

KARNEVAL is a very special and crazy time in Cologne.
Here is all you need to know about the “JECKE ZICK!”



1. In Cologne, Silliness Is Serious Business

At the end of February, from Thursday until Ash Wednesday, the city of Cologne is in an exceptional state. Carnival (in German Karneval) has been celebrated in Cologne since medieval times and is so famous that it's often even called the Fifth Season. There are many German cities which celebrate carnival to varying degrees of intensity, but in Cologne, carnival is serious business! Any normal activity stops during these so called "Crazy Days" and is replaced by dressing up in costumes, dancing, laughing, singing and serious drinking.



2. The participants of the Carnival are called “Jecken”

A Jeck is any person that participates in Carnival. The j is pronounced like the y in the English word yam. Contrary to members of official Carnival Clubs (Karnevalsverein) who are called Karnevalisten, anyone can be a Jeck.



3. Three Rulers Preside Over the Mad People

During carnival season, three symbolical rulers are elected. Together they are called the Trifolium (or Dreigestirn) which consists of the character of the Prince, the Peasant and the Virgin. The Prince is the prince of the carnival itself, the Peasant represents the wealth and the defensive strength of the city of Cologne, whereas the Virgin symbolizes the virtue and beauty of the city. And yes, the Virgin is always a man.



4. In Cologne the call of the carnival is “Alaaf,” not “Helau”

The call of carnival is called Narrenruf (literally jester's call). Each city that celebrates carnival in Germany and Switzerland has its own call. Also, each city (where carnival is taken seriously) is convinced of the superiority of its own carnival compared to the others, so if you want to join the fray, make sure to get the right call for the right city. For example, they shout Hellau in Mainz, while in Cologne it's always and only: Alaaf!



5. Don't wear a (costly) tie on Weiberfastnacht

On Weiberfastnacht (literally women's carnival), (also known as Fat Thursday), it is customary for women to cut off the tie of any man they see. This custom dates back to a revolt by washer women in the year 1824. Everyone traveling in or through Cologne at this day wearing a tie is bound to wear only a stump by the end of the day. The practice, which on other days would be considered damage of property, is actually sanctified by local law for 24 hours.



6. Kiss or Be Kissed

Another carnival custom of Weiberfastnacht is the so called Bützchen, a kiss on the cheek dealt out by women to any man they meet. This should not be mistaken as a declaration of passion or any other carnal desires, but simply as a sign of carnivalistic camaraderie and joy. There are stories of men who have turned their head during a Bützchen, trying to receive a kiss on the lips, but they have been known to only get a slap in the face instead.



7. The Rosenmontagszug is Germany's Biggest Carnival Parade

Traditionally held since 1823, the “Zoch” (Cologne dialect for Zug: train, procession, parade) is the oldest and biggest carnival parade in Germany, comprised of marchers, bands, horses, dancers and floats. The Rosenmontagszug, which takes place on Rose Monday (as the name says), is more than six kilometers long and attended by hundred-thousands of people.



8. 300 tons of “Kamelle” are thrown each year

During the Rosenmontagszug, every year 300 tons of Kamelle are thrown to the delight of children and other sugar-friends, including 700,000 bars of chocolate plus 300,000 small flower bouquets. Kamelle can be anything from candy, paper flowers to animals, but mostly it's just glorious glucose in all shapes and forms. Serious Jecken have developed various strategies to catch as much flying candy as they can, using anything from their bare hands to umbrellas.



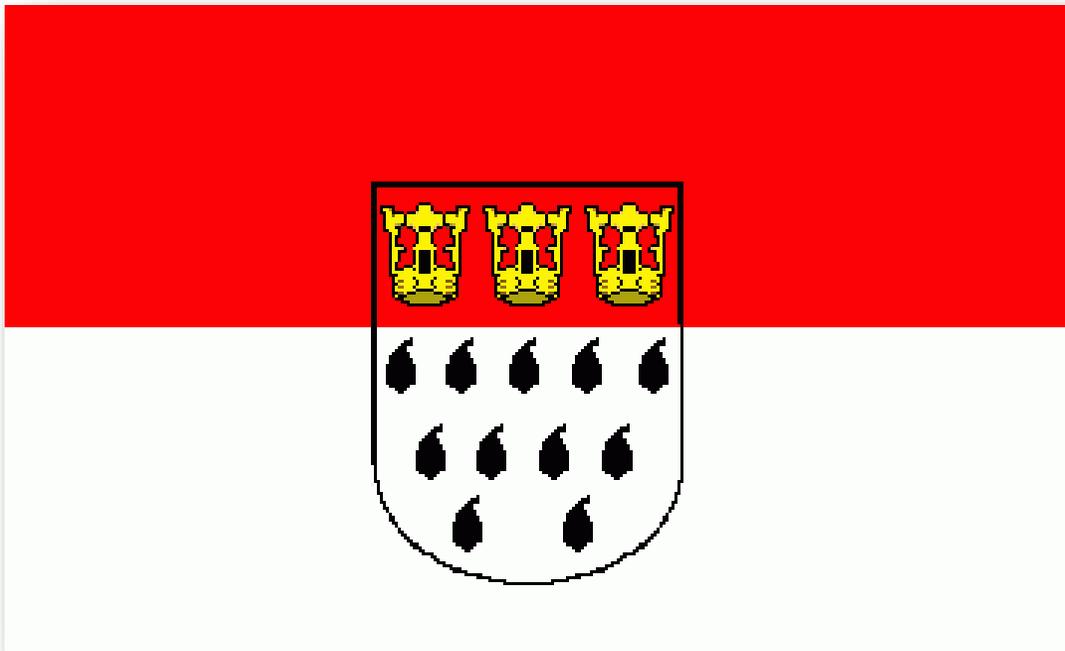
9. The Floats Often Feature Political Satire

Part of the Rosenmontagszug are not just the traditional marching bands, horses and dancers but also giant floats, often showing recent events in a satirical light or poking fun at politicians.



Why is it called “Karneval?”

As for many other traditions related to carneval, it is not documented where the term itself comes from. The most common explanation is that it derives from the Latin translation of carne levare - “taking away meat“. Another translation is rather meant to be a joke: „carne vale“ which means “Goodbye, meat!“ Either way it seems to have originated from the fact that the celebration of carneval marks the beginning of Christian Lent.



Some carnival-related terms you should know:

- **Bützchen:** a small kiss on the cheek
- **Dreigestirn:** the "Trifolium" (the Prince, the Peasant and the Virgin) which reigns over the *Jecken*
- **Kamelle:** the sweets and snacks that are thrown from the floats
- **Nubbel:** a puppet made of straw that is burnt the Tuesday after carnival to free the *Jecken* from all sins committed during the festivities
- **Session:** that's how you call the the time of carnival, starting November 11 and ending Ash Wednesday
- **Strüßjer:** small bouquets that are thrown or handed out during the parades in exchange for a *Bützchen*
- **Zoch:** the most famous parade in Cologne - the *Rosenmontagszug*

Kölle Alaaf!



Even though the carnival time is one of the coldest spells in Germany, the “Crazy Days” are definitely worth a trip!

Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn for more trivia about Cologne and Koelnmesse!



@KoelnmesseInc



@KoelnmesseInc - Koelnmesse North America



Koelnmesse, Inc.

Sources

- <https://www.morgenpost.de/vermishtes/article227614539/Karneval-2020-Warum-der-Startschuss-schon-am-11-11-faellt.html>
- <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/everything-you-need-to-know-about-colognes-carnival/>
- <https://learnoutlive.com/9-facts-about-cologne-carnival/>