

# Swiss steamship survival : Mario Gavazzi reflects on 50 years of the steamship renaissance

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have remained at the same level 25 years on. This reflects the fact that much of the rise is in longer distance commuting, which has also been – accidentally – encouraged by the (in Swiss terms) cheap GA.

However, is there a point when it all goes too far? We've seen Zürich HB in an almost permanent state of building work since the start of the Zürich S-Bahn work in the 1980s. Multiple tracking expands, with the then needed sound barriers. Some lines are at capacity, for example the RBS lines into Bern HB low-level where the only answer is a

complete new station at an (in UK) terms unimaginable, amount of investment. As a result, there is already talk of pricing fares to reduce growth (e.g., the half-fare card is going up in price faster than inflation and the three year discount removed). The Basel S-Bahn FLIRT EMUs are to have seats removed to increase standing space – something that sounds familiar to travellers in London!

*In summary, you now know why the SBB has been campaigning for more money to cover an increasing backlog of permanent way maintenance.* 

# Swiss Steamship Survival

## Mario Gavazzi reflects on 50 years of the steamship renaissance



In 1972/3 'p/s Stadt Rapperswil' was the first saved and renovated steamer initialized by steamboat enthusiasts.

*All photos: Mario Gavazzi*

During this summer of 2017 the Swiss lakes (and 'almost-Swiss' Lago Como) boasted a fleet of some twenty steam-powered ships. Sixteen of these are two-deck 'Salondampfer' paddle steamers, three are 'Halbsalondampfer' (one and a half deck) paddle steamers, and one small screw propelled steamer. If all goes well by summer 2018 another screw steamer on the Thuner See will join these ships. Yet fifty years ago the situation regarding steam navigation in Switzerland seemed to be bad, as new diesel-powered ships replaced one 'Oldtimer' after the other. The general view was that there was no future for the last of the lake steamers. However, the decision in 1967 of the Bodensee operator 'Untersee und Rhein' (URh) to replace their last paddle steamer 'Schaffhausen' by a modern diesel ship, sparked a complete change in the public perception of these venerable old ships.

The last voyage of the famous and beautiful 'Schaffhausen' on the 24th May 1967 was

Today 'p/s Schaffhausen' can be seen only in pictures, films and as a model ('Seemuseum' Kreuzlingen, [www.seemuseum.ch](http://www.seemuseum.ch)).

followed by a decision of the URh to order her immediate scrapping at Romanshorn. This precipitate decision prompted the initial momentum to found an enthusiast movement for all the other steamers. Prominent in the early days was a Swiss TV personality Kurt Felix, who had produced a programme the previous year about the last days





of this lake ship. Following the scrapping, there was a spate of TV, radio and newspaper articles and declarations to help keep the last units. One intervention in 1969 involved 17 y/o Charlotte Kunz taking part in a popular TV quiz show on



**TOP:** Europe's first lake paddle steamer, saved as an active ship, was in 1965 'p/s Piemonte' on Lago Maggiore, seen here at Locarno.

**MIDDLE:** Initialized by Lake Geneva ship company (CGN), the first renovated steamer in 1966 was "Savoie", seen here in Geneva with the 'Jet d'Eau' behind.

**BOTTOM:** A happy end after one of the longest 'fights' by Dampferfreunde: 'Blümlisalp', the BLS steamer on Lake of Thun, here on a 'winter trip' between Christmas and New Year.

the subject of 'Steamboats'. Her well-publicised intention was not simply to win but to make a wake-up call that without public action these iconic vessels would soon be no more. In that year alone four 'Oldtimers' were to be withdrawn from service; 'Stadt Rapperswil' (Zürichsee); 'Neuchâtel' (Lac de Neuchâtel); 'Wilhelm Tell' (Vierwaldstättersee); and 'Blümlisalp' (Thuner See). This led to the formation in January 1970 by Kurt Schaad, Hans Bosshard (Editor of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung), and Marcel Fuchs of the association 'Aktion Pro Raddampfer' (APR). Together with the Zürichsee-Schiffahrtsgesellschaft – ZSG (the navigation company of the Zürichsee) APR helped to save the ZSG's last two steamers 'Stadt Zürich' and 'Stadt Rapperswil' both of which were returned to service following action by enthusiasts, the latter in 1972/3. Around a similar time in the Neuchâtel area a small, active group of steamboat enthusiasts tried to save the 'p/s Neuchâtel', reduced to being a floating restaurant without engine and boiler. Thanks to the founding of the association 'Trivapor' (and millions of Swiss francs) after a long period 'Neuchâtel' did get the chance for a second life, with the use of the boiler and engine from a ship on Germany's Chiemsee, re-entering service in 2014.

