
Lateen sailing boats on Lake Geneva



The *Neptune*, the *Demoiselle* and the *Aurore* off the coast of Ouchy, centenary regatta, 2015 © Roland Grunder

Lateen-rigged barques and the expertise needed to sail them have been preserved thanks to the commitment of a passionate group of enthusiasts. As opposed to rectangular sails, lateen or Latin-rig sails allow the vessel to sail into the wind. Nowadays, this tradition is being continued in French-speaking Switzerland thanks to the voluntary work of two associations in Vaud, one in Geneva, one in Valais, and two in France. Altogether, they have around 1,000 members and 260 boatmen and boatwomen who bring to life this unique type of sailing at regular outings that are open to the public throughout the summer season, and at various regattas celebrating cultural heritage and festive occasions. This knowledge is passed on through the regular training of new boatmen and women.

Lateen sails originated in the eastern Mediterranean at the dawn of the Christian era, and were introduced to Lake Geneva in the 13th century, where they turned out to be remarkably well suited to the lake setting. Lateen sails were initially used for military purposes and only featured on civilian boats from the second half of the 17th century. With the transportation of building materials, the Belle Époque was both the golden age and the beginning of the end for lateen sailing boats. From the 1920s onwards, the number of lateen sailing boats declined, and by 1958, there were only two left: the *Neptune* in Geneva and the *Vaudoise* in Lausanne, which was bought by the *Pirates d'Ouchy* in 1948. In 1976, the *Neptune* underwent restoration and in the early 2000s, several replicas were produced, including the *Savoie*, currently the world's largest lateen sailing boat. Since then, these sails have been a familiar sight on Lake Geneva.

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The list of living traditions in Switzerland aims to raise public awareness of cultural practices and their transmission. It is based on the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The list is drawn up and updated in collaboration with the cantonal cultural services.

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Ancient yet uncertain origins

We don't know exactly where and when lateen sails first appeared. However, they probably originated in the Mediterranean as the earliest visual evidence comes from between Greece and Egypt at the dawn of the Christian era.

The lateen sail is probably derived from the square sail, by inclining the yardarm and transforming the cut from rectangular to triangular. This was revolutionary, because – unlike the rectangular sail – it allowed vessels to sail into the wind. Naval vessels were the first to adopt lateen sails, with the galley being the best example. Their use soon spread across the Mediterranean, spilling over to the Atlantic coasts of Africa and Europe, and southwards as far as Zanzibar and Sri Lanka via the Red Sea.

It is therefore unsurprising that when the Counts of Savoy were looking for vessels to secure control of Lake Geneva, they called on boatbuilders from Genoa to build up an efficient naval fleet. We don't know exactly who gave the order or when, but an inventory drawn up in Chillon in 1285 mentions 'due galee' (galleys), which proves that they had already been around for some time. The people of Geneva and Bern were also keen to purchase Latin-rig galleys when the time came.

The use of lateen sails was long confined to naval vessels and, strangely, they don't seem to feature in civilian navigation until the mid-17th century. When a more efficient merchant ship was needed than the 'naus' (flat-bottomed vessels) in use at the time, the idea was born on the northern shore of the lake, to propose the construction of a mixed-use galley, which would be a merchant ship in peacetime but could be easily transformed into a warship. And so the barque du Léman was born. The prototype (the Gaillarde), built by Laurent Dental from Nice on behalf of Jean-François Panchaud, a merchant from Morges, was launched in 1691. It was a resounding success and ten barques were built in the space of six years. In 1720, there were eight large barques and 23 small ones, known as brigantines. More than 200 transportation barques were built until 1932.

