

Fastnachtzeit oder Fastenzeit: Carnival Season

Why are there different names for „Carnival“?

The *Carnevale* in medieval Venice is one of the earliest documented carnival celebrations in the world. It featured still-popular traditions, including carnival parades, masks and masquerade balls. Gradually the Italian *Carnevale* customs spread north to other Catholic European countries, including France. From France it spread to the German Rhineland and, through colonization, even to North America (Mardi Gras).

The third common term for carnival in German, **Fastnacht**, refers to the Swabian-Alemannic carnival, which differs in some ways from *Fasching* and *Karneval*, and is found in Baden-Württemberg, Franconia (northern Bavaria), Hesse and much of Switzerland. Although this word looks like it comes from the German for the “eve of Lent,” in fact it is based on the Old German word *fasen* (“to be foolish, silly, wild”). Thus the word, sometimes spelled *Fasnacht* (without the t) actually means something like “night of being wild and foolish.”

Carnival in Germany, Switzerland and Austria

There is a huge variety of customs and traditions associated with Carnival celebrations in the German-speaking countries of Germany, Switzerland and Austria. They can vary considerably from country to country, but also from one smaller region to another. This is already reflected in the various names given to these festivities occurring before Lent.

What do people do? Carnivals are held in southern German cities, and in the *Rheinland* (Rhineland) cities of Mainz, Aachen, Bonn and Düsseldorf.