

Carnival in Cologne – A guide to the “Crazy Days”

Every year, many visitors come to Cologne for carnival. You don't necessarily need a "carnival etiquette" to take part in the festival of merriment as a non-Cologne resident. However, it is certainly helpful to know a few "rules of the game" so that you don't leave disappointed because your expectations of the "fun days" were not met. This guide aims to answer questions such as: What does it actually mean to celebrate carnival in Cologne? Where do you go? How do you celebrate and with whom?

In addition, the small guide aims to awaken an understanding of the peculiarity of Cologne's humor so that you can experience Cologne Carnival in all its diversity and without any worries.

Historical facts

The Cologne Carnival is as old as the history of the city itself and has been organized as it is today for 200 years. The Greeks and Romans celebrated joyful spring festivals in honor of Dionysus and Saturn. The Germanic tribes celebrated the winter solstice to drive away the evil winter demons. Christians later adopted these pagan customs. The pre-Easter fasting period was heralded by Shrove Tuesday or Carnival (Latin *carne vale* = meat farewell). In the Middle Ages, carnival revelry (the "Mummerei") often took on drastic forms. Bans and regulations were of little help, but the celebrations were still wild and merry. In the 18th century, the cheerful street carnival was joined by the so-called "Redouten", exuberant masked balls based on the Venetian model, which were initially reserved for the nobility and the wealthy bourgeoisie. Neither the French revolutionary troops nor the strict Prussians were later able to stop the people of Cologne from cultivating their carnival tradition. During the Romantic period, the carnival was then bourgeoisified and organized. Cologne celebrated its first Rose Monday parade in 1823, the year the "Festival Organizing Committee" was founded. With the "Hero Carnival", today's prince, another aspect was added. With and after the founding of the festival committee, one carnival society after another emerged. Sessions with carnival speakers and carol singers helped to bridge the gap between New Year's Day and Rose Monday.

It's still like that today ...

There are now around 300 organizers, such as carnival societies, local clubs and neighbourhood associations, who celebrate the carnival days with more than 900 sessions, balls and parades. The carnival societies can be roughly divided into two groups in terms of origin and aim: the corps societies, which wear uniforms and see themselves more or less as a satire on the military, and the committee societies, which also wear jackets in the club colors and aim to be a sociable, carnival-like event for the whole family. The alternative carnival with its "Stunksitzungen" and ghost parade has also become a major feature of Cologne carnival since the 1980s.

The Cologne mentality

Every nation has its own peculiarities, and so do the people of Cologne. As an old Roman city that grew into Germany's largest trading metropolis in the Middle Ages, to which merchants, sailors, craftsmen and pilgrims flocked over the centuries, Cologne has a population in which the characteristics of many people are combined

into a happy "Gemölsch". This explains the Rhenish character and its tolerance towards other people.

The people of Cologne are cosmopolitan, communicative and quick to make friends. Cologne people are also said to have a certain superficiality; real friendships take a little longer, just like everywhere else. The population of the Rhine metropolis is divided into Kölner and Kölsche. Kölner live here. Kölsche, however, are those in whose veins the pulse of the city can be felt.

The language

Don't despair if you don't understand the people of Cologne straight away. Kölsch is considered one of the most idiosyncratic dialects and is, incidentally, the only language you can drink. And yet, your ears will quickly get used to the dialect. Words don't mean everything in carnival, it's the right gestures that count, and in this respect, the people of Cologne are tolerant, in the spirit of "Jede Jeck es anders" (every fool is different). The language of "Fasteleer" is international.

Helau or Alaaf?

Instead of "Fasching", people in Cologne speak of "Fastelovend" or "Fasteleer", which in turn originates from Fastnacht. "Helau" is shouted in Mainz and Düsseldorf and therefore under no circumstances in Cologne! The Cologne cheer is "Kölle Alaaf", which means something like: All ab (All-av), a toast used in the Middle Ages and not only in the fool's season. It means: "Cologne alone", "Cologne above all", the shortest possible declaration of love for the cathedral city.

Costumes

Cologne Carnival is a festival of disguise. There are no limits. The more colorful and unusual, the better. Carnival costumes do not necessarily have to be beautiful. The important thing is to show creativity and feel comfortable in your costume. People from Cologne wear a costume they can identify with. They like to embody the role they are playing. For events in closed rooms such as balls and meetings, airy costumes are sufficient. For street carnivals, the costumes should be warmer so that you don't freeze even if you're outside for a long time. Because the right "Jeck" can't be deterred by the weather! Guests arriving at the last minute can still stock up on masks, costumes and make-up in many stores in the city center. In an emergency, a simple red clown nose will also suffice.

Where to go?

Before the crazy days of street carnival, numerous meetings, balls and events invite you to celebrate – the range between "representative" and "alternative" is wide, so there is something for everyone. Some renowned societies expect evening dresses for their "Prunksitzungen", while others require colorful costumes.

You should book well in advance, as many events sell out very quickly. The profits from the events go towards youth work, charitable causes and financing the parades. The highlight of the fifth season is the street carnival between Weiberfastnacht and Ash Wednesday, which, as the name suggests, is celebrated in the streets, on Cologne's squares, in the neighborhoods and in the countless pubs of

the city. You have to get tickets for many pubs in advance, for others it is definitely worth turning up early at around 9am.

