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Autor: Gavazzi, Mario
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Portrait of “p/s Piemonte”.

Mario Gavazzi



“Piemonte” arrives at Locarno and meets another oldtimer of Lake Maggiore: M/S “Delfino”, built in 1950, the first two-deck motorship on this lake.

Photos: Mario Gavazzi

Before the construction of the Swiss and Italian railway networks, and also in the early days of these, the Vierwaldstättersee (Lake Luzern) and Lake Maggiore – or Lago Verbano to the Italians – formed a vital link in the transport of people and freight between Central Europe and Italy. Travellers took a ship from Luzern to Flüelen, traversed the Gotthard Pass, and having made their way down the Val Leventina took another lake ship at the Swiss village of Magadino to sail down the length of the Maggiore/

Verbano to Arona or Sesto Calende en-route to Milano and further south. The opening of the rail route through the original Gotthard Tunnel in 1882 put paid to the lakes being part of a ‘Trans-European Highway’. However, as the tourist trade developed on the shores of Lago Verbano, and elegant paddle-ships were put in service, a cruise on the 65km lake became part of visitors’ holidays.

The years prior to WW1 were a boom time for the genteel tourism that this area attracted and in 1904 the lake shipping

company introduced their “p/s *Regina Madre*” to cater for this trade. The 51m long vessel carried this name (given in recognition of Italy’s Royal Family) until 1943 when, for political reasons during WW2, it was re-named “*Piemonte*”. Along with the paddle steamers “*Lombardia*” and “*Italia*” she was withdrawn from service in 1961. However, unlike the other two, following a change of heart by the operators she was given a total restoration and modernisation returning to

“*Piemonte*” is one of the last paddle steamers in public service, operated by a traditional hand steering wheel.






Captain Riccardo Ottolini operates with the help of the original telegraph.



The two-cylinder steam engine is operated by Kevin Houldey (l.) and Filippo Ciaramitaro.

service in May 1965. Another period of refurbishment took place in 1973/4 when her boiler was replaced. She was again out-of-service between 2001 and 2006. Although operational, and still powered by her original Escher Wyss steam engine, the “*Piemonte*” is now unfortunately only used for occasional cruises – just four in 2017.

Her last public cruise of 2017 was on the 21st October and was organised by former Davos High School teacher Urs von de Crone, now living in Val Maggia near Locarno, who organises cultural events in his retirement. He arranged for the “*Piemonte*” to circulate the whole lake on its classic route, including venturing to Locarno and the Swiss part of Lake Maggiore, that it does not normally visit. The trip attracted some 200 passengers, including steam and paddle ship enthusiasts from five countries. Also on board were local tour operator and guide Caterina Zago and Andrea Keller, the shipping company’s operating manager for the Swiss part of the lake shortly to retire after 38-years service. These two were able to answer questions and inform their guests about the ship and the lake during the voyage. It is hoped that this cruise will be repeated in 2018.

Check www.corona-sapere.ch for details. 



Caterina Zago (right), tour operator and tour guide, explains in several languages stories and the history of Lake Maggiore.



ABOVE: Thankful words from Urs von der Crone (left), to Andrea Keller for his help in the organization of this excursion.

BELOW: Oldtime steamer but modern gastronomy: Most of the guests enjoyed the typical Italian meal by Styl Restaurant of family Renato Vitali.

