



Getting to know you: The author does the tango at a *milonga* in Buenos Aires.

EXPERIENCE

So You Think You Can Dance?

The Argentine tango is a sure way to get into the soul of this South American country. | **By CAMILLE CUSUMANO**

NOW AND THEN, in Buenos Aires, I have the urge to rub against a man I've never met. When that occurs, I usually go to La Boca, the barrio that throbs with the afterglow of Italian immigrants who poured brilliantly colored paints over their drab tenements in the early 20th century. This afternoon, I find my guy near El Caminito, a pedestrian way where the polychromatic hues are even louder than my pink high heels.

Gustavo and partner have just performed tango on a raised stage for the entertainment of tourists dining alfresco. He greets my request for a spin warmly, “*¡Por supuesto!*” (“Of course!”)

Since 2006, I've been a regular at many of the city's *milongas*, dance halls where modern tango's first steps were crafted and refined over time. This new kick—watch me tango with a complete stranger—is, in part, schoolyard-showoff stuff. But it's also that this torso-to-torso dance is a thrilling narrative, a romantic miniseries, improvised anew with each partner. As with many love stories, first times bring that added flush of excitement.

Tango, renowned for its sensuality, has been blushing complexions for at least a

hundred years. In old and new *milongas*, one dances with a cross-section of Argentina—from taxi drivers to psychotherapists—assuring deepest cultural immersion, almost literally, on famously packed dance floors. I revel just in watching each swaying body project an annotated timeline of Argentine culture: the *candómbes* rhythms of African slaves, the hip-swivel *habanera* of Cuban mariners, the folksy influence from Andalusia, and the foot-stomping of *gauchos*. In tango lyrics, you hear the heart-wrenching melancholy of Spanish and Italian immigrants.

Refined and elegant today, the tango hug is soft and sliding on your trunk, never rigid as in ballroom dance. “Here we are used to touch more than in your country,” says Oscar Coda, a regular dance partner. That seems obvious—just walk one block of the crowded streets in this city of three million. Yet, tango seems to thrive because of, not in spite of, a lack of

personal space. That is what I have thought in this country, where even police greet each other with cheek kisses, where I can walk up to someone and ask to share, bodice to body, the sweetness of a dance.

In 2009, UNESCO gave tango, whose Rio Platense birthplace includes Argentina and Uruguay, status as part of the world's “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” No surprise to Argentines and to Rodolfo and Gloria Dinzel, who performed on the 1985 Broadway hit, *Tango Argentino*, who believe that no other dance expresses “elements so noble and intrinsic to the human being.”

I was not always as confident as Argentines seem to be. My first *milonga* I sat like a block of wood and did not dance. After two hours I stole out. Like most foreigners, I had morbