

# St. Petersinsel (Island of St Peter) : a place of mystery and fame

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## Three Lakes Region

### St. Petersinsel (Island of St Peter): a place of mystery and fame

The island of St. Peters in Lake Biel is surrounded by mystery and fame. Since the waterway correction at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is in fact a peninsula, as those works lowered the lake levels by about 2m and unearthed a pathway that was built by the Roman occupiers. This path was named Heidenweg or Heathen path, as Romans were heathens in the eyes of the strictly catholic local population. Excavations and documentation have revealed that a substantial church stood on the island in the Middle Ages.

The island was refuge and final resting place for notable leaders and injured crusaders from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century. They were tended to and respectfully buried by the monks on the island, who dedicated their lives to tending the graves.

As is common among the clergy, a vineyard and farmlet were developed, including a stand of chestnut trees. The land was gifted to the Cluny monastery by King William III of Burgundy in 1107 and was administered by the local representatives. In 1484, the Pope closed the monastery due to financial and moral deficiencies – the few monks were given to the wine a bit in excess.

### The Aar (Aare)

The **Aar** (German *Aare*), a tributary of the High Rhine, is the longest river that both rises and ends entirely within Switzerland. Its vast catchment encompasses 17,779 km<sup>2</sup> (including the Three Lakes Region) and it extends for a total length of 295km.

The Aare has its origin in the alpine Bernese Oberland region and runs through the central part of Switzerland's most populated plateau region. At the northern border to Germany, near the twin towns Koblenz (Switzerland) and Waldshut (Germany), the Aare flows into River Rhine. The name Koblenz comes from Latin *Confluenta* [flow together]. *Aa* is basically an old German word for any running water in contrast to lakes or to the sea.



St Peters Island with Erlach in the foreground  
[www.bielsee.ch](http://www.bielsee.ch)

By 1535, the Hospital of Bern became the owner of the island and appointed caretakers intermittently from the two neighbouring towns of Twann or Ligerz, until it was finally assigned to the Council of Twann in 1818. Part of the island was then subdivided and sold off privately. The public part which contained the monastery with vineyard and farm was managed by local farm workers and vintners in an arrangement similar to sharemilking in New Zealand, but this has since been replaced by lease agreements with management companies.

The writings of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau have elevated this island from a sacred place of magnetic attraction to a mecca for people seeking peace and natural beauty. The quotation "*I was granted only 2 months on this island. Without*

*a moment of boredom I could have stayed here 2 years, 2 centuries or the whole of eternity. For me these 2 months are the happiest time in my life...*" drew the attention of people around Europe.

The ideological ponderings of this writer made him unpopular with the French authorities as he delved into social injustices based on the inequality of human beings. Rousseau also observed the plant and animal world and recorded his findings in several books.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe also stayed on the island for a period of time, as did Napoleon's wife Josephine Bonaparte. It is a place of natural beauty and due to its marsh lands, host to many birds and even beavers can be seen occasionally.

It explains why the monastery was transformed into a historic hotel/restaurant and is a popular weekend destination for people from far and wide. As it happens, the region is celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of J J Rousseau, and several celebrations and educational gatherings are being held for the occasion, as can be seen on <http://www.rousseau300.ch/>.

By Trudi Fill-Weidmann

*This article draws on several sources from the internet (details available).*

Many brooks in Switzerland are simply called *Aa* or have a name combining *Aa* with some local name. So its name already expresses that the *Aare* is *the* Swiss river *par excellence*, while the other major Swiss rivers, like the Rhine and Rhône, run through peripheral regions or mark the border to neighbouring countries.

The Aare used to devastate large plateau areas by inundations in past centuries. To stop this, hydraulic engineering measures were taken. The Hagneck canal leads the waters to Lake Biel serving as a huge compensation basin.

The old course of the Aare between the village of Aarberg and Büren still exists, but is only a small brook nowadays.



Stretch of the old Aare  
([de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aare](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aare))

A second channel, the Zihl canal, directs the waters from Lakes Neuchâtel, Murten and Biel to Büren.

By Melissa Lanz

Sourced from :

[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aar](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aar)