

What You Should Know About Carnival in Cologne and elsewhere

(Text: Sigi Lieb, Translation: Petra Plaum and Christian Werthschulte) – Version: January 5, 2017

When Does Carnival Take Place?

Carnival ends about forty days before Easter. That day is called Aschermittwoch (Ash Wednesday), which is the beginning of Lent (fasting time, similar to Ramadan) and lasts until Easter. In former times Christians were not allowed to eat meat or drink alcohol during this period. For children, fasting usually means living without eating candy. Today fasting is less common but some people use this period to renounce things of which they think that they are a bad habit, e.g. facebook, smoking.

Carnival takes place on the weekend before the beginning of Lent. The festivities begin on a Thursday and end the following Tuesday night. The days have different names in every region:

Thursday: Weiberdonnerstag, Weiberfastnacht, Altweiber, Weiberfasching, Wieverfastelovend (Cologne) and others

Friday: Karnevals-/Faschingsfreitag

Saturday: Karnevals-/Faschingssamstag

Sunday: Karnevals-/Faschingssonntag

Monday: Rosenmontag

Tuesday: Karnevals-/Veilchendienstag

In Cologne, the whole weekend is called Fastelovend.

What Happens During Carnival?

There are regional differences. Almost everywhere, partying starts on Thursday - Weiberdonnerstag – at 11:11 am. People may go to work in costumes, at least in cities such as Cologne, where carnival is celebrated intensely. Don't be surprised when your bus driver or job center employee wears a red make-up heart on his or her cheek, a green wig or funny clothes. This tradition is called *sich verkleiden* and it's normal in Cologne on this day. Many people are dressed up as certain professionals, animals or popular characters, e. g. a sorcerer, a cowboy, a clown.

Most shops close at noon. The rest of the day is spent partying on the street, in cafes and bars, in costumes.

Throughout the whole weekend there are carnival parades with decorated floats, dancing groups and music groups. In the streets, people are watching and dancing, they shout "Alaaf" and "Kamelle" and "Strüßcher" to ask for flowers and candy from the floats.

"Kamelle" and "Strüßcher" is shouted during the parades, so that the musicians, dancers and their fellows will throw candy and give flowers to them. "Alaaf", "Kamelle" and "Strüßcher" aren't common German words, but words from the Cologne dialect called "Kölsch" (as the regional beer).

The biggest parade is called Rosenmontagszug, it takes place in the whole of the city center. The "Schull- und Veedelszoch" on Sunday is also huge. In different quarters of Cologne and in the cities surrounding Cologne there are many small parades which might be more suitable for children, because they aren't that crowded.

There's traditional music in and from Cologne for carnival. Many texts aren't in German but in Kölsch. Well-known bands are Brings, Kasalla, Cat Ballou, Bläck Föös and Höhner. But there are many other bands too.

In many bars and pubs, there are no chairs and tables during this weekend. It's usually crowded in there and sometimes you can hardly breathe. Quite a lot of beer is consumed. For people who can go with the flow, it's fun and entertaining. For people who don't, it's better to stay at home, though. The city of Cologne's pretty crazy during these days.

Rosenmontag is a holiday (in the regions, where carnival is celebrated). Most shops in Cologne are closed. On Rosenmontag people with costumes are in the streets the whole day.

During Tuesday night Cologne people burn the Nubbel. The Nubbel is a doll made out of straw which you find over the doors of pubs and bars during carnival.

On Aschermittwoch everything has come to an end. Practicing Catholics go to Church, the priest puts a cross made out of ash on their forehead. Afterwards they eat fish together. The ash cross is a sign for the finite nature of life and reminds people of the importance of being humble.

Where Does the Tradition Come From?

Carnival (Fasching, Fastnacht or Fassenacht) is very old and has several roots.

1. Before Christ: People wanted to expel the ghosts of winter to make spring arrive, so that there'll be cereals, fruit and vegetables and everyone has enough to eat.
2. Christianity: Have some big party before the 40 days of Lent start.
3. The Old Romans: For one day, masters are servants and servants are masters.
4. In Cologne, there are certain uniforms to make fun of the French and Prussian occupants (which ruled the city during the 18th and 19th century)

Who Wears Costumes And Parties On Carnival?

In some regions, carnival is celebrated predominantly by children and teenagers. Not so in Cologne, Düsseldorf or Mainz. There everyone who likes to party does so, from the baby to the grandma, regardless of social and economic background. If you want to join carnival festivities, you should dress up at least a little, e.g. by having colour in the face, wearing a wig or a costume. If you aren't dressed-up at all, others might feel offended.

Carnival For Families

Some carnival celebrations are suitable for children and others aren't. Please ask friends, neighbours, the Heimleitung or Willkommensinitiativen (welcome groups), which celebrations are right for you.

Security Issues

During carnival many people drink a lot of alcohol. Not all of them will know how to behave. Because there have been dangerous fights in the past, in some parts of Cologne (Zülpicher Platz, Altstadt) glass bottles and glasses are prohibited during carnival. For other cities and regions, please ask whether such rules apply.

Please be careful. Avoid places where the crowds are too dense (Central Station, Altstadt, around Zülpicher Platz).

On Weiberdonnerstag and Rosenmontag you will observe many people dancing, singing and drinking in busses and trains, too. Public transport may be delayed. If you want to avoid this situation, better try to abstain from taking public transport during those days.

How to Have a Good Time

Cologne has been founded by the Romans and from the beginning, people from different cultural backgrounds used to live here together. This is one thing, which is being celebrated during carnival too. The atmosphere is easy-going, things which are usually considered inappropriate are okay now.

People are singing, dancing and flirting. It's normal and doesn't signal any further intentions or any closer contact. There are exceptions. But this doesn't happen often.

Be careful: Kisses in the air or real kisses, a deep look in the eye or hot dancing usually mean nothing. It's just fun. Don't feel hurt if somebody dances and flirts with you and then moves on to the next person. This is totally normal and part of the carnival tradition.

It's also normal that men dress up as women or vice versa or that some people are lightly dressed. Everyone is allowed to dress just as he or she likes.

Before you take pictures, please ask the person whether she wants it or not.

Carnival is a celebration of togetherness. It's important to stay polite, though, and never to force others to do something they don't like. A NO has to be respected. Your NO has to be respected, too. To respect other people's boundaries is one of the few, but very important rules, especially during carnival.

Important Vocabulary

- Alaaf! – This exclamation means: Great, we're celebrating carnival. (In Düsseldorf and Mainz, people shout „Helau!“ instead)
- Kamelle – chocolate, candy and other sweets which are given away during the parades
- Strüßcher – small bouquets of flowers given away during the parades
- Karnevalsumzug (Kölsch: der Zoch)– decorated floats, groups of musicians and dancers, who are singing and dancing in the street, on predefined routes
- der Jecke, die Jecken bzw. der Narr, die Narren – people who dress up and celebrate carnival
- der Nubbel – straw doll hanging over doors of pubs where carnival is celebrated
- bützen – Kölsch for: to kiss someone on the cheek
- sich verkleiden / sich maskieren – to wear funny costumes, paint your face, wear wigs or funny hats.
Nouns: die Verkleidung, das Kostüm
- sich schminken – to use make-up or paint your face
- die Maske – a mask out of rubber or plastic to put over your face
- die Perücke – wig
- schunkeln – put your arms under those of your neighbours and dance together to the music