



The Suunto DX, built on the award-winning Suunto D9tx, is the first of its kind to feature CCR compatibility.

Text by Peter Symes
Photos: Peter Symes. Historic images: Suunto

Suunto is like Kellogg's cornflakes to me—a brand that has been with me, like, forever. Well, perhaps not quite that long, but at least since my early diving days, now obscured in the fog of memory. Several decades down the line, I am now on my fourth instrument. Not that I have actually worn out any of them; they have all been good and reliable companions. But as newer and much more capable models invariably came along, upgrades were too hard to resist. I was thus excited to be given a chance to visit Suunto in Finland, and have a look behind the scenes.

The headquarters are located on the outskirts of Helsinki, which, by the way, is quite an exciting and appealing city, laden with history and interesting shopping. Oh, and did I mention design?

Suunto, as I would find out, is very much the embodiment of Finnish virtues: fiercely independent, innovative, quality-minded and design conscientious. I have conducted business on three continents, and most businesses with which I have dealt have always been somewhat grounded in or flavored by local customs, but rarely to the degree I saw in Suunto's conference room. Their famed lakes, vast forests and convoluted

shorelines were never far away, as I listened to their thoughts on legacy, nature, design, lifestyle and how it all came together. "Sophisticated Roughness," the tagline read on one of their opening Powerpoint slides, which had an image of high-tech society juxtaposed with an image of grand wilderness. That is indeed the apparent contrast Suunto appears to strive to unify.

But I am getting ahead of myself—some 80 years or so. "Humble beginnings" is an over-used cliché, but in Suunto's case, it is appropriate. It started off with a problem looking for a solution. As the company's annals state, in the early 1930s, Tuomas Vohlonen—an engineer and surveyor by trade—had grown frustrated by the inaccuracy and lack of steadiness in using

"Like so many other companies, it was started by one man, having one idea."

Suunto

Turns 80
— It Started with a Compass

Historical photo from of Suunto's factory in the 1940s



Suunto's vision statement:

The most desired brand of sports watches and solutions for adventurers

compass also worked underwater. Provided with his feedback, Suunto didn't take

long to introduce the SK-4, the world's first dedicated diving compass, and with it, the company's first foray into the still nascent dive industry. The present SK-8 model is a direct descendant thereof.

Among the many milestones, one that stands out as significant was reached in 1987 when Suunto introduced the first wrist-mounted dive com-

puter for the sport diving community—the SME-ML, which could be seen now as the grandfather of dive comput-

ers as we have come to know them. Compared to present-day computers, it was, obviously, quite basic. But at the time it hit the market, it was groundbreaking.

Basically, it was an electronic dive table (US Navy) paired with a depth gauge and timer. The computer also added multi-level capability—a defining feature, which we now take

for granted. It also looked very much like a dive computer, as we have come to know them, and not all that dated either, taking into consideration that it is now a nearly 30-year-old invention.

A long series of dive instruments followed, and new models continued to be introduced on a regular basis, leading up to the DX—the first rebreather-compatible wrist-sized dive computer, which was unveiled in 2013. It was followed the next year by the EON steel, which combines advanced technology with a bright color



a traditional dry compass and set out to find a better solution. He came up with the liquid-filled compass in which the magnetic needle and damping fluid were completely sealed.

After being granted a patent in 1935, he founded Suunto Oy ("suunto" is Finnish for "direction") with his wife and nephew, and the rest is history—albeit one peppered with milestones and significant inventions. Vohlonen died just four years later in 1939, after which, his widow took the helm and guided the com-

pany through the difficult times of war. After WWII, the company underwent rapid expansion, supplying compasses and other navigational instruments to both the civilian and military sectors.

Diving

Fast forward to the mid-1960s: Suunto got into diving when a British sport diver, in 1965, took note that his

Suunto wrist



Suunto SK-4, the world's first dedicated underwater compass

Historical photo from the 1950s of an employee calibrating a Suunto compass.



Suunto's old warehouse in the 1940s



THIS PAGE: Scenes from Helsinki, Finland

was developed by Dr Bruce Wienke. It lists three varieties of this model: Suunto RGBM, Suunto Technical RGBM and Suunto Fused RGBM, which are used in different models. The finer details about how they differ is a complex story for another day.

While all these innovations for divers were being launched at regular intervals from the late 1990s and onwards, Suunto branched out to making instruments for other outdoors activities. Highlights include the Vector from 1998—an outdoor training watch, which featured an altimeter, barometer and compass. It remained in production until 2015, even after the launch in 2012 of the Ambit, which had additional features such as a built-in GPS and body monitor.

Diving is thus but one business unit of Suunto, which now employs 500 people worldwide and reached an annual turnover of 140 million Euros (US\$152.8 million). Since 1999, Suunto has been a subsidiary of Amer Sport—another Finnish company, which also owns a range of brands of sporting and outdoor goods such as Salomon and Atomic Ski (snowsports), Arc'teryx (hiking, climbing, backpacking) and several more.

