



AllWays Traveller

Basel Fasnacht, Switzerland

A carnival never taken lightly

Fasnacht is the carnivals in Switzerland, southern Germany and western Austria.

It is a time for people to go 'mad' and for chaos to rule. Where hierarchies are overthrown and everyone indulges in three days of revelry.

While Fasnacht celebrations coincide with the pre-lent, pre-fasting period in the Catholic areas, in Protestant Basel they take place one week later.

And nowhere is Fasnacht embraced more wholeheartedly than in this historic city.

As one Fasnacht finishes so the 12,000 participants, or

Fasnächtler, start planning, preparing and rehearsals for the next.

This results in a truly memorable three days for those lucky enough to be there to enjoy it.

Ashley Gibbins

The International Travel Writers Alliance

ashley@itwalliance.com



Basel Fasnächt, the biggest carnival in Switzerland, takes place annually from precisely 4.00am on the Monday after Ash Wednesday until 4.00am the following Thursday morning.



A personal view

Einstein's to the left of me, Neanderthals to the right

by Ashley Gibbins



When writing a feature a word will sometimes spring to mind that's just perfect for explaining a situation.

Cacophonous. Now that's an absolute gem of a word, I think you will agree. It also describes Basel Fasnächt to a 'T'.

A stirring, strident, jarring and discordant sound. Raucous and with harshness.

And it was indeed a cacophony of sound that assailed my senses when a Guggen band of 25 *Einstein's* (performing a rumbustious rendition of *Spanish Eyes*) came face to face with, rather ironically, a clique of Neanderthal's playing a military lament of sorts on piccolo and drums.

While these two groups, were faced with the dilemma of how best to pass each other, they were confronted broadside by the Smurfs from the left (blasting out *When I'm 64*) and a trio of rampant drummers, dressed as grotesque clowns, from the right.

A cacophonous episode ensued.

Here comes another word. Surreal

The four groups continued to perform unabated and unperturbed at the chaotic congestion. Soon enough we spectators were gently manoeuvred aside to enable the groups to go their separate ways.

Encounters like this would be repeated, time and again, by dozens of different groups throughout the three days and nights of carnival.

They will all be dressed in costumes and masks that are, by turn, dramatic, exotic, outrageous or just plain ludicrous.

And during Fasnacht, the historic old town becomes the domain of the 18,000 Fasnächtler who, in their Cliques and Guggen bands, will march and perform pretty much as, when and where the mood takes them.

The facts

Basel

Basel, Switzerland, is located on the Rhine at the border with Germany and France. It is the country's third largest city, after Zurich and Geneva.

Basel Fasnacht



Basel Fasnacht, the biggest carnival in Switzerland, takes place annually from precisely 4.00am on the Monday after Ash Wednesday until 4.00am the following Thursday morning.

During the 72 hours of carnival the city's historic old town is taken over by the Fasnächtler, the 12,000 participants who dress in outrageous costumes and masks.

The Sujet

Most of the groups choose a Sujet, or theme, for the Fasnacht, based on local, national or world events presented in satirical fashion.

A Sujet will also be depicted on the large lanterns that are carried by the members of the Cliques.

The costumes

The participants will often theme their costumes to satirise famous politicians or celebrities, put a focus on current affairs or to represent comic characters or animals.

Others will stick with the more traditional masks depicting Napoleonic soldiers or Stänzler.

Others wear the costumes of the

The Cortège



Even the Cortège, the carnival parades, that take place on the Monday and Wednesday have the participants joining the circular procession route at their time and place of choosing.

If all this sounds complete mayhem and you are thinking someone ought to be getting things under control. Well, emphatically no.

This is a festival that belongs to the Fasnächtler and they rightly resist all but the minimum of organisation and regulation.

It works just fine



And it all works just fine as it is.

One must remember, of course, that we are talking Switzerland so the mayhem is going to be relatively reserved and extremely well behaved.

So despite thousands of performers and many thousands more spectators cramming into the old town.

There is no need for the crowd control or the heavy police presence that puts an unfortunate edge on some carnivals in other parts of the world.

And while many of the bars and restaurants stay open day and night throughout, there is no hint of drunkenness or unsocial behaviour.

Stänzler, which are inspired by the military uniforms worn by the Basel regiment in the 19th century.

