

Carnival in Cologne

Carnival, also called "Fastelovend" or "Fastnacht" by the locals, plays an outstanding role in Cologne's tradition. Rhinelanders are generally known for having a zest for life. During carnival, anyone who wants to be part of the celebration is invited to laugh at themselves and take a short break from daily routines in life.

The "fifth season" of the year is celebrated between New Year's Day and Ash Wednesday. However, in Cologne people already celebrate the beginning of the new carnival season on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of the preceding year at exactly 11:11 a.m. On a huge stage in the city centre the designated members of the triumvirate (the Prince, Peasant and Maiden who will preside over the carnival festivities), still dressed in their everyday clothes, are presented to the public for the first time. After that, carnival remains in the background until the New Year's Eve balls.

A short history of Carnival in Cologne

Carnival in Cologne is almost as old as the history of the city itself. But it has been celebrated in the organised fashion we know today for only about 200 years. In 1823, the Festival Committee was founded, and on February 10 the same year, the first Rose Monday parade was held with the motto "Inthronization of the Carnival Hero". After the foundation of the Festival Committee, many carnival societies were established. Those can be roughly divided into two groups according to their origins and aims. The first group consists of the corps societies, whose members wear uniforms and see themselves as caricatures of the military. The second group is the committee societies, whose members also all wear the same jackets in the society's colours and offer a range of carnival-themed social activities for the whole family.

The form and content of the carnival shows called "Sitzungen" (sessions) developed, the "Bütt" or speakers' podium was introduced, and the President hosted the "Sitzung" on the stage in the midst of the ten other members of the "Council of Eleven". Starting in 1827, medals were awarded to especially deserving celebrants (this too was initially meant as a caricature of the military). In 1860 the first "Ghost Parade" was held on the evening of carnival Saturday. Even after the turn of the century, the founding era of Cologne's carnival continued. In 1902 the Guard of Honour, which accompanies the Peasant and the Maiden, was formed. In 1906 Prince Carnival got his own Guard of Honour. Willi Ostermann and his songs and witty Grete Fluss made carnival in Cologne famous beyond the city's borders. The "Sitzungen" with their humorous orators and singers bridged the gap between New Year's Day and the beginning of the street carnival.

These traditions continue to the present day and bands such as Bläck Fööss, Die Höhner, Kasalla, Querbeat, Cat Ballou and Brings are the trademarks of Cologne's "fifth season". The "Stippeföttchen-Tanz" of the Rote Funken, a dance that parodies the strict life of soldiers, is world-famous. Each guard has a Funkemariechen – a traditional carnival figure that can be traced back to the sutlers, and which is female occupied since the National Socialists. Funkemariechen are admired for athletic excellence and usually dance in a group of other Mariechen or

together with a dance officer. Three figures that are as indispensable to today's Cologne carnival as the "Alaaf" exclamation are prince, peasant and maiden. The triumvirate (also known as the Trifolium) did not yet exist in 1823. Back then, the people behind the romantic revival of Fastnacht enthroned the Carnival Hero as the central figure. In 1825 the Cologne Peasant ("His Heftiness") appeared independently for the first time in the Rose Monday parade. Ever since the Middle Ages, he has been a symbol of the readiness of the inhabitants of the imperial city of Cologne to defend themselves. He carries a flail and a key to the city. The Cologne Maiden ("Her Loveliness") also dates back to the Middle Ages and is a symbol of the free and independent city. She was introduced in the Rose Monday parade of 1823 and is always impersonated by a man (except for 1938 and 1939 during the NS era).

Today there are approximately 300 organisers such as carnival societies, local history societies and neighbourhood groups that celebrate their home town's carnival in more than 900 shows, balls and parades. An alternative carnival scene is also well established and mocks the traditional festival committee and affiliated clubs in its own events, such as the Stunksitzung (Stink Session). Carnival also shows Cologne's tolerance and emphasises that all social classes and the most diverse opinions are represented at the popular festival in the Rhine metropolis. It is not for nothing that the saying "Jede Jeck es anders" (Every fool is different) plays a major role in Cologne – not just during carnival season.