“Amer Sport is an exciting company to be part of,” said Suunto’s president, Mikko



Moilanen, “but first of all, we are the market leader in dive computers, and we are in that position because we were there first and have invested massively in developing technology and new innovations such as the PC-interface, RGBM, air integration and so on...”

Philosophy

“At the base of all our designs is rock-solid engineering,” explained Business Unit



screen and customizable features. Suunto’s own timeline is posted here: <http://bit.ly/2eRSzbc>.

Suunto has also worked extensively on dive algorithms for the calculation of decompression, building on the reduced gradient bubble model (RGBM), which





Upwards view from the reception area



Suunto is also a lifestyle accessory. Screenshot from presentation on Suunto's design philosophy and branding on the global market.



Suunto's HQ in Vaanta, a short commute from the center of Helsinki, is a rather nondescript complex on the outside but facilities on the inside seemed like a quite pleasant place to work, with lots of open space in between offices.

"We cover the highest mountains to the deepest oceans, and everything in between."



The Ambit3 series is a GPS watch with advanced outdoor and multisport function, which comes in three varieties: Peak, Vertical and Sport. While exercising, a Bluetooth-connected heart rate sensor measures and stores the heart rate data, which is then transferred wirelessly to the watch.



Kailash is a contemporary traveler's watch, which logs your travels and keeps you up to date wherever you are. See calls, messages and push notifications on the watch with smart mobile connection.

Director Mika Holappa. "First of all, the products are built for the outdoors. Yes, they are beautiful—design is obviously important to us—but they also need to function under extreme conditions. So, there are certain elements, such as authentic craftsmanship, which goes into it. And this kind of Scandinavian approach works extremely well ... There's no nonsense, no fuss, which is what differentiates us from the lot. Design is not an easy thing; the devil is always in the detail. We also put a lot of thought into our interfaces, and our computers are known to be easy to use, but that is also a challenge in itself. Less and less people actually bother to read the manual, so it should be straightforward to use straight out of the box."

Design

"How do we do things?" Design Director Antti Kujala asked rhetorically. "First, what I like about this brand," he began, "is that you get work in the context of sports. Secondly, everything is designed and manufactured here in Finland, and we don't separate things. It is the same people who work on several product ranges. We are also aware that, at any given moment, 24/7, some people somewhere are

doing wild things and relying on our products to keep them alive while enjoying themselves—and that is pretty humbling.

"Everything we do needs to be authentic, and we need to be aware that this is serious stuff. Putting that together with nice design is where things get difficult. As a Finnish brand, Suunto adheres to the Nordic and Scandinavian design philosophy in which everything is required to have a function or a purpose, and that is where you see the reductionism—where we are striving to simplify and reduce the



The Suunto Spartan solution for athletic and adventure multisport comprises Suunto Spartan GPS watches, renewed Suunto Movescount.com and mobile smart phone applications.



Essential is a rugged but stylish watch with built-in altimeter, barometer and compass. Made from ceramics, stainless steel and Sapphire crystal glass.



The EON Steel combines advanced technology with a bright color screen and is designed to be visually intuitive, with a simple, easy user interface of menus and buttons. It is fully customizable and has the following modes of operation: gauge, air, nitrox, trimix and CCR.

"Design is not an easy thing; the devil is always in the detail."



THIS PAGE: The Suunto factory floor as it is today. The product line is divided into "cells" in which products are assembled by hand. The environment of the factory is tidy, clean, functional and safe, and rather muted—not much sounds at all.



Suunto Cobra 3 hose air integrated dive computer

resulting product. You see this in Apple products too, so it is a universal quality. There are a couple of reasons for this. First of all, you need to be able to trust the product. Secondly, when you have less visual clutter, the materials start to breathe. Thirdly, it has to be functional in use."

Production

The product line is divided into "cells" in which products are built by hand. At first glance, the factory floor, as seen from above, looks like—well, I was about to say it looks like a scene from an upcoming Terminator movie, but certainly, it was a bit surreal, like a gargantuan Meccano set. In this bewildering maze of pipes, cables, racks, equipment, test benches, screens, tools, apparatus and numerous contraptions and construc-



Where these three iconic dive computers (and others) are assembled by hand and tested.



Suunto DX technical dive computer

tions least eye, a unknown function— perhaps for some pressure chambers—staffers worked intently, manually assembling and testing the many fine products in Suunto's assortment.

The environment and ambience of the factory, while being a far cry from cosy and bordering the sterile, appeared tidy, clean, functional and safe—as it should be—without any weird smells or loud noises. In fact, it was rather muted, with not much sound

of, at to my mostly function— except—

Suunto Vyper Air dive computer



at all, just like some sort of laboratory. I thought, "So, that's what a high-tech manufacturing plant making dive instruments looks like." Well, that was interesting. ■