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Small is Beautiful

Mario Gavazzi reports on a special weekend on the Sarnersee



Jubilee steam concert: DS 'St. Ur' and 'Liberty Belle' on Saturday September 23, 2017.

Photos: Mario Gavazzi

The Sarnersee is not one of Switzerland's must-see locations. Located in Canton Obwalden, this small 5.7km long body of water is sited in pleasant pre-alpine scenery, and for many it is a hidden gem, something the Swiss tend to keep to themselves. However, this quiet location once attracted the attention of a world-famous artist, for around 1842 J. M. W. Turner journeyed there and painted "The Sarner See, Evening", one of his series of Swiss watercolours. It is now in a private collection, but can be seen on London's Tate Gallery Website.

Turner features two people in a boat on the lake, probably fishermen, but perhaps early tourists like him. It was some 55 years later in 1897 that the first public ship cruises, specifically catering for visitors to the area, started on the lake between Sarnen at its northern end and Giswil at the

south. The Sarnersee is not a tourism 'hot spot' where a ship operator can make lot of money. During the last 120 years several families have operated the navigation using one or two boats, and only normally during the warmer seasons from spring to autumn. For the last 30 years the Family Weiss has run the cruises with Franz Weiss in charge of the 'ms Seestern', whilst Heidi Weiss has run the complimentary "Bistro Seefeld" near Sarnen and an associated boat rental service.

In season the 'Seestern' (Starfish) operates 3 to 5 times daily between Sarnen (Seefeld), Sachseln (adjacent to its Zentralbahn station), Wilen on the west bank of the lake, and Giswil. 'Seestern', a conventional modern ship seating some 60, has had some interesting predecessors over the last 120 years. The first ship on the service was a naphtha-powered vessel the 'Mignon' built in 1896/7.

In 1903 a small ship, the 'Volta', was put in service. Volta indicated electric power and this was a surprise at the time. It was built in Germany in 1889 as a steamboat and first saw service on the River Aare at Solothurn as the 'St. Urs', it moved in 1894 to the Alpnachsee (Vierwaldstättersee) and then to the Sarnersee. The new owners, Family Läubli, converted it to electric power (a Tribelhorn engine), renamed it and used it for private and public cruises. Herr Läubli operated a furniture factory at Wilen and ordered two freight boats to transport his products over



'MS Seestern' approaching Sarnen.

the lake to Sachseln for onward transit on the Brünigbahn. These two boats were also operated by electric power! In 1973 'Volta' became out-of-order and was sold in 1992 to the Schmid families. They preserved this old ship and rebuilt it back to a steamboat and again named it 'St. Urs'. As the original steam engine had been scrapped, another very similar engine was bought in Great Britain to power the ship, generally on the Aare at Solothurn.

After a quarter-century absence the Schmid's returned the 'St. Urs' to the Sarnersee for the 120 year jubilee celebrations that took place over the weekend of 23rd/24th September 2017 when the weather was beautiful. The celebrations commenced during Saturday with both a ship parade, and a cruise for invited guests on the 'Seestern', the 'St. Urs', the 'oldtimer' motorboat 'Doris' owned by Erwin Heymann, and the Family Bolzern's small steamboat 'Liberty Belle' – the smallest paddle steamer in Switzerland. This was followed by a reception at Sarnen, organised jointly by the Family Weiss, the Association Schiffs-Agentur, and Erwin Heymann, where the attendees were entertained by a folklore choir. Also a new book 'Sarner see Fahrt' (ISBN 978-3-033-06407-2) was launched. All the important facts and figures of navigation on Sarnersee (also the freight ships) are described in the new book, together with lots of pictures. The Sunday was 'Fünfliber-Tag' (Five Francs Day), when the public were invited to cruise the lake on the 'Seestern', 'St. Urs' and 'Doris' for just CHF5. The ships were crowded! Thanks must go to the Family Weiss, Erwin Heymann, Sonja Wiget, Heinz Amstad, plus many others, for organising such a successful weekend.

Mario's Postscript – No, not 007!

Who remembers the James Bond film where his amphibious car rises out of the water and flies? Well there was also a similar scene at the end of the Saturday ship parade when it was time for Martha and Beat Bolzern to take 'Liberty Belle', their small British-built paddle steamer, home to Emmenbrücke. As Beat reversed the trailer down the slipway into the lake, Captain Martha manoeuvred the little boat onto it to 'fly off' out of the water. Although neither Swiss citizens are employed on Her Majesty's Secret Service, but perhaps their 'Liberty Belle' and the Sarnersee could feature in a future Bond movie. Imagine Daniel Craig at the wheel of this jewel of a boat, steaming across the lake as he rescues his latest Bond girl from the lakeside villa hideout of an international villain. 007 comes to Obwalden! *We can dream.* ☑



1. Sarnen, jubilee day September 23, 2017: MS 'Seestern' and guest ship DS 'Liberty Belle', operated by Beat and Martha Bolzern, the smallest paddle steamer in Switzerland, five passengers only!
2. 75 years young: oldtimer-motorboat 'Doris' after total revision in 2016/7 by owner Erwin Heymann.
- 3./4. 'Liberty Belle' being hauled-out at Sarnen.
5. 'Liberty Belle' going home.