The street carnival

The highlight is the street carnival, the "Crazy Days". From "Weiberfastnacht" (Women's Carnival), which is the Thursday before Rose Monday, to Ash Wednesday. There is a traditional series of shows, balls and parades, with people celebrating, singing and dancing in party rooms, restaurants and pubs. During this time, the whole city is in a "state of exception". Many public institutions are closed, and the Carnival Prince rules.

While the ladies take command on Weiberfastnacht and the whole city rings in the crazy days at 11:11 am, Sunday is characterised by the "Schull- und Veedelszöch" (school and neighbourhood parades), consisting of creatively costumed groups from Cologne's schools and neighbourhood associations, wind its way through the city centre. The climax of carnival is Rose Monday, when the big official Rose Monday parade takes place. For about five hours, the showy and satirical floats glide through the city. The parade is about 8 kilometres long and consists of almost 12,000 participants and about 62 bands. The participants throw about 300 tons of "Kamelle" (sweets), 700,000 bars of chocolate and 300,000 "Strüßjer" (small bouquets) to the approximately one million spectators, most of them in costume, who line the parade route.

The air is full of the carnival cheer "Kölle Alaaf!". The origin of this phrase is unclear, but it means something like "Cologne's the greatest" and is probably the shortest way to declare your love for the Cathedral City.

Before daily life returns on Ash Wednesday as though carnival had never happened, the "Nubbel" is burned in many places throughout the city on the evening before. The "Nubbel" is a straw puppet that represents all the misconduct the fun-loving people of Cologne might have been guilty of during carnival.

The “Crazy Days” – A 2023 Overview

Wieverfastelovend (Women's Carnival), February 16, 2023

The streets will fill up early in the morning with Carnival celebrants in costumes heading for their workplaces or to the Alter Markt.

At 11:11 a.m. Cologne's street carnival is opened in the Alter Markt in the presence of the Cologne triumvirate (Prince, Peasant and Maiden) and the mayor.

At 1:30 p.m. the historic Carnival play “Jan un Griet” is performed at the Severinstor in the Südstadt, followed by a parade along the Severinstraße to the Alter Markt.

Subsequently: Celebrations in the quarter's pubs and in the streets

Afternoon and evening: shows and fancy-dress balls

Carnival Friday, February 17, 2023

The Cologne neighbourhood associations march from different starting points and meet at the Alter Markt. Starting at 6:00 p.m. there is a Carnival programme lasting until approximately 8:45 p.m.

Evening: shows and fancy-dress balls

Carnival Saturday, February 18, 2023

Start the day with a Cologne Frühschoppen (breakfast with a Kölsch) at the “Funkenbiwak” (gathering of the traditional corps that is presented by the Rote Funken) on Neumarkt at 10:30 a.m.

Evening: Balls at many locations throughout the city

Carnival Sunday/Tulip Sunday, February 19, 2023

Starting at 11:11 a.m. the school and neighbourhood parades will wind its way through the city centre with masked school groups and imaginative masquerades staged by associations from the neighbourhoods. The way of the parade is almost the same as the Rose Monday parade the next day.

Evening: shows and fancy-dress balls

Rose Monday, February 20, 2023

10:00 a.m. marks the start of the high point of carnival, the big Rose Monday parade organised by the Festival Committee of Cologne Carnival. Kamelle (sweets), Strüßjer (small bouquets) will be tossed from the floats to the hundreds of thousands of costumed spectators and many Bützjer (kisses) are given.

Evening: Cheer, hustle, bustle in party rooms, restaurants and pubs

Carnival Tuesday/Violet Tuesday, February 21, 2023

Noon: Parades of masked groups and associations in Cologne's suburbs, followed by parties in the pubs lasting until the “Nubbel” (a straw puppet) is burned with great lamentation at midnight.

Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Traditional menus featuring fish are offered in many taverns and restaurants.