



DREAMS MADE OF STEEL AND WALNUT

The practical vision of Peter Hofer

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Have you dreamed of a gun that is truly one of a kind and a perfect match to you in more ways than the weight, balance, stock dimensions, and trigger pull? A gun that not only has engraving like no other gun in the world but features a unique caliber or combination of chamberings, built on a very rare system, or perhaps exists only in your head? If you have such a dream, and the only thing that keeps you from owning it is that no firearms manufacturer offers anything remotely similar, you might want to pay a visit to Peter Hofer of Ferlach, Austria.

For an American, that could be a long way. Ferlach lies on Austria's southern border, closer to Venice than Vienna and doesn't even have a train station, except a historic one that offers nostalgic pleasure rides on vintage steam engines. The nearest international airport is in Ljubljana, the capital of neighboring Slovenia. From there, it's only about an hour's drive over a scenic road through the Alps, where ibex and chamois roam.

On Ferlach's streets, little suggests that guns have been made there since the early 16th Century. But they have, and sporting guns from Ferlach are unmistakable. It's about more than unique aesthetics; it's a blend of the cultural heritage of diverse peoples who used to belong to the Vienna monarchs' spheres of influence: German and Ottoman, Balkan and Italian, Slavic and Hungarian. There are also local design specialties, like the Bergstützen, a mountain rifle in two different calibers, and the Ischler single shot, favored by Emperor Franz Joseph, who practiced the "one shot, one kill" philosophy nearly a century before Colonel Cooper.

In Ferlach's heyday, when the town had over 400 independent gunmakers, there was a gunmaking shop literally at every corner. Now the number is down to eight, and each is unique in its own way. But to paraphrase the classic, some gunmakers are more unique than others. Most Ferlach gunmakers simply follow ancient traditions—Hofer draws from that and takes it to a new level.

Of course, you don't have to go to Austria. Hofer is a frequent guest at gun shows and hunting conventions, and if he's there, you can't miss him. Hofer is a big bloke whose head with a heap of unruly hair usually towers above the crowd. The thoughts inside that head are, as often as not, about guns. Hofer is one of those people who lives, breathes, drinks, and eats his job. Even when he's hunting or cruising his motorboat along the turquoise waters of the Adriatic, he can't completely shut his mind off from gunmaking. If he admires a custom pen or watch—his other passions—he keeps an eye open for inspirations that may influence his next project.



You can't miss his stand either. Your eye might first fall on a 4-bore double rifle, a weapon that redefines "heavy gun," develops 28,000 joules of energy, weighs over 30 pounds, and deserves to be featured in the Jurassic Park franchise more than any other weapon. Next to it, and often ordered as a set, there is the world's lightest double rifle. Chambered in .17 HMR, .17 Hornet, or .22 Hornet, it tips the scale at only 2.2 pounds and may well be the most elegant gun in the world. Especially striking is the colibri-themed engraving on the original gun of this model. You could spend hours admiring the details of numerous birds, their tropical plumage reproduced through inlays of different alloys, among the rainforest flowers.

Those who write about Hofer, starting with the great Geoffrey Boothroyd who noticed the young gunmaker as early as 1993, often use words like "visionary," "paradox," "artist," "enfant terrible," and even "genius." Hofer broke his first record exactly as he entered the trade, becoming the youngest Master Gunmaker in history. Other seminal works followed, including

PETER HOFER DOUBLE RIFLE "TECHNIKART"

Caliber 375 / 375 H&H. State-of-the-art handcrafted hunting rifle in skeleton design with satellite-controlled tracking system integrated in the stock, which warns of any unauthorized use, emergency alarm system, shot counter, altimeter, hydrometer, barometer, GPS tracking system.

some whose influence may extend beyond firearms production and could at some point enter applied art textbooks.

A case in point is a double rifle called the TechnikArt. The transparent sideplates of this double rifle leave the intricate details of the lockwork in full view. The parts are highlighted by an underlying 24-karat gold plate, all held together by over 300 tiny screws, each measuring only .3 millimeter. The operational parts are thus also ornamental, challenging the distinction between decorative and functional.

TechnikArt has several integrated high-tech devices, including a shot counter, an altimeter, a barometer, and a GPS module that allows you to retrace the steps you made on your safari exactly. Hofer also means it as a response to the social criticism of gun ownership—legally owned firearms are hardly ever used in crime, and high-end collector weapons are practically never involved. In addition, the GPS technology adds even more safety by preventing any unauthorized use.

As you can see, Hofer does not look down on technical progress in general. Where he does have reservations is application of the high-tech methods for production of custom guns. All Hofer's creations are old-fashionably made by hand—and it's more than a marketing claim. Some 125 years ago, George Teasdale-Buckell, better known to dog people as Purcell Llewellyn's right hand but also an influential English gun editor, asked P.J. Webley of Webley & Scott why the advanced machinery employed in the production of their famous service revolver



was not used for manufacture of sporting guns that were made entirely by hand. The answer was that machine production suits the customer who wants the output to be identical. But that wouldn't work with the buyers of sporting arms. Hunters want their guns to be as unique as they are.