The technical superiority of the lateen-rigged barques led to the disappearance of the traditional 'naus'. Until the competition from steamboats started in 1823, barques were used for most transportation in and around the lake: passengers, livestock and various goods. The firewood needed by industry and households made up the majority of the goods transported at the time. When, from the mid-19th century,

railways were used to transport coal – and were faster and cheaper – it looked like the end for sailing boats as a means of transportation. However, paradoxically, the opposite happened: the barques du Léman experienced their heyday during the Belle Époque. Intensive construction activity required huge quantities of building materials and sailing vessels were ideally suited to this type of transport. The sixty or so vessels that sailed from one shore of Lake Geneva to the other in the early 20th century transporting stones from Meillerie left a mark on the collective consciousness, and the lateen sailing boat viewed from the front with its sails sticking out like ears became emblematic of Lake Geneva.

After the First World War, the growing use of reinforced concrete, which was much cheaper than stone, and the development of overland transport, proved fatal to sail transport. A handful of barques continued to scrape by, but they could not survive for long. From the 1920s, the number of these boats declined. By 1958, there were only two left: the Neptune in Geneva and the Vaudoise in Lausanne, which was bought by the Pirates d'Ouchy in 1948. In 1976, the Neptune underwent restoration, and in the early 2000s several replicas were produced, including the Savoie, currently the world's biggest lateen sailing boat. Since then, these sails have been a familiar sight on Lake Geneva.

Boats and associations

The barques, cochères and brigantines of Lake Geneva all belong to an association or foundation that manages them. However, the Latin-rigged dinghies are privately owned. The Association des voiles latines lacustres (the Association of lateen sailing on lakes) brings together most of these owners. On the Swiss side, there are four associations: the Confrérie des Pirates d'Ouchy (founded in 1934, 425 members, 60 boatmen), the Fondation Neptune (founded in 1977, 80 members, 55 boatmen and women), the Association la Barque des Enfants (founded in 1996, 298 members, 50 boatmen and women), and the Association des Amis de la Cochère (founded in 1997, 194 members, 25 boatmen and women). Altogether, the associations around Lake Geneva have nearly 1,000 members and around 260 boatmen and women.

These barques and the know-how needed to sail them have been preserved thanks to passionate enthusiasts working on a voluntary basis. Today, this tradition continues thanks to the work of the four Swiss associations mentioned above, together with two French ones. This involves managing what

amounts to a small business with all the difficulties that entails. It takes a great deal of personal commitment and the establishment of a true 'business culture' to bring together all those involved in lateen sailing.

The captain is supported by several boatmen and women. These passionate individuals bring to life this unique kind of sailing at regular outings that are open to the public during the summer months and at various regattas celebrating cultural heritage and festive occasions. They also pass on this know-how by regularly training new boatmen and women.

Lateen sailing today

During the Belle Époque, a fleet of about 60 barques and 250 boatmen brought stone and firewood from production sites to the booming urban centres around Lake Geneva. While nowadays this activity has disappeared completely, and there are only five traditional barques left, nearly 260 volunteer boatmen and boatwomen take hundreds of passengers aboard these boats every year and allow them to experience this cultural heritage. Paradoxically, more people practise the art of lateen sailing today than they did in the past.

This involves two types of boat: for the most part, the traditional transport vessels – three barques, a brigandine and a cochère – but also a number of sailing-rowing dinghies.

– The transport vessels: Due to their size and the number of boatmen and women required to sail them, the current barques are owned by associations. They are used as passenger vessels and most of their activity involves being hired out for day sailing. This is how the funds are raised to maintain them. Only the *Demoiselle* is used as a sailing school and, as well as tourist trips, is primarily used for camps lasting several days for e.g. young people, schools, scouts, and associations to pass on this traditional expertise.

Barques are considered an important part of cultural heritage by local people (two of which – the *Vaudoise* and the *Neptune* are listed as historic monuments), and regularly feature at events organised around Lake Geneva, where they are sometimes the stars of the show: *Voiles latines de Morges*, *Parade de la CGN* (Compagnie Générale de Navigation sur le lac Léman), *Régate des Vieux Bateaux à La Tour-de-Peilz*, *Fête des canots de Rolle*, national festivals to mark the 1 August or 14 July etc.

Furthermore, they meet up all together once a year to race at the regatta known as the 'Centenary'.

