYERS FROM THE GERMAN SOCCER TEAM. THEY ALL OWN ONE OF CHRISTOPHE’S CREATIONS.





PEOPLE THINK THE CUCKOO CLOCK IS KITSCH NOWADAYS. THEY MADE HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF THEM VERY CHEAPLY. YOU HAVE TO MAKE THE CLOCK AND THEN WORK OUT THE PRICE. YOU CANNOT MAKE A CARVED CLOCK IN MASS PRODUCTION, BECAUSE IT LOOKS HORRIBLE. YOU NEED TIME.

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There was a movement in the Black Forest to reclaim the industry in the 1980s, but by that stage there was another dilemma: all the great carvers were either retired or dead. Lots of the techniques needed to make the traditional clocks had been lost and so they quickly morphed from being individual works of art – hand-carved from linden wood – to modern-day versions, which are often made from cheap materials and don't even feature a cuckoo, the iconic bird replaced with tawdry figurines swilling beer.

"This is why people think the cuckoo clock is kitsch nowadays," Christophe laments. "They made hundreds and thousands of them very cheaply. Today, companies come up with a price and then make a clock for that figure, which is wrong. You have to make the clock and then work out the price. I have a lot of people who come for a tour and beforehand they think of cuckoo clocks as kitsch and then afterwards they buy a small clock, because they say they've never seen something they could hang in their house that would give them such a good feeling. You cannot make a carved clock in mass production, because it looks horrible. You need time."

According to Christophe, despite the huge number of clocks sold as 'original' Black Forest pieces, most of the manufacturing and parts are sourced and handled beyond the German border. He only knows of five carvers still working in the area, which concerns him, because without any young hands picking up the trade the authentic cuckoo clock could vanish. "This is why we try and keep the tradition alive," he says. "Because the cuckoo clock is headed in the direction of becoming a souvenir, and it's not a souvenir. It's a traditional art and craft. A traditional cuckoo clock is made from wood and has a cuckoo. That's all. When you look to the clocks today they have a lot of figures and things, which are easy to make, because they're only glued together. Nothing is carved. For example, when I make a roof, I carve the shingles from the one piece of wood, while the others take each shingle and glue them on. It's not the real thing."

Attempting to address these problems, Christophe's father, Robert, started an association to protect the reputation of the traditional Black Forest clocks. The collective set quality controls that had to be met before they would be certified with a sticker. Unfortunately, Robert quickly tired of policing all the makers and having to stop them from using foreign parts or non-traditional methods. "The new president of the association also makes cuckoo clocks," says Christophe. "But he buys his carvings from the outlands. Everyone has this sticker and it's on every clock, but it stands for nothing. I have the stickers here, but I don't use them on my clocks unless people really want one."

It's not uncommon to spot a real-life cuckoo near Christophe's workshop in the village of Schonach. The slender bird with the famous call is also renowned for being a brood parasite, which means it lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, abandoning them to be raised by strangers. The European Common Cuckoo has even developed an egg with two coatings, which provides extra padding when they're dropped into a host nest. The chick then hatches earlier than the host eggs, grows faster and in most cases will kick the host eggs or host chicks out of the nest. Pretty nutty stuff. "And this is why we call crazy people cuckoo," says Christophe. "He's the only bird who doesn't have time for his own babies. He doesn't feel what all the other birds feel."

It's 8am, and a chorus of mechanical cuckoos begin calling out as Christophe starts carving his first clock for the day. It's only small, without too many details, so it might be finished in eight hours. In contrast, he's been working on the much larger piece on the next station for over two months and it's still not done. From where Christophe is standing he can see the small carpark out the front, so whenever a car of tourists pull-up he rests his tools and heads out into the shopfront to greet them, give them a tour and hopefully sell them a clock. It's back and forth like this for the next 12 hours.

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The only tools in Christophe's workshop are chisels and an old mallet. There's a jigsaw, but it rarely gets used. The chisels come in all sizes and shapes, each one perfectly suited to sculpting the hundreds of different features. The linden wood he uses is harvested locally, milled just down the road and then dried for three years. Only then will it have reached its optimal condition, which is soft enough to carve, but hard enough to forge something that will last for centuries.

"The most important thing is that one person carves the entire clock," Christophe says, when asked what makes great work. "When one person does the lot they see everything. For example, sometimes when I'm carving I'll have to go and work on another job and when I come back I see something completely different. I'll see I have to carve a little more here or add a bit more detail there. When one person makes a clock, not a line of people, it always looks special."

Looking at Christophe's creations, most of which are made using the old templates of his forefathers, you couldn't call them anything but works of art. This is funny, because Christophe doesn't consider himself an artist. "No, I'm not. People always say that, but it's more like being a barber. It's something you can learn. I'm just a

normal worker like someone who puts the roofs on houses." Having said that, he does go on to clarify that it is more of a passion than a job, and that he has to have fun while he's working, otherwise the carvings end up looking horrible. As for people's reactions when he reveals his profession at a party? "They think it's pretty special," he admits. "Especially in this era."

Supermodel Claudia Schiffer. Royalty from Saudi Arabia. The Kruger family of South Africa's Kruger National Park. Star players from the German soccer team. They all own one of Christophe's creations. He doesn't know how many clocks he makes per year, but it's not enough to keep up with demand. They range in price from 100 to 10,000 euro (\$130 - \$12,800), with the average customer spending around 500 euro (\$650). "It's not an iPod or an iPhone, where it's old technology after one year," Christophe says. "The cuckoo clock works for a lifetime. Only when a cuckoo clock is 100 years old do we class it as antique. It's a good investment."

It's the ultimate luxury, having a talent for something you love that also makes you a decent living. And growing popularity means Christophe gets to pick and choose his jobs nowadays. If anyone requests a clock with a battery movement,

rather than the traditional weight mechanism, he will explain he's not the man for the job, no matter how much money they offer. Same thing if you ask for a custom design that is too ambitious and would take too much time.

Christophe switches off the three lights over his workbench one by one. It's late afternoon and the room is now dark, except for a strip of sunlight entering by the picture window. This is where his great-grandfather stood. As he organises his chisels in preparation for the morning, it's easy to imagine Christophe as a farmer too, or to at least think of him as a young man trying to save a dying art by locking out the modern world. But he's smarter than that.

"The internet gave me an amazing chance to make a really good business," he says, when asked about the future. "The tourists stopped coming so much a few years ago, with the economic crisis, but because the clock collectors can go on to Google and find me we have a good connection. I have no kids, but my girlfriend works with me now. So who knows, maybe a sixth-generation clock maker will come some time? That would be great, because otherwise all this will die with me."

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