"Drink doch ene met" (Drink with us)

Real carnival revellers drink because they are celebrating, not the other way around, and the motto "less is more" also applies in this context. It is important to note that beer in Cologne is always called "Kölsch", all other types of beer and harder drinks are not served in pubs during carnival anyway, usually not even on request. Never call for the waiter in a brewery, he is called "Köbes" here. An important preparatory measure before the exuberant celebrations is to lay the foundations, for example in the form of hearty Cologne home cooking. After a good portion of "Himmel und Äd" (mashed potatoes with apple sauce and fried black pudding) or a couple of hearty minced meat rolls, you are sure to be sufficiently fortified. A classic street carnival tradition is to start the day with a hearty breakfast together with friends.

Bützen (kissing)

"Bützjer" are kisses with pursed lips on the cheek and have nothing to do with a real kiss. Bütze is part of the carnival tradition and quite common – but only where it is desired by both parties!

The official course of the carnival days

The fifth season begins long before the week of street carnival. The starting signal for the upcoming session is given on 11.11. (Eleventh in Eleventh) and the time until Weiberfastnacht is bridged with meetings and foolish events. Wieverfastelovend, which always starts on a different Thursday in February or March, marks the beginning of the week of street carnival and ends with Ash Wednesday, which heralds the 40-day period of fasting until Easter.

Weiberfastnacht

On Weiberfastnacht, the women officially rule the roost. On the Thursday before Rose Monday, carnival can be experienced in its original form. Early in the morning, the streets are filled with costumed revellers who go to the office, workplace or store and flock to the Alter Markt from 10:00 a.m. At 11:11 a.m., the street carnival is opened there by the Lord Mayor and the Cologne triumvirate – consisting of the traditional figures of Prince, Farmer and Maiden (incidentally, there is always a man in the Maiden's costume – apart from twice in 1938 and 1939!) You have to buy tickets for the interior and the grandstand for the session opening. If you want to be reasonably close without a ticket, you have to be there early enough. Traditionally, the Wiever (ladies) are allowed to cut off the men's ties on Weiberfastnacht and return the favor with a Bütze. However, it doesn't hurt to ask nicely before the supposedly dressed-up gentleman in the suit is out on business.

Carnival Friday

This day is usually a day of rest. From 4:00 p.m., carnival groups from the various districts march in a star parade to Alter Markt and Heumarkt. A colorful stage program for the whole family takes place there from 6:00 p.m. until around 9:00 p.m. Numerous sessions and balls also take place in the evening.

Carnival Saturday

The "Funkenbiwak" (bivouac) of the "Rote Funken" is held on Neumarkt for a Cologne morning pint. Balls are held in the evening.

Tulip Sunday - Carnival Sunday

"D'r Zoch kütt!" (The parade arrives!) Although not yet the Rose Monday parade, it is one of the most beautiful and extremely popular parades with families: "Schull - un Veedelszöch". It is considered the popular version of the Rose Monday parade and takes place on Carnival Sunday. It is contested by the school processions (Schullzöch), in which numerous Cologne schools take part, and the Veedelszügen, which consist of numerous regulars' tables, neighborhood and district associations. The floats are judged by a jury and the three winners are allowed to take part in the Rose Monday parade the next day.

Numerous small parades also take place in the various districts of Cologne from Carnival Saturday to Carnival Tuesday.

Rose Monday

The highlight of Cologne Carnival has always been the Rose Monday parade. Almost 12,000 people make their way through Cologne's city center, which is cordoned off over a wide area, in the singing, ringing, eight-kilometer-long "Zoch". Around one million people experience the triumphant journey of the triumvirate in the Rose Monday procession, which always tries to outdo the previous year's procession in terms of ideas, humor, color and costumes and at the end of which the motto of the new session is ceremoniously unveiled.

When taking your place at the edge of the procession, the order of arrival is decisive. Pushing in front will only make you unpopular. The front row naturally belongs to the children. And the row behind watches out for all the children, because despite the "float angels", the safety distance to the large floats is sometimes dangerously small. The typical throwing material consists of "Strüßjer" (bouquets of flowers) and "Kamelle" (sweets), which you can shout for at the top of your lungs. But countless other small gifts are also thrown into the rows of spectators.

A tip: you should not stand near the cathedral. This is where visitors who have arrived by train at the last minute tend to pile up. There are more comfortable places along the long route. At the line-up point, for example, you can marvel at the groups in peace and quiet. However, it is not yet permitted to throw "Kamelle" there. Anyone who thinks the Rose Monday procession alone is worth seeing is mistaken. Visitors should arrive in good time, because before the "Zoch" starts moving, the merrymaking already begins. Groups of jesters parade through the streets in colorful costumes, singing, laughing and swaying. After the parade, the merriment moves to the pubs. Joining in is the order of the day: carnival is not an intellectual achievement, it comes from the gut! You can also join one of the costumed groups that dance through the streets behind a thick drum - the "decken Trumm", the emblem of carnival.

Carnival Tuesday – Violet Tuesday

Before everyday life returns on Ash Wednesday as if nothing had ever happened, the "Nubbel" is burned in many places in the city on Tuesday evening, a straw puppet as a scapegoat for all the transgressions that the revelers have committed during carnival. The torchlight processions in the night from Carnival Tuesday to Ash Wednesday with the subsequent ceremonial are a unique experience. Impressive Nubbel burnings take place in Nippes and Südstadt, in the "Kwartier Latäng" and in the old town.

Ash Wednesday

On the morning of Ash Wednesday, Catholics collect their ash cross in church as a sign of penance and in the evening, the session traditionally ends with a fish supper in a convivial atmosphere.