

COLOGNE – CARNIVAL – CATASTROPHE - CONGA

A visit to Cologne for the last days of the February festival of Carnival had been the dream for my colleague, Joan, and me while staffing our Company's stand at the large international confectionery fair held annually in February in the city. This was the culmination of the winter festival and there would be crowds, fun fairs, fancy dress, music and street parades. Walking back to the hotel in the cold, dark, evenings we made our plans.

Our times in the city had expanded our knowledge of the huge variety of restaurants. We particularly enjoyed visiting one away from the centre owned by a charming Croatian couple and during our evenings there – eating Balkan dishes and drinking Plavac red wine – we became friendly with the proprietors. One night we had fallen into conversation with them and mentioned our wish to return for Carnival. We complained that hotels would be extremely costly at such a prime period and they promised us that when we returned they would find us inexpensive local accommodation. So when we were free to make our own holiday arrangements so we telephoned our friends and they sent us the details of a couple just outside the city centre who would put us up.

A convenient flight allowed us to arrive at Cologne/Bonn Airport at lunch time and we bought tickets for the coach that would take us to the central railway and coach station. I had separate wheels for my suitcase and balanced a holdall on top while Joan carried hers. Leaving the coach stop we manoeuvred ourselves and our cases through the masses of people thronging the station and made our way to the metro. From our previous visits we knew the transport system like the backs of our hands. All we had to do was get the train to the shopping centre, change to a tram and bingo! - five stops later we would be there.

Unfortunately, from the middle of a packed carriage, Joan misread the name of the next station. We pushed our way to the doors, lowered our suitcases on to the platform and wearily straightened up. "Oh, sorry, no", she said. "It's the next stop". So we climbed back on to the train, hoisting our luggage wearily up the two steep steps.

Arriving at last in the centre we heard in the distance the sound of the marching bands. Eager to be in the crowd we hurried as best we could to the tram stop that would take us to our host accommodation but a

policeman approached and explained that because of Carnival no trams were running from that station so we would have to travel by a different line. With my suitcase and holdall now continually slipping as we mounted and descended kerbs we trudged fifteen minutes to the appropriate stop and arrived, eventually, hot and tired, at the restaurant. Our friends greeted us warmly and drove us to our welcoming hosts.

After chatting to them and having some coffee and cake we made our way back into the city. It was filled with colour and exuberance; street booths selling mulled wine and donuts lined the pavements. It abounded with people in fancy dress, drinking the local Kölsch and singing and dancing in the streets. A switchback ride had been erected opposite the dignified Cathedral. We found a small pub in a side street and enjoyed traditional German food and finally, encouraged by the other patrons, we abandoned our inhibitions and danced the conga through the streets.

Returning to our lodgings and settling into our rooms we decided to refresh ourselves and plugged in an adaptor and small jug kettle brought from home to make a cup of tea. We stretched out on our beds and looked forward to the morning when the main parade would take place. But our self-satisfaction was rudely shattered as darkness suddenly fell on our room and we realised with dismay that in spite of the adaptor we had taken it was obvious that the British electrics were not compatible with the German ones - and we had fused all the lights in the house.