



Carnival in the Netherlands

Annual carnival will be celebrated on Saturday 6, Sunday 7, Monday 8 and Tuesday 9 February 2016, in many municipalities in Zuid-Nederland, in the provinces of Limburg and Noord-Brabant.

Local festival

This annual, traditional festival that is also celebrated in other countries, such as Germany, Switzerland and South America, is primarily a celebration for the local residents of the municipalities in the Netherlands. In some municipalities, carnival is celebrated over three or possibly four days. It is a festival full of music, song, dance, fancy-dress parties and, of course, eating and drinking. All of the participants get dressed up in all sorts of costumes. The streets are often decorated too, with cafés and restaurants sporting colourful lights and streamers.

Organisation

Every municipality has one or more organisations who keep the festival on track. The local organisation ensures that one of the residents, or sometimes someone from outside the municipality, is crowned Prince of the carnival. This person is then appointed various, dressed-up, festival 'supervisors' who will help him lead the celebrations. At the beginning of the celebrations, he is usually awarded the keys to the city by the mayor of the municipality. This is to signify that, for the duration of the carnival, it is the party-goers that rule the municipality. This is only taken lightly as, in reality, the mayor always retains responsibility. The residents take part individually or in groups. Sometimes, they are united within a carnival committee and may, for example, take part in the parade on a decorated float of some sort.

Festivities

Alongside appointing a Prince, the committee also organises all sorts of festivities, such as a parade with floats and music or musical parties, public meals, the unveiling of a temporary statue, etc. These types of activities can also be organised by others. It is structured by the locals, based on long-standing traditions.

Satire

Caricature and parody are important elements of the festivities. Individuals are satirised in word and deed in order to offer a comedic reflection of the real person. This corresponds, of course, to the government which, in the eyes of the residents, could have made an incorrect, sometimes laughable, decision. It is, however, always good-natured and not overly cutting. The number 11 has long been known as the 'crazy' number and is used frequently throughout.

Taking part in carnival

Carnival is a local festival in which everyone can take part. Even if you don't come from the city where the festival is held, you can still join in and enjoy carnival. The carnival celebrations are all about creating a welcoming atmosphere to which everyone contributes. This includes the decorative and colourful clothing. During carnival, a great deal of alcohol is consumed. But even when people are drinking, it is important that the festival remains welcoming to all. If you have any questions, please ask COA personnel for more information. The asylum-seekers centre sometimes organises an activity too.

Short history

Winter ritual

According to experts, elements of the carnival, such as Shrove Tuesday (or 'vastenavond') are rooted in old, winter rituals. They date back to the times of our forefathers from this area who believed that the cold, wet, infertile days of winter, with its short days, sickness and death, were a punishment from angry gods and spirits. People thought, in those times, that they could influence these gods and spirits and came up with processes to chase them away or placate them. The aim of all this was to drive away the winter and bring back the warm, fertile summer. These processes or rituals consisted of sacrifices or offerings or by making a lot of noise and wearing masks, etc.

Catholic church

The Catholic church long tried to eliminate what they believed to be pernicious, pagan practices. When they were unsuccessful, they tried to incorporate the practices into their own catholic festivals. In the 11th century, the church decided that, prior to the catholic festival of Easter (the resurrection of Christ), there would be a fasting period of 40 days. A few of the practices that existed at the time, to drive winter out, were then incorporated for three/four days prior to the fasting period, which always began on a Wednesday. This, along with other contemporary rituals, ultimately became the Shrove Tuesday festival that is now known as carnival.

Disappearance of Shrove Tuesday

Shrove Tuesday (the evening before fasting) thus became a three or four day festival that compensated for the forty days of fasting, and was therefore celebrated with parties, much eating and drinking, music and fancy dress. For this reason, it is referred to as a catholic festival. Things often went a bit awry though, as people drank to much and often fights broke out. As a result, the catholic church did their best to eliminate this spirited event from their calendar. In the 16th century there was a dispute in the church and the Reformed Church was created. This religion was more vigorously opposed to carnival and succeeded in banning it almost entirely from areas that were primarily protestant. This tended to concern provinces in the Netherlands that were located above the great rivers and, since then, these areas have only been sporadically involved in carnival.

Carnival revival

In the 19th century and principally in the 20th century, after the Second World War, carnival became enormously popular in southern regions, inspired by old carnival locations and television. This also took in locations where carnival had not previously been extensively celebrated. In order to maintain these practices, organisations were created to keep the heavily-criticised festivals on the right track and ensure that the fights and conflicts of old did not occur. Nowadays, almost everywhere in Zuid-Nederland, but primarily the provinces of Limburg and Noord-Brabant, celebrate carnival. Carnival organisations work on the event for many months.