

There's no time to laze by lively Lake Geneva — get your skates on, says Emma J. Page

ON THE waters of Lake Geneva, an expertly restored Belle Epoque paddle steamer is ferrying me to the vineyards of Lavaux, where the Swiss have been producing crisp, white wines from the Chasselas grape since the 11th century.

It is a warm day; sky and shore merge indistinguishably, the lake is clear, the horizon vast. This is a world away from the snow-capped mountains, alpine forests and ski resorts that, until now, I had always associated with Switzerland.

The slopes of the French Alps are in evidence as I make the short trip from Ouchy, a popular district of Lausanne located on the lake's northern shore, but in summer their outline assumes an altogether gentler appearance.

Skiers tend to roar past Lausanne in their 4x4s in winter, missing out on one of Switzerland's prized assets.

Lausanne is a busy town, buoyed by a lively student population, but Lac Lemane, at the foot of its hills, remains a hypnotic anchor.

The Swiss weekend here in summer; skating in one of the many lakeside parks, swimming, pedal-boating, kayaking or water-skiing — all fitting pursuits in a place that the International Olympic Committee calls home.

My endeavours are less sporty but no less rewarding. In the historic centre, I linger at the 13th-century Gothic cathedral, whose night watchmen have been calling the time hourly for the past 600 years.

LATER, travelling on the metro (the only one in Switzerland), I am surprised to hear the recorded voice of the cathedral's current watchman, Renato Häusler, announcing each stop. This is a hilly town, with the ancient centre at the top. Just below, the recently renovated warehouse district of Flon is home to a cluster of swish

bars and restaurants, including seasonal open-air Les Arches; a perfect pit stop for an aperitif of dry white wine for which the region is known.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays there is a market in the pedestrianised area that links Flon to the old city. Here you have a good chance to watch the Swiss going about their day confidently and efficiently, just as you would expect in a country that is at the centre of Europe but strictly

outside of the European Union. My preferred spot for a ringside seat is the terrace of Chateau d'Ouchy, once a fort and now a landmark hotel. From here lakeside life unfurls before you as people jog, cycle and skate by the water's edge. They seem an awfully healthy bunch.

My next stop is Geneva, 35 minutes away via a train ride that reveals vistas worthy of the journey alone. Petit Lac, the narrower and shallower southern

shore of the lake, is dominated by Geneva's fountain, Jet d'Eau.

The best views are offered by the promenade hotels, including Le Richemond, the epitome of old-world elegance. Many of its suites feature views of snow-capped Mont-Blanc.

From there, it is best to make a beeline for the lake. Bain des Paquis has been a city hotspot since the Thirties, where visitors can swim, dive, eat at the buvette (a subsidised restaurant) and



Picture: CORBIS

Vintage view: Lake Geneva and Lausanne seen from the wine-producing village Saint-Saphorin

catch the sun for a daily admission fee of about £1.50.

It is all a far cry from my preconceived idea of Geneva as a hub for starch-collared businesses and international banking.

After meeting Damien Mermoud, who grows vines just a few miles south of the city, I begin to see that, like Lausanne, this is a town set up for enjoyment.

The wines and cheeses are first-class, the lake a perennial source of activity and the city's beautiful old town, presided over by St Peter's Cathedral, is filled with ancient alleyways.

Lake Geneva has a bit of everything and is perfect for a break at any time of the year.

TRAVEL FACTS

Swiss (0845 601 0956, swiss.com) flies to Geneva from £68 return. Doubles at Chateau d'Ouchy from £185 (0041 21 331 3232, chateaudouchy.ch). Doubles at Le Richemond (0041 22 715 7777, dorchestercollection.com) from £310. More at myswitzerland.com and lausanne-tourisme.ch.

SWITZERLAND IS ON A ROLL!