The Spirit of Geneva Lake

ne Sunday during a sparkling Geneva Lake Memorial Day weekend, I joined a wedding party on board a Gage Marine cruise boat. Leaving the Riviera docks in Lake Geneva, we headed for a leeward shore just beyond Geneva Bay. As the captain slowed the engines, and the solemn pronouncement of marriage began, I suddenly noticed that we were surrounded by what seemed to be a three-ring circus!

High-powered speedboats roared by, seaworthy cruisers rumbled past, sailboats swept by, anglers bobbed atop the waves, scuba divers slipped into the cold clear waters, water skiers skimmed past, and just as the newlyweds kissed, a skier waved as he soared by, attached to a colorful hang glider.

It was a typical Geneva Lake summer weekend, with people and boats plying the waters in all directions, blue skies above crystal clear waters beneath, and lush green shores to the sides.

Winter enthusiasts enjoy a similar range of activities on the frozen waters of the lake. I remember a mild Sunday afternoon in January when the temperature hit 40 degrees, and the ice was as smooth and clean as plate glass. The sun was warm, the sky clear, the breezes gentle, and the lake frozen to a depth of 12 inches.

On that perfect winter's day, the Williams Bay ice was a giant ring of activity. Ice boaters sped to and fro, sails tight against the breeze. Large groups of anglers basked in the sun while chatting and watching their tip-ups. Ice skaters glided happily by while a pack of snowmobiles raced nearby. Four-wheel-drive trucks and four-door sedans cruised along the thick ice, heading nowhere in particular. Families strolled across the ice with children sliding, dogs running, and sleds dragging behind. A lone motorcyclist roared past, studded tires barely gripping the smooth surface of the ice. When an airplane suddenly appeared out of nowhere and landed on the bay, I knew it was time to find a quieter place to enjoy the day!

For many, the spirit of Geneva Lake is typified by the busy and often frenetic weekend activities of the different seasons. Others know how the lake has a life of its own, apart from our motors and wakes, our shouts and our laughter. For them, the spirit of Geneva Lake is best felt in those rare moments when the humans and their machines are absent from the lake.

Over the years I have been able to witness the lake's "hidden" spirit in those quiet moments when either the weather or the time of day allowed the lake to present other dimensions to its life.

I have skied across the lake and back during a driving noontime snowstorm, the only human foolish enough to be out on that frozen day. But the silence of the moment, as the snow deepened upon the ice, and as the shore became a whitening blur against the gray sky, called forth an eternally pristine essence. The lake was revealing itself to me in new ways because I allowed myself to stop and watch its silent beauty unfurl before me.

Once while skating across the smooth and mirrored ice in a full moon's midnight hour, I heard the cries of a lone screech owl along the silvered shore. I listened to the ice call back with great booms and cracks, as if to sing its own song of identity. The lake environment reclaimed its natural peace while people and machines slept in warm houses and garages.

On a quiet August night drifting in a silent sailboat, I felt the warm breezes against my skin, listened to the gentle lapping of the waves against the boat, and watched the light-years flash as meteorites streaked across the starlit sky. The heavens accented the lake's timeless beauty, highlighting eternity with this silent display of movement and light.

Hemingway wrote that Paris was "a moveable feast," an experience that would live with him all his days. The spirit of Geneva Lake is a "moveable feast" for all who linger by its waters for refreshment, and who later, in the midst of a busy day, summon its renewal during some daydreaming moment.

The lake is a living environment with a life of its own. It welcomes our happy and noisy forays unto its waters, and just as certainly invites us to feel its essence as we share solitary moments of quiet.

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