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'Neuchâtel' - A superbly restored paddle-steamer Bryan Stone

Publicity image of 'Neuchâtel' from Trivapor Facebook page.

The paddle-steamer 'Neuchâtel', dating from 1912, briefly re-entered public service on the Lake of Neuchâtel last year, after an eight-year restoration programme, before having to undergo guarantee repairs on the boiler insulation. This year, fully operational again, she has worked a full programme throughout the season on the three Jura lakes of Biel, Neuchâtel and Murten.

As 'Neuchâtel' is the last survivor in Switzerland of a single-deck, half-saloon paddle-steamer of a style once common in Switzerland and elsewhere. With a capacity of 300 passengers she is a smaller type than ships on other lakes. Built in 1912 by Escher-Wyss in Zürich, she is 48.60m long, has a 11.20m beam, and a draft when laden of 1.18m. Having worked for 56 years, a boiler defect led to her withdrawal in 1968 after which she was moored as a floating restaurant in Neuchâtel harbour. At this time the boiler, the steam engine, as well as many components, were removed and mostly lost. In 1999 she was offered for sale, and interested parties formed the Foundation Trivapor to purchase

her, hopefully as a museum piece. Unfortunately their bid failed and she remained a restaurant until 2007 when the new owner went bankrupt. With the ship again on the market the Foundation Trivapor again made an offer and this time obtained possession of, what was by then, little better than a hulk. The thought that she might work again was adventurous.

However, a benefactor found, stored in Rotterdam, a serviceable reciprocating 2-cylinder compound steam engine built by Maffei in München in 1927 that was suitable, in size, power and weight, for possible use in the 'Neuchâtel'. The engine was brought to Switzerland by rail and stored, but having acquired this working engine it meant that a new 15 bar boiler had to be obtained. Next a site was found in a small boatyard in Sugiez, near Murten, on the bank of the Broye Canal, where a dry dock with protective roof was built. 'Neuchâtel' was secured between two barges and towed across the lake, to be lifted by heavy road crane onto her new home for some 4 years. (See *Swiss Express* - September 2011.)

There were many setbacks. Her condition was worse than expected with some hull plates being wafer-thin, plus promised subsidies from Cantons Fribourg and Vaud were not forthcoming. However, a retired dentist made it his life's ambition to see her again at work, and his generosity was an inspiration. Other institutions contributed, lottery funds were made available, and private members of the Foundation Trivapor from all over Switzerland came



'Neuchâtel' at Sugiez Shipyard in 2011. Photo: Bryan Stone

together, until CHF12m was found and invested. Today 'Neuchâtel' belongs to the Foundation Trivapor, has the approval of the Federal authorities, and is operated under contract by the 'Company of Navigation of Lakes Murten and Neuchâtel'. She can operate, as in the past, everywhere on the Lakes of Biel, Murten and Neuchâtel as do today's motor ships. The reason is an unusual geography lesson.

The Jura lakes, and the original course of the Aare from the Bernese Oberland through Bern to its confluence with the Rhein, result from the retreat of the glaciers 11,000 years ago. The regions below Bern were always flooding, and between 1868 -1878 the first Jura Water Correction, a huge task, was carried out. It involved diverting the Aare at Aarberg into the Lake of Biel by an artificial canal, as well as the building of two further canals, using existing river beds. These were the Broye Canal which links Murten and Lake Neuchâtel, and the Zihl Canal between Lake Neuchâtel and Lake of Biel. All the lakes were lowered by about 2.5 m to a common level. A major result was, with drainage canals, the creation of an unusually fertile black-earth region between Murten and Ins known as the Berner Seeland, today a rich source of all sorts of agricultural products. A second correction, starting with the artificial Wahlensee below Bern, and including corrections below Biel and stabilisation of levels, took place from 1962 to 1973. With the opening of the Broye and Zihl Canals the through operation of steamships on the three lakes became possible. In fact, navigation was not new; Robert Stephenson and Henry Swinburne in their 1850 Swiss Railway Network Report to the Confederation, had recommended that the railway from Olten to Genève should operate with shipping connections along the lakes, and over a century before attempts had been made to build a canal from Yverdon to Lac Léman (Genève) to permit haulage of goods between the Rhein and the Rhône. That is another story, but remains of this project are still to be found around Eclépens.

Back to our paddle-steamer: the 'Neuchâtel' has retractable upper works which are required for bridge clearance in the Zihl Canal, allowing her to navigate on all three lakes. On a recent cruise we travelled from Neuchâtel, leaving at 12.05, to Murten and back, a deeply satisfying 3 hours of hissing and puffing with that gentle to-and-fro sensation which all our paddle-steamers generate. The passage of the Broye Canal takes about 20 minutes, partly through a wild-life sanctuary in the reedbeds, and the view from the lake of the historic walled city of Murten (scene of the Confederation's victory



'Neuchâtel' approaching her home port.

Photo: Bryan Stone



'Neuchâtel' arriving at Neuchâtel.

Photo: Bryan Stone

over Charles the Bold's Burgundians in 1476) is its own reward. The 'Neuchâtel' has both First and Second Class accommodation, an excellent restaurant, and of course other refreshments available. Although we did the round trip passengers can also leave the ship at Murten and, after visiting the Old Town, take the train on some back-water branches to Bern, Payerne, Neuchâtel or Fribourg. Other schedules take in Yverdon and the Lake of Biel. The website www.Trivapor.ch gives details. It is advisable to check the availability of your Swiss Pass as there are changes afoot, but if you can plan a trip on ps 'Neuchâtel' on your next Swiss visit it will be very worthwhile. ☞

Foundation Trivapor logo.