These activities go hand in hand with the

meticulous maintenance work, which is generally carried out on a voluntary basis in the low season. Being registered as a passenger vessel involves very rigorous training for boatmen and women and captains. To train a boatman, 13 days of sailing are needed, while training a captain requires several years of experience. In addition, training cruises are often organised. The training cruises involve practising manoeuvres and roles (man overboard, fire, waterway, passenger management etc.) Captains also need to obtain a special licence for passenger vessels, which is equivalent to the licence needed to sail a CGN boat.

– Lateen-rigged dinghies: Dinghies are privately owned and are primarily used for recreational sailing. They also frequently feature at various festivals of nautical heritage: the *Fête des Canots* in Rolle, the *Régate des Vieux Bateaux* at La Tour-de-Peilz, and the *Classique de Sciez*. The practice of sailing lateen-rigged dinghies – which is often solitary – is handed down informally from one generation to the next, whether in families or among peers.

Similar living traditions

Many countries have used lateen sails since Antiquity, in particular the countries around the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, but also the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Coast on both sides of the strait of Gibraltar. In these countries, lateen sailing is still practised on a daily basis and the shipbuilding yards have preserved their expertise, continuing to build and maintain lateen sailing boats according to local styles. So you're just as likely to see preserved old vessels sailing around as new ones. Historical replicas are mainly found in European countries. For example, Lake Geneva's neighbour Lake Annecy has its own brigandine with lateen sails: the *Espérance III*.

Because of their elegance and charm, lateen sailing boats are often a tourist attraction and are used both to promote a location (pointed bows lined up along quays in the south of France), and to offer excursions (Aswan feluccas on the Nile in Egypt or in the Kerkenah Islands off Tunisia).

Many associations support the art of lateen sailing. They organise training courses and maintenance and renovation sessions. They also instigate historical studies that provide an insight into this activity, and disseminate the findings in publications. In all these ways, they bring to life the culture linked to their passion. Various museums also showcase the richness of this heritage.

It should be noted that, as the world faces the need to decarbonise and move away from combustion

engines, we need to do all we can to preserve this know-how, particularly in poorer countries that will not be able to afford to adopt cutting-edge technologies (electric or hydrogen engines), and will probably have to make do with what they have preserved. For them, recognition of the age-old techniques of lateen sailing is therefore a key factor in the energy transition.

Threats and safeguarding measures

While lateen sailing on Lake Geneva has so far survived, it is not out of the danger zone. It faces various threats (material, financial, societal, legal and security-related), which call for equally diverse responses.

In response to the disappearance of the last two historical barques from Lake Geneva, the Cantons of Vaud and Geneva listed them as historical monuments in 1993: the Vaudoise (1932) and the Neptune (1904). But the cost of maintaining large vessels (whether historical or not) is a problem in itself. While the maintenance is largely carried out by volunteers, some specific work must be done by expensive professionals, which requires fundraising campaigns and the use of foreign companies, as the local boat yards that used to maintain the barques have disappeared. Apart from the Neptune (which has two professional captains to sail and maintain it), all the other boats are dependent on volunteers. Like all structures based on voluntary work, the lateen sail associations are fundamentally precarious and cannot survive if they fail to recruit enough volunteers.

The legislation relating to passenger vessels also poses its own threats to this tradition: on the one hand it requires captains to obtain a sailing licence equivalent to that of a pilot at the CGN (the company operating a boat transportation service on Lake Geneva). The associations note that the complexity of this licence requirement makes it difficult to find new captains and are calling for simplification. The inspections carried out for awarding a sailing licence can also be tricky.

Studying and disseminating to keep the tradition alive

Despite everything, the Association des voiles latines lacustres (AVLL) and its passionate members continue their work to promote and preserve lateen sailing on lakes: carrying out historical research, producing documentation, organising conferences, and publishing books on lateen sailing on Lake Geneva, but also promoting the use of specific terms among current boatmen and women. What matters to them is raising the profile of Lake Geneva's cultural and

nautical heritage and passing it on to preserve it for future generations.

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