In October 1970 the navigation company 'Schiffahrtsgesellschaft des Vierwaldstättersees' (SGV) replaced their historic steamer 'Wilhelm Tell' with a new motor ship the 'Gotthard' and in 1972 the steam ship became the well-known restaurant moored in Luzern. This prompted a move in September 1972 by a group of enthusiasts to found the association 'Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee' (DFV) with Hermann Heller as its president. The association had the chance to profit from the Swiss TV programme 'Grüezi miteneand' later that month with steamship enthusiast Kurt Felix presenting the programme. The following day the new association organised a first steamboat parade and in two days gained more than 2000 members! After a long discussion with SGV, and the help of thousands of members, it was possible between 1975/77 to fund the first revision of 'p/s Schiller'. The big chance for DFV came in 1977 with the creation of new share capital by SGV that needed CHF3m for a new shipyard building and the renovation of steamboats. The DFV helped SGV and organised a 'Sammelfahrt' (collection trip) to create new capital. With the help of all the Swiss media by 4th June the total new share capital raised was CHF4.8m. The new capital, plus sponsor actions, has enabled all the five steamers; 'Stadt Luzern'; 'Gallia'; 'Schiller'; 'Uri'; and 'Unterwalden' to be saved.

On Swiss National Day 1st August 1971, the BLS announced the final trip of the 'p/s Blümlisalp', the last steamer on the Thuner See. This announcement led a small, but active, group of enthusiasts in the region of Berne, Thun and Interlaken to form a support group 'Aktionskomitee Pro Dampf'. After a 20-year struggle, and with the help of the foundation 'Vaporama' and the association 'Dampferfreunde Thuner-und-Brienzersee' (who also supported the BLS's



'p/s *Lötschberg*' on the Brienzersee), they managed to save the '*Blümlisalp*' and in the spring of 1992 she returned to service with a triumphal cruise from Thun to Interlaken. The '*Lötschberg*' has never been in danger but has been renovated and is active in service every year. At around the same time an international organisation of steamboat enthusiasts called 'Bodenseeschiffahrts-Museum' with local groups in Austria, Germany and Switzerland saved the last steamboat on the Bodensee. This was the '*Hohentwiel*', built in 1913 by Escher Wyss, Zürich and withdrawn as a member of the DB's fleet in 1962. Fortunately the steamer was not scrapped, as were all the other steamers on that lake, it being used for many years as a floating restaurant at Bregenz Yacht Club. By 1984 the association had managed to put in place a renovation programme for the ship, which eventually re-entered service in 1990 operating charters and cruises. The '*Hohentwiel*' is a large impressive ship on a very large lake. At the other end of the scale is the oldest steamer in public service in Switzerland, the 20-passenger screw steamer '*Greif*' built in 1895, that operates on the Greifensee near Zürich. In 1915 it was transformed into a diesel ship, yet when in 1979 an old steam dredger on the Zürichsee was scrapped, its engine was discovered to have come from the '*Grief*'. This was the big chance for the small boat and the foundation 'Stiftung Dampfschiff Greif' helped to put her back in steam service in 1986.

Shipping services on Le Léman are operated by the CGN – 'Compagnie Générale de Navigation Lac Léman' who in 1966 took the decision to retain steam power on a number of their ships. Several of their paddle steamers were transformed into diesel-electric units, the first being '*Genève*' in 1932 the last '*Helvétie*' in 1974/6, but the 1966 decision marked a change of course as '*p/s Savoie*' was to be kept with her original Sulzer engine. Also the flagship '*La Suisse*' and the '*Simplon*' (the biggest lake paddle steamer in Europe), plus the '*Rhône*', were saved for the future. Again in 1997/8 CGN had to decide what would happen with these 'Oldtimers' as some of the diesel electric units had been taken out-of-service years before. This was the big chance for the steam enthusiasts to found the 'Association des amis des bateaux à vapeur du Léman – ABVL' in 2002. Together with a brilliant team of enthusiasts, plus thousands of sponsors, and millions of Swiss francs, the ABVL helped CGN to restore the '*La Suisse*' and '*Savoie*'. The ABVL is constantly looking at ways to save and restore the other steamers and they have also helped to restore the two paddle-ships '*Vevey*' and '*Italie*', both ex-steamers now with new diesel-electric motors instead of steam engines. Before ABVL was founded, the steamboat enthusiasts were also organized into another association on Le Léman called 'Association Patrimoine du Léman – APL' that has its own projects and is engaged in the history of shipping on the lake.