Then there's the Harlekin (reminiscent of the Commedia dell'Arte).

As well as enhancing the dramatic effect, the masks also ensure the anonymity of the participants, an important element of Basel Fasnacht.

The groups

Basel Fasnacht's distinct groups are the Cliques, the Gugge and the Waggis.

The Cliques



The Cliques are groups who march up down and across the streets of the old town playing the piccolo flute and basler drum.

The pipers (Pfeifer) and drummers (Trommler) are led on these processions by a vanguard of marchers (Vortrab) who will gently move spectators out of the way.

Because they do not follow set routes, different Cliques will regularly cross each others path. When they do one will stop and let the other pass.

The Gugge

The Gugge, are the brass bands who play Guggenmusik throughout Fasnacht either on the march or from impromptu venues throughout the old town.

The Waggis

Finally there are the Waggis, the infamous and impish creatures who spend Fasnacht throwing confetti at over or down the backs of spectators as they stroll the old town or from the floats taking part in the Cortège.

The programme

Masks more than for dramatic effect



The other essential element of Basel Fasnacht is the masks worn by all the participants.

As well as adding colourful and dramatic effect it provides an anonymity that allows people of all age and social standing to take part. All Fasnächtler are equal.

The final abiding memory of Fasnacht in Basel is the confetti – hundreds of tons of the stuff. It is hurled by those aboard the carnival floats, along with flowers, sweets and oranges, and thrown over bystanders by the mischievous Waggis.



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Morgestraich

The Morgestraich, on Monday morning, marks the start of Fasnacht.

At exactly 4am all lights in the old town go out to herald a parade of over 200 lanterns by the Cliques to the sound of pipes and drums.



The Cortège

The Cortège are the parades, which take place on Monday and Wednesday afternoon, around two defined circuits of the city.

During these two processions, the Cliques and Gugge are joined by dozens of floats carrying Waggis who toss oranges, flowers and sweets to the crowd and shower them with confetti.

Children and Family Fasnacht

All in a good cause

And woe betide those who have not purchased an official carnival badge, that helps fund the carnival festivities, and who are not on constant watch.

(Or, it seems, any attractive young ladies). It's confetti down the back of the shirt time.

By the end of each day the confetti has formed a thick carpet everywhere and it is a real feat for this to be removed, as it is, by early the next morning.

Parades and performances



And so from precisely 4.00 am on the Monday to exactly 4.00 am the following Thursday, Basel is dominated by the parades and performances of the Fasnächtler.

While all of this is taking place there is still plenty of opportunity to stroll the wonderful old town or along the majestic Rhine.

Basel Fasnacht will be held :

Monday 22 to Thursday 25 Feb 2010
Monday 14 to Thursday 17 Mar 2011
Monday 27 Feb to Thursday 1 Mar 2012

The Children and Family Fasnacht takes place on Tuesday with many parades through the city.

The lantern exhibition

A spectacular exhibition of over 200 lanterns is staged on the Münsterplatz on Carnival Tuesday.

Gugge concerts

The Gugge come into their own on Tuesday evening, with dozens of outdoor concerts throughout the city.

The end of Fasnächt

Basel Fasnacht ends at precisely 4.00am on Thursday morning when the sound of pipes, drums and brass that has been resounding through the old town for the previous 72 hours stops abruptly.

Links

Basel Fasnacht

www.fasnachts-comite.ch
www.fasnacht.ch

Basel

www.basel.com

The Basel tourist information web site and its two information centres in Basel will provide information on staying in and making the most of a visit to the city.

A place to stay

For one fine mid-range hotel within easy walking distance of the old town centre and the Fasnacht activities check out the Hotel Metropol.

www.metropol-basel.ch

The International Travel Writers Alliance



AllWays is the consumer travel service from the International Travel Writers Alliance.

The International Travel Writers Alliance represents travel writers, editors, broadcasters and photographers worldwide

The International Travel Writers Alliance

Hampton House, 77 The Ridgeway, North Chingford, E4 6QW, London, UK.

Tel: +44 (0) 20 8524 4089

E: Ashley@itwalliance.com

Registered in England No: 6545647

Ashley Gibbins

Ashley Gibbins is a third generation journalist and travel writer.

He is also Director General of the International Travel Writers Alliance and Managing Editor of AllWays – the consumer travel service from the Alliance.