

Carnival in Cologne – 1823 to the present day

Carnival, also called “Fastelovend” or “Fasteleer”, plays a prominent role in Cologne. The “fifth season” takes place from New Year to Ash Wednesday. But on the 11th day of the 11th month at 11:11 sharp, Cologne celebrates the start of the new carnival season. On a large stage in the Old Town, the designated triumvirate (the carnival regents Prince, Farmer and Maiden) make their first public appearance. Carnival then remains in the background until the New Year's Eve balls, when it reaches its climax with the street carnival, held every year forty days before Easter.

A brief history of carnival in Cologne

Cologne Carnival feels as old as the history of the city itself. Rooted in Germanic and Roman cultures and festivals, traditional celebrations have been documented in Cologne since the 14th century. However, celebrations have only been as organized as they are today for just over 200 years. The “Festordnende Comité” (festive committee) was founded in 1823. On February 10 of the same year, Cologne celebrated the first Rose Monday parade with the motto “Throne Ascension of the Hero Carnival”. With and after the founding of the Festive Committee, numerous carnival societies emerged that still exist today and can be roughly divided into two groups: the traditional corps, which wear uniforms and see themselves more or less as a satire on the military, and the committee societies, which also wear jackets in their club colors and want to be a sociable, carnival offer for the whole family.

From “Bütt” to “Mariechen”

In the 19th century, the form and content of the sessions also evolved: the “Bütt” (wash tub) appeared as a podium for the speakers, the leader of the session (“president”) was enthroned on the stage surrounded by ten other gentlemen in the “Elferrat” (council of Eleven). From 1827, medals were awarded to particularly deserving Carnival jesters called “Narren” (initially a parody on the military). In 1860, the first ghost procession made its way through the city on the evening of Carnival Saturday. The founding period of the jolly carnivalists continued after the turn of the century. In 1902, the guard of honor was formed to accompany the farmer and maiden. In 1906, Prince Carnival got his Prince's Guard. Willi Ostermann with his songs and the amazing Grete Fluss made Cologne Carnival famous beyond city limits. The sessions with carnival speakers and carol singers bridged the gap between New Year's Eve and the start of the street carnival.

And this is still the case today. Music groups such as Bläck Fööss, Höhner, Kasalla, Querbeat, Cat Ballou, Planschemalöör and Brings are the trademarks of the “fifth season”. The “Stipperföttche” dance of the Rote Funken is famous, a caricature on the tightly-knit soldiery. Almost every guard has a “Funkemariechen” (red-coat Mary) – a traditional carnival figure that can be traced back to the sutlers, who have been female since National Socialism and are admired for their top athletic performance, usually in a group of “Mariechen” or as a couple with a dance officer.

Cologne Trinity

Three figures that are as much a part of today's Cologne Carnival as the exclamation “Alaaf” are prince, farmer and maiden. The triumvirate (also known as the

“Trifolium”) did not yet exist in 1823. At that time, the romantic carnival innovators had enthroned the “Hero Carnival” as the central figure. In 1825, the Cologne farmer (“His Heartiness”) made his first independent appearance in the parade. Since the Middle Ages, he had been a symbol of the defensiveness of the old imperial city of Cologne and carried a flail and a city key. Another medieval symbol, namely the free, independent city, is the Cologne Maiden (“Her Loveliness”), who appeared in the Rose Monday parade as early as 1823 and is always represented by a man (except in 1938 and 1939 during the National Socialist era).

Cologne Carnival today: tradition meets alternative carnival

Today, there are around 300 organizers such as carnival societies, local clubs and neighbourhood associations that celebrate the festival in more than 1,000 sessions, balls and parades. An alternative carnival scene is now also well developed, which has been mocking the traditional festival committee and associated clubs since the 1980s. Originally practiced by younger people, the alternative carnival scene spans all generations. The now wide range of alternative activities includes the Stunksitzung and the “Geisterzug” (ghost parade). In contrast to the other parades, in which the carnival revellers are spectators, everyone can take part in the ghost parade in spooky disguise. The tradition of the procession, which was reintroduced in 1991, dates back to the Middle Ages. The ghost procession usually takes place on the Saturday before “Weiberfastnacht”, always following a different route, and is a political demonstration. One prominent group of the alternative carnival is the “Ahl Säu” (old sows), who lead the Rose Monday procession in particularly imaginative costumes every year. Gay and lesbian groups have also organized themselves in the carnival – with their own clubs, sessions and dance guards. Carnival also shows that Cologne is tolerant and everyone has a place at the Rhine metropolis' most popular festival. It's not for nothing that the saying “Jede Jeck es anders” (every fool is different) plays a major role in Cologne, and not just during the carnival season.

The street carnival – an overview of the crazy days

The highlight of Cologne's carnival is the street carnival, also known as the “crazy days”. From Thursday's “Weiberfastnacht” (ladies' carnival) to “Ash Wednesday”, there is a well-established schedule of sessions, balls and parades, and it is mainly in the halls, restaurants and pubs that people celebrate, sing and dance. All of Cologne is in an exceptional state these days, many institutions are closed and Prince Carnival reigns.

While the ladies take over on “Weiberfastnacht” and the whole city heralds the start of Carnival at 11:11 am, on Carnival Sunday the “**Schull- un Veedelszöch**” parade through the city center – originally masked groups from Cologne's schools and neighborhood associations – before the highlight of Carnival takes place on Rose Monday with the big official **Rose Monday parade**: For around five hours, the pageantry and persiflage floats parade through the city, eight kilometers long, with more than 12,000 participants and 60 bands. 300 tons of “Kamelle” (sweets), 700,000 bars of chocolate and 300,000 “Strüßjer” (bouquets of flowers) are thrown by the parade participants to the million or so costumed people lining the streets.

Meanwhile, the carnival cheer can be heard everywhere: “**Kölle Alaaf!**” Its origin is unclear, but it means something like “Cologne alone”, “Cologne above all” – it is the shortest possible declaration of love for the cathedral city.

Before everyday life returns on Ash Wednesday as if nothing had ever happened, the night before, the "Nubbel" is burned in many places in the city, a straw doll as a scapegoat for all the transgressions the fun-loving people of Cologne have been guilty of during carnival.

The Cologne Carnival Festival Committee provides an [overview](#) of the individual events during the carnival days.