

VORWEIHNACHTZEIT / PRE-CHRISTMAS SEASON

der Aberglaube, die Aberglauben: superstition
der Glaube, die Glauben: belief

BELIEF: conviction that certain things are true, usually at a particular holiday or an isolated period of time (Glaube)

SUPERSTITION: any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true or rational; especially such a belief in charms, omens, supernatural, etc. and can happen any time (Aberglaube)

TERRIFYING TRADITIONS: GHASTLY WINTER DEMONS RUN WILD IN ALPS

Other monsters are the symbolic expression of driving out winter and its demons to herald warmer seasons to come, and their costumes and processions vary between regions. In the largely German-speaking northern Italian region of South Tyrol, for example, residents of a town stage the *Wudeljagd*, or "Wudel Hunt," whereby dragon-like figures called *Schnappviecher*, or "snapping animals," are slaughtered by men in butcher's outfits during a procession. The butchers represent spring, which triumphs over winter.

Research for the book took four years, and Peter attended some of the events more than once before he was satisfied with his images. "It was very difficult photographically," he says. "One had to be very close, travel great distances -- and much of it happens at night without good lighting." But it is precisely the motion blurring and spooky atmosphere that illuminates the sheer oddity of his subjects. Peter's goal was to make them look "as exotic as possible," and achieve a "foreign look at my own culture."

'They Pounced On Me'

In many of the photos, he succeeds. In one image snapped in southern Germany's Allgäu region, where the demonic figures are called *Klausen*, one man's sheepskin headgear evokes the costumes used by the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. In another, Death tromps around with a drum and his helper with a shrunken head near the Untersberg mountain between Germany's Berchtesgaden Alps and Salzburg, Austria. This particular photo looks more like an African voodoo ritual than an Austrian Advent tradition.

Peter, who comes from southern Bavaria, near where many of these winter traditions take place, says that despite their close proximity, many of these rituals are still shrouded in an aura of mystery. "They have their own world with their own terms, which makes it difficult for an outsider to get inside," he explains.

But other challenges in researching the book included the possibility of falling victim to his mischievous subjects. The wild straw-covered *Buttnmandl* demons of the Berchtesgaden region, for instance, didn't pass up the chance to give him a proper thrashing. "They pounced on me and during the attack parts of my camera lens were broken," he says.

Indeed, the project turned out to be a test of resolve for Peters, who specializes in spectacular outdoor adventures and nature photos. On one occasion, masked figures climbing around buildings in the Salzburg region dumped snow on him from a roof. On still others, a joker in a *Habergoass* goat costume stole his hat and witches played practical jokes on him.

"The more one looks at these traditions, the more strange it all seems," Peter says.