Hofer's philosophy is the same. He recognizes that hunters still want their guns to be unique and resents the reality that most gun companies have given in to the pressure of making products cheaper and delivering them faster. Even most of the made-to-order guns are produced with CNC machinery. Granted, you can have any engraving and finish imaginable, from photo-quality naked bodies to deep relief scenes of a Viking raid. However, look below the surface of the finish, and most are making essentially two to four models.

Not Hofer. His company turns out as many as 25 models with nine different locks, five safety systems, 44 barrel sets, and over 400 possible combinations of the above. That would be impossible if the firm relied on CNC machinery. As Hofer likes to point out, while the machine can turn out very precise parts very cheaply, before it does, it needs to be programmed. And programming is expensive. Very expensive. No matter how high the

hourly rate of a trained gunmaker is—for one-off parts for a one-off gun—the human still comes out cheaper than the machine.

Hofer's small team can do all jobs completely in-house, which many feel is essential for continuous and uncompromising quality. The talent source is Ferlach's Höhere Technische Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt, an R&D and educational college from which Hofer himself graduated. It offers unparalleled educational programs in both practical gunmaking and weaponry development, packed with practical skills and theoretical knowledge—something that comes in handy when embodying people's dreams.

Few people realize what it takes to design a truly innovative gun. For example, one of the problems Hofer faced when creating the 4-bore double rifle was that first he had to come up with ammo for it, and not just the regular ammo (if you can call 20,000 foot/pound cartridges "regular"), but also the ammo that developed the increased pressure required to submit the guns for proof. Nobody made either hulls or bullets, but worst of all, not a single European proof house had a 4-bore pressure barrel. Hofer had to build one himself.

That scenario should indirectly answer the question about Hofer's prices, which in most cases involve six figures. This is not surprising given that the regular guns take up to 7,000 man-hours to build, and the most extensive project to date required 21,000. But who can really put a price on a piece of art or a dream that came true? Besides, Hofer's guns tend

PETER HOFER FALCON SHOTGUN

Caliber 12/12. Double UNESCO World Heritage project united in one work of art.



**PETER HOFER DOUBLE RIFLE
SET "DINOSAUR"**

World's smallest double rifle caliber 17/17 HMR with a record weight of 0.9 kg (1.98 lbs) and world's largest double rifle in the newly developed caliber 4/4Bore Nitro express with a record weight of 13.5 kg (29.76 lbs), highest impact energy ever achieved with a hunting rifle.



to hold their value quite well. He quotes cases when his guns delivered an annual return on investment, adjusted for inflation, of over 8 percent across several decades.

Designing unique weapons is also an investment of a different kind, focusing on know-how that can be used for more conventional guns. Hofer's firm can outfit you for any hunting experience, from a pair of side-by-side sidelocks for an English-style pheasant shoot to a precision mountain rifle. With that know-how, they can do it even better. For instance, the challenge of building the world's smallest double rifle—you can't simply scale a traditional design down—translated into a very compact but very reliable system, perfect for ultralightweight smallbore shotguns.

Then again, take the old Ferlach specialty, the combination gun with two or three different barrels in one stock, although Hofer can create up to five. Imagine a double-barreled shotgun combined with a smallbore rifle barrel for varmints *and* a medium-bore rifle for deer or antelope *and* a big bore up to .470NE that can stop a charging rhinoceros. Some may call it a pipe dream, but all dreams have a right to exist and to be embodied in wood and metal—if you can find a gunmaker who's up to the job.

But Hofer is ready to take the concept of the combination gun even further, creating a gun that is not only unique but also surprisingly practical—something that any upland bird

hunter has wished for at least once. It looks just like a regular 12-gauge side-by-side, except it has a secret: a .17 rifle barrel hidden between the two shotgun barrels. This is a step away from the conventional Teutonic Drilling, which is a rifle with two shotgun barrels on top. Hofer's "hidden third barrel" gun looks and feels like a perfectly balanced shotgun. Fitting in the lock for the third barrel and an extractor for its hull, in addition to the automatic ejectors for the shotgun barrel into a regular-sized receiver, was a challenge few gunmakers would accept. This model comes in 12, 20, 28, and .410 gauges for shotgun barrels. The rifle barrel can be chambered for .17 Hornet—the incredibly fast and flat-shooting round can take a fox or coyote at 300 yards. If you are waging a personal war on predators, the instantly available long shot is right for you. The alternative rimfire chambering the .17 HMR could be just right for that grouse on a distant treetop. A variation is also available for those who favor the over-and-under.

In Hofer's workshop, anything is possible unless the laws of physics forbid it. Customers who need a conventional gun may find what they seek at a conventional gunmaker. However, if you have a dream—a dream of a unique gun, a gun with an original design that nobody else has in their lineup—the one gunmaker in the world who has the most experience in making fantasies come alive in a fusion of wood and metal is Peter Hofer. 🦋