

Belle Neuchâtel



This year the city of Neuchâtel commemorates its 1,000th anniversary. And, as one new resident knows quite well, there's plenty to celebrate.

By Bill Harby | I *love* my home of one year – the town of Neuchâtel – and no, it's not *only* because I met a lovely Swiss miss here.

What I love about Neuchâtel (population 33,000) is that, while it's historic, it isn't stuck in the past. It's culturally rich and welcoming, and somehow manages to feel both large and intimate at the same time. A university town and also the canton's capital, Neuchâtel is a diverse, but compact, community that's easy to embrace.

A lovely guide

I first embraced the city in 1975, when I was hitchhiking around Switzerland and France. My first stop on that hot summer's day was a non-descript bar oddly named **Pam-Pam**. Lucky for me, at the next table sat a lovely Swiss miss, toying with chess pieces on a small, round, white-marble table embedded with a chessboard. I asked in my terrible French if she'd like to play a game. She didn't understand. I tried again. She replied, "Perhaps we should speak English." Lucky me again.

Over the next two days, Maïf – a *Neuchâteloise* for all of her 19 years – showed me around her town. During the day, we strolled along the lakefront or lolled on the grass, while the swans preened by the rocks.

Sleepy under the sun, I gazed across to the many finely preserved, old, golden limestone buildings that caused French author Alexandre Dumas to say that the city looked as though it had been carved out of butter.

At night, Maïf took me to her favourite places along the narrow, cobblestone lanes of **la vieille ville** – the medieval heart of Neuchâtel. I remember stopping for a glass of wine at **Le Cardinal**, a traditional *brasserie* with Art Nouveau frosted windows. But by that time, I hardly noticed where I was: because by then, I was totally smitten with this Mademoiselle, who (unlucky me) had a boyfriend in Canada whom she would soon join.

So, the next day I stuck out my thumb again. But I couldn't get Maïf out of my mind. After two days I came back, and found her again at Pam-Pam. She took me home to the 150-year-old house up the hill where she'd grown up, and her sweet grandmother made us an omelette for lunch.

But the next day I had to leave again, this time for real. A couple months later, when we both got to our new universities – she in Ontario, I in Chicago – we communicated a couple times, but her heart was taken, mine broken, and we lost touch.

For 32 years.

Enter the Internet: a Google search in 2007, a flurry of emails between her home in Geneva and mine in Hawaii; her visit to my home, mine to hers, and in March 2010, bride and groom moved into a little farm cottage on the hill above Neuchâtel.

A city filled with life

Last Saturday, we shared another drink at Pam-Pam. There's a new owner now and, until recently, the scuffed marble table with an embedded chessboard was still there. (As a surprise for Maïf, it now sits underneath an apple tree outside our country cottage.)

Of course, we've spent a lot of time during the last year walking arm-in-arm around town, stopping to smooch at many of the

places we strolled past together 35 years ago.

We've been back to Cardinal to eat mussels and sip wine made with chasselas grapes grown in Auvernier, one of the historic little lakeside villages just minutes away by tram.

We've climbed the cobblestone lane by the 10th-century **Tour des Prisons to la Collégiale** – the 13th-century church and chateau that give the town its name ("Neuchâtel" means "New Castle"). As a young girl, Maïf played among these old fortifications. Now, she and I explore them together.

We've had *apéro* with Maïf's childhood buddy, Anne-Carine and her husband David at a popular café, **Chauffage Compris** ("Heating Included"). This has become one of my two favourite spots to do homework before French class. I conjugate and cogitate, while scoffing down a sandwich and sipping their great, local unfiltered *vin blanc*.

My other favourite place is a tiny café, **Bar de l'Univers**. Such a spacious name for such a tiny bar makes perfect sense. Neuchâteloise owner, Saskia Wagnières explains that it's so-named because "everyone in the universe is welcome here". Saskia serves delicious homemade soups, salads, sandwiches, and wines and beers from Switzerland and France. The walls are adorned anew every few weeks with the work of another local artist.

