

KARNEVALSBRÄUCHE

Wie feiert man Karneval? heutige Bräuche (How is Carnival celebrated? / customs of today)

What do people do? Carnivals are held in southern German cities, and in the *Rheinland* (Rhineland) cities of Mainz, Aachen, Bonn and Düsseldorf. The biggest and zaniest **Karneval** is in Köln (Cologne). The first written record of the *Köln* carnival is from the year 1341.

Nearly every town has its own festivities and it is celebrated in homes across the country with the same enthusiasm in which we celebrate Halloween. The Karnevals vary from area to area, but no matter where the celebrations are held, there is fun, happiness, laughter and a certain nostalgia.

For these magical six days, parts of Germany are transformed. For one week in 52, humour is positively encouraged - even a social necessity all of a sudden.

Stand-up comedians dust off their repertoires and address packed ballrooms in regional dialects. Orchestras provide helpful fanfares to mark the end of jokes.

If you are interested in joining the German Mardi Gras party this coming season, learning a bit about the traditions can greatly boost your enjoyment of the celebrations.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, amusing plays known as *Fastnachtspiele* were performed during the pre-Lenten season. Today there are elaborate parades (*Umzüge*) in the many large and small communities where Carnival is celebrated. Floats and marchers displaying large caricature heads often lampoon regional and national politicians. Another part of the celebration involves Carnival royalty (princes, princesses) and a sort of "counter-government" during the season. The Rhineland *Rosenmontagsumzug* is an event broadcast each year on German television, similar to the Macy's Thanksgiving parade in New York. It features colorful floats with caricatured figures mocking local, national and international politicians and other famous personalities or events.

Local bars are so packed during Karneval that the partying spills out onto the streets as people sing, dance, drink and sway arm-in-arm. In addition to the costumes, the other ubiquitous thing about Karneval is noise. Incessant, clamoring noise coming from horns, drums, whistles and other noise-makers can be heard throughout the city at all hours during this time. It's the type of noise that is irritating and ear-piercing under most circumstances, but becomes music to the ears when you are drunk with merriment and enjoying the Karneval festivities. However, they don't sound so great if you are nursing a hang-over.

Karneval or Fasching has always been a riotous season of merrymaking just before Lent. Modern Germans may care less than before for the rigorous taboos of Lent: formerly, no meat was allowed during the period, so huge feasts were laid on just before it began. But Karneval is still a good excuse for wild parties, crazy processions, and a gigantic consumption of alcohol.

Because of the influence of the Karneval societies and the tourist trade, the Rhenish Karneval has become something of a "consumer's article," and as such it is a rationally planned affair. Similar commercial tendencies can be observed in south-west Germany, though they are not so conspicuous. Nevertheless, there is also a good deal of original, creative "sub-culture" which makes itself apparent in the Karneval customs even today.

The number and variety of popular customs which have survived to the present day is considerable, many of them even in urban districts. For the Austrian people they constitute a living link with the countless traditions of their past, affording them opportunities not only of games and amusement, but also of a more serious appreciation of the deeply-rooted observance of popular beliefs.