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Basler Fasnacht

The Basler Fasnacht (Carnival of Basel) is the biggest carnival in Switzerland and takes place annually between February and March in Basel. It has been listed as one of the top fifty local festivities in Europe!

The Basler Fasnacht starts on Monday after Ash Wednesday with the so-called Morgestraich. At exactly 4am, all the lights in the old town of Basel are turned off and the Industrielle Werke Basel (the Industrial Works of Basel are the public utility organisation of the city) shut down the streetlights.

The only light remaining comes from the lanterns of the Cliques (Fasnacht groups). These are the oldest traditional formation of the Fasnacht and march through the alleys of the old town, playing the piccolo and Basler drum.

The carnival lasts for exactly 72 hours and, therefore, ends on Thursday morning at 4am. During this time, the Fasnächtler (the participants) dominate the old town of central Basel, roaming the streets and cramming restaurants. From 4am on Monday, many restaurants and bars in the old town open their doors and remain open for the following 72 hours.

People sample traditional Basler carnival specialties, such as flour soup, Zibelewäie (onion tart) and Chäswäie (a quiche-like baked dish with cheese). Approximately 18,000 active Fasnächtler dress up in a wide variety of costumes, including a mask known as a "Larve".

Participants are completely covered and remain incognito during the festivities; it is considered highly inappropriate to identify oneself. "Intrigiere" is a popular sport undertaken by Fasnächtler, verbally exposing known members of the public which is usually deeply embarrassing.

Members of the various Cliques wear uniform costumes that fit a specific theme or "sujet", except during Morgestraich and on Fasnacht Tuesday. The sujet is often very satirical and preferably political. Very clever poems in Basel dialect ("Schnitzelbängg") are written about the sujet chosen by each Clique and handed out to the public in copious quantities for their personal enjoyment. The costumes worn by the Fasnächtler represent famous persons, such as politicians, or even comic characters or animals. More traditional masks recall harlequins (Harlekin), "alti Tante" (old aunts) and the famous Waggis - figures with a huge nose, grotesque grin and crazy hair.

The throwing of confetti is a typical tradition from Basel that later spread to the rest of the world. While there is no proof for this theory, the amount of confetti used during Basler Fasnacht is huge in comparison to other carnivals.

Originally, sweets in the form of small sugar balls known as confetti (an Italian name, similar to the English confectionery) were given away or thrown at the crowd during the parade. After this practice was prohibited in the 19th century, small shards of paper were used as a replacement.

In the Basel German dialect, confetti are called Röppli and only single-colored confetti can be purchased in Basel. Confetti is available in all possible colours, but never mixed. This was decided by the regional confetti manufacturers to prevent the once-common practice of reselling "used" confetti.

Marching brass bands playing "Guggemusig" are another formation present during Fasnacht. These do not participate during the Morgestraich, but only at the Cortège (parade) on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, and during the evenings, especially on Tuesday night when they hold their Gugg-Concerts.

Basler Fasnacht is often referred to as die "drey scheenschte Dääg" (the three most beautiful days). Unlike the Carnival celebrations held in other cities on the Rhine (such as those held in Cologne, Mainz and Düsseldorf), the Basel Carnival displays a clear separation between participants and spectators.

Getting a bit homesick now and would like to move to the beats of a Guggemusig? Don't worry, New Zealand has its own Guggemusig! The Auckland Guggemusig plays at a variety of events. Check it out on www.carnivalband.co.nz

By Alexandra Beskid-Jung

For further information about the Basler Fasnacht, go to www.fasnacht.ch. Fasnacht 2014 commences on 10 March 2014.



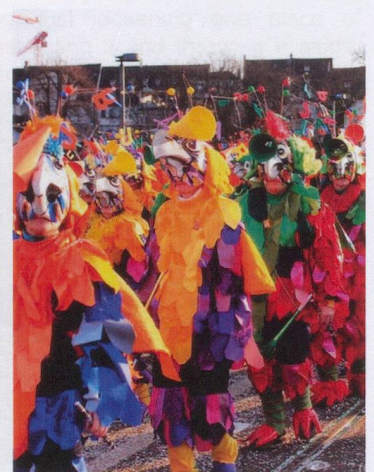
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