Saskia buys her French wines from one of the town's more interesting characters, Jean-Philippe Bauermeister – music composer, raconteur and wine merchant extraordinaire. His *cave* is in the heart of the Old Town on **Rue des Moulins**. In spite of his unabashed free thinking, wine lovers will likely have a religious experience in these ancient stone, cloister-like rooms lined with thousands of bottles of excellent French wines. Ask Jean-Philippe to play the beautiful piano, which is the room's centrepiece. Then try to resist taking home a bottle (or six) for communion.

A paradise of local produce

Jean-Philippe and Saskia don't just work in Neuchâtel, they grew up here; and like many other locals, they often buy their fresh vegetables, fruits, cheeses, breads, nuts, sausages, sweets and other goodies at the sprawling open-air market on Wednesdays and Saturdays around **La Place des Halles**.

This is a colourful circus of village commerce, alive with the boisterous sounds of neighbours greeting each other, and vendors shouting the quality of their wares – probably not so different from the markets here hundreds of years ago. Since 1569, the turrets of the **Maison des Halles** have provided the backdrop to this lively square. Back then, the Maison was where grains and fabrics were sold; now it is a restaurant *gastro-nomique* with fine views onto the dozens of stalls and outdoor tables of other restaurants.

Our friends David and Anne-Carine live alongside the square, on the 5th floor of a walk-up building constructed in 1711. On market days, they love being able to survey the lively crowd below. As David says, "after buying some of the locally cultivated produce, [these market-goers] also cultivate friendships with their neighbours over a good glass of wine or beer". He adds that, "as long as I'm able to climb the stairs, I'll continue to love this enchanting view".



Wine merchant Jean-Philippe Bauermeister always has a story to tell



Bi-weekly market at La Place des Halles



Saskia Wagnières

The next thousand years

For me, an American whose country is only 235 years old, it still boggles my mind that friends live in a 300-year-old building, and my town is celebrating its 1,000th anniversary this year (Latin texts from 1011 refer to the *Novum Castellum* on the hill).

But the human history of this shoreline goes further back than that, as you learn at **Laténium**, the superb museum devoted to the area's earliest Celtic settlers. This striking modern building stands on a stunning lakeside site, where a Paleolithic Celtic settlement existed.

Like I said, I love Neuchâtel because it's rich with history,

yet not stuck in the past: today's young Celtic descendents don't have to dance around a fire. There's plenty of nightlife. **La Case à Chocs** and its **Queen Kong Club** offer live reggae, rock and electronica in the converted brewery that's also home to the fine restaurant, **Interlope**, which serves not only good food, but *amazing* fresh-fruit cocktails.

Also, just above the Old Town, there's Jazz Tuesdays at **Bar King** (a name that is a play on words: it's beside a *par-king* garage), and other fun little bars and cafés nearby, such as **Desobeissance Bistronomie** and **Le Saxo**. Over at the *gare* (railway station) is the quietly sexy upstairs-bar, **Orient Express**.



at her Bar l'Univers



Inside the 13th-century church la Collégiale

Neuchâtel's sweethearts

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Or you can bask in the glow of the footlights at one of Neuchâtel's intimate music and theatre venues like **La Maison du Concert** or the **Theatre de Poudriere**, which has an especially interesting bar if you like to have intimate conversations with marionettes. **Theatre du Pommier** features imaginative productions for children (and us big kids too), and runs its own acting school.

Mirror of the city

And finally, always, there's **Lac de Neuchâtel** – the third largest in Switzerland, and the largest lake entirely within the nation's

borders – a soothing but powerful presence that seeps into your psyche like a dream. And like a dream, it can shape-shift from minute to minute, season to season: now a clear, teal window; next a flashing, mercury mirror, or a foggy gunmetal mystery, edged with snow. Celtic artefacts are still being uncovered in the silt of these waters.

Meanwhile, bobbing boaters pass untroubled afternoons gazing back on the city's buttery architecture rising up the hill. And we strollers along the lakeside listen to the water's rhythmic lapping and the children laughing, while young lovers loll in the grass just like another couple did so many years ago.