

KARNEVALSBRÄUCHE

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

The Local's guide to Karneval

Carne Vale – Medieval Latin for: Meat, Farewell!

The Germans are nothing if not a conundrum – and one with a medical theme. One minute they're dealing with history's biggest recession with the loveless efficiency of a hospital matron, the next they're fretting over which suppository is best for an earache, and before the evening is out they're working out a way to get their health insurance to pay for yoga courses.

It's either supreme competence or abject neurosis with them, which is why, maybe, the tradition of *Karneval*, or *Fasching*, or *Fastnacht*, or *Mardi Gras* in the Franco-English of New Orleans, has thrived so long in the Germanic world. When the rest of the year is a hypochondriac see-saw of economic aptitude and overpowering anxiety, you don't have to be Freud to realise that the collective Teutonic id needs a "fifth season" of debauchery and anarchy. Spending Shrove Tuesday frying a couple of pancakes for dinner, as the British do, just will not cut it.

The Christian aspects of the festival have long been reduced to a question of where to put the red letters on the calendar. Nowadays the eve of Lent is seldom followed by a fast marking Christ's 40 days in the desert. Instead, the weeks leading to Easter are generally greeted with a hungover stumble into the office. Germans have been a resolutely secular bunch since at least 1823, which was when the first Karneval club was founded. But if the modern incarnation of the Karneval proves anything, it's that you don't have to be a Roman Catholic to need catharsis. Modern life, it turns out, is every bit as oppressive as Original Sin, and people always yearn for escape.

Cliché you say? Perhaps, but Karneval is universally acknowledged as Germany's annual refuge in what has been described as "humour, satire, and revelry." The allegorical figure that represents these three most Dionysian of human conditions is the court jester, or *Jeck* or *Narr*, and it is this character you are meant to emulate, imitate and dress up as when you immerse yourself in this excess of Teutonic zaniness.

But there are other fairytale icons too, all kept alive by seven centuries of tradition and paraded every year in huge, thronging pageants in the great cities on the banks of the Rhine. There are Karneval princes and Karneval princesses, Karneval virgins and Karneval peasants, all masked and costumed and sent guffawing through the crowds looking for ritualised fun by their various clubs.

Cologne, not coincidentally the oldest of Germany's major cities, is the throbbing heart of the festivities and is where the biggest and most-televised parades take place. But more or less the whole of Germany joins in, and since 2001 even cynical, post-Protestant Berlin has resurrected its own tradition. There is clearly no sign of Karneval-fatigue in Germany despite seemingly endless TV programming each year showing ageing Teutons in garish costumes clapping to oompah music and showing just how much *fun* they *really* are.

So before you find yourself lost in the middle of the crowd trying to swill a *Kölsch* beer while an accountant from some Cologne suburb is jostling your arm and pointing to his silly hat, then look no further than this handy guide. *Kölle alaaf!*