

Fasching in München

Munich celebrates
Fasching with vigor

MUNICH, Germany — In New Orleans it's Mardi Gras, in Rio de Janeiro it's Carnival and in Munich it's Fasching.

Whatever you call it, the few weeks before Ash Wednesday each year are celebrations of the joys of life. But it is perhaps in Germany that the celebration finds its true home. Germans, who drink prodigious amounts of beer during normal times, view Fasching as an excuse to drink abnormal amounts.

In Munich, the capital of Bavaria (and the secret capital of the German soul, some say), Fasching reaches its apex. Although much of the country enjoys the rites of Fasching, nowhere is the festival more joyous.

Celebrators clog the streets, filling the gutters with confetti and themselves with beer. Costumed revelers strut up and down the pedestrian avenues of downtown, pausing to watch and listen to the rock bands, little German bands, jazz bands, and one-man bands performing every 100 feet or so along the avenue.

Crowds are massive. Tens of thousands pack together like lemmings and seem as bent on self-destruction. Despite the justling and the drunken condition of the crowd, it's rare to see tempers flare. A smile is the badge of Fasching.

It's entrancing to stand in an alcove along one of the Fasching avenues and watch the children of Munich. The youngsters are particularly beautiful, most in full costume; many with painted clown faces that require a lot of effort on Mom's part. Heads bobbing as they ride on their parent's shoulders, the little ones discover the wonders of Fasching from their elevated perches.

The adults put on their finest costumes for the Fasching balls. Ranging from elaborate feathers-and-papermache creations to simple rubber-nose-and-a-mask styles, the costumes are mandatory for entrance to the Fasching parties. In Munich, there are more than 3,000 Fasching costume balls during the festival.

Considering its long history, it's not surprising that Fasching has carved such a place in the hearts of Bavarians.

The first official recognition of Fasching came from the City Council in 1537, but the celebration goes further back at least two more centuries. It was first mentioned in German writings in 1359.

Early festivals featured sleigh rides, tournaments called "Lublges-tach," in which knights jostled wearing small wooden barrels on their heads instead of helmets, and the first "fast night" dances in a special hall built by the council.

Masquerade balls began to bloom at the beginning of the 19th Century. The bulletin of St. Peter's Church mentions a ball in 1828 that attracted 5,000 costumed Bavarians. King Ludwig I was among those who attended.

Fasching traditions continued to be added: in 1894 the well-organized balls began, the first Fasching prince was enthroned and the first big Fasching parade was initiated, its floats bouncing through the decorated streets of the city. In 1908 an organization was founded to maintain the artistic standards of the event.

All these traditions and all this history come together each November at 11 minutes after 11 p.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month. They go into high gear in January and reach a climax the day before Lent.

As the day winds down, after all the parties, beer, food and dancing, Fasching is declared dead and the Fasching prince is carried to his grave as Ash Wednesday begins.