Now 50 years after the abortive project to save the historic steamer '*Schaffhausen*', that helped to start the ship



TOP: One of the most beautiful renovated steamers is '*Hohentwiel*' on the Bodensee (Lake Constance), here at Romanshorn.

MIDDLE: Small and beautiful: Switzerland's oldest steamer in public sailing is '*Greif*' on Lake Greif.

BOTTOM: What a wonderful steamer: '*Neuchâtel*' on Lake Neuchâtel, operated by the steam engine of '*p/s Ludwig Fessler*' (ex-Chiemsee/Germany).

preservation movement, there are plans for a new steam powered '*Schaffhausen*' to sail the Rhein. This high-tech vessel would be powered by a pellet-fired boiler and modern, efficient, steam engine. For more information see [www.pro-dampfer.ch](http://www.pro-dampfer.ch). Other current steam-powered projects are for






The next renovation project on Lake Lucerne is the flagship 'Stadt Luzern', here with 'Gallia' at Seedorf on a special cruise for the Association Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee.

the general renovation of the SGV's 'Stadt Luzern' commencing at the end of 2018, whilst on the Thuner See it is hoped that restoration can commence on the 1901-built 'Spiez'. This screw steamer lost its boiler and engine in 1950 and since then it has cruised as a diesel ship. Thanks to a sponsor who has given CHF1m it is intended to rebuild 'Spiez' with new steam driven machinery. So, if everything goes well, in 2018 the Thuner See will have a second steamboat. More information is on [www.spiezerli.ch](http://www.spiezerli.ch). These three projects, and


the future plans on Le Léman, show us a very important fact: that the work of steamship salvation in Switzerland will never end!

In addition to all the hard work that has gone on in Switzerland, south of the Alps our Italian friends have also been active. Back in 1961 the Italian Government, who owns the navigation rights on the Swiss/Italian Lago Maggiore, decided to save the 'p/s Piemonte' the last steamer in their fleet. After four years of renovation, in May 1965 the 'Piemonte' returned to service as the first lake paddle steamer in Europe preserved as a historic steamer able to cruise using its original steam engine. The 'Piemonte' sails only for charters and only seldom are public sailings organised. However, on Saturday 21st October 2017 she will sail from Arona and Stresa to Locarno and return to Arona. For more information on this unique voyage see [www.corona-sapere.ch](http://www.corona-sapere.ch).

It is to be hoped that all the active steamers will have a good and great future as they are a very good example of the best of Swiss tourism and are a very important marketing argument to visit Switzerland. Even when Switzerland is seen as too expensive for many people from other parts of Europe to visit, the fact that most of the steamers can be used with normal tickets (also Swiss Pass, half price tickets, etc.), everybody has the opportunity to take cruises on our lakes using historic vessels. This is thanks to the first generation of steamboat enthusiasts who started in 1967 with no money, but good arguments for saving the steam navigation. 


## A New Diamond for Luzern

Mario Gavazzi

Sunday 9th April was a sad day for Luzern and for all enthusiasts of the fleet of ships that sails on the Vierwaldstättersee. On this day the veteran 'm/s Rigi' made her last public appearance on the lake, watched-over by her namesake mountain. In practice her last operational sailing was on 31st December 2016 when her Captain, Kurt Hunziker, also retired. From January to April she had been chartered by the cultural organisation 'Kunststube' as a floating exhibition venue, and it was with a private art cruise that she finished her service. The 'm/s Rigi' has been replaced in the fleet by a new five-deck hybrid motor ship the 'm/s Diamant'. This state-of-the-art vessel is electric powered, with 'clean' diesel engines generating the electricity, and was brought into service during a ceremony at Luzern on the 4th May 2017. She has a capacity of 1100 passengers and will be scheduled on public services and cruises as well as being used as an event ship. The new 'Luzern Diamant' gives the feeling to her passengers that they are on a yacht cruise, and it is certain that she will become a popular vessel. 



## Where's Heidi?

In which station did Heidi find this impressive mural? 

Answer on page 36.