

Geneva, a maritime centre without a sea

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The paradox of a trading centre without a port is that of chartering. Geneva is home to dozens of chartering, shipbroking and ship management companies, as well as to the shipping departments of the major trading houses, which charter thousands of vessels every year to carry the cargoes traded from the city.¹ The world's largest container shipowner has its headquarters in Geneva, where it employs several thousand people, which adds to the cluster a transport dimension that few inland centres possess.² Switzerland also has a maritime register, whose vessels fly the Swiss flag, and a tradition of ship finance in which Geneva banks have been active.³

Chartering in Geneva follows the usages and the law of international maritime transport, which are largely English: charterparties, the contracts of affreightment, are drawn up on standard forms, most often governed by English law and subject to arbitration in London, which links the Geneva cluster to the London market described above in connection with insurance.⁴ The Geneva brokers contribute their knowledge of available vessels, ports and freight rates, while the trading houses' operators manage port calls, demurrage and loading disputes. This maritime competence, acquired through commodity trading, makes Geneva a decision-making centre of world transport that its geography gave no reason to expect.

1 Notes

1. Public Eye, "La flotte géante des négociants suisses en matières premières" (The giant fleet of the Swiss commodity traders), 17 January 2024: "Swiss companies today control more than 3,600 vessels", of which 2,200 are operated by the trading houses and more than 1,400 by shipping companies; Trafigura 280 to 290 tankers and bulk carriers, Vitol more than 250 ocean-going vessels, Cargill at least 650, Bunge around 200 bulk carriers, Louis Dreyfus Company 200 to 250 vessels under contract, Gunvor 80 to 100 tankers (Clearlake Shipping),

Mercuria 54 (November 2023), Glencore 59 according to Marine Traffic. ↩

2. Wikipedia (en), art. “Mediterranean Shipping Company”: headquarters established in Geneva in 1978, in the Champel district; around 900 vessels and 7 million TEU (September 2025), 524 offices in 155 countries, more than 200,000 employees worldwide; company wholly owned by the Aponte-Diamant family, management handed over in April 2026 to Diego Aponte and Alexa Aponte Vago. ↩
3. Wikipedia (en), art. “Merchant Marine of Switzerland”: fleet created in 1941 to supply the country, 37 vessels in 2010, 49 in 2016, 14 in 2022; swissinfo.ch, 29 April 2023, “Switzerland rescues its merchant fleet”: flag introduced on 9 April 1941, Swiss Maritime Navigation Office in Basel, bankruptcy of the Bernese shipowners SLC and SCT having cost the Confederation CHF 215 million (forced sale of nine cargo ships and four chemical tankers), federal guarantees abandoned for vessels commissioned after 2017. ↩
4. Wikipedia (en), art. “Baltic and International Maritime Council”: BIMCO founded in Copenhagen in 1905 by shipowners, first draft standard charterparty in 1913, members in more than 130 countries representing around 60 per cent of the world’s merchant tonnage (2,200 member companies in 2016), standard contracts (TOWCON, TOWHIRE) and status as an NGO accredited to the IMO; art. “London Maritime Arbitrators Association”: association of maritime arbitrators established on 12 February 1960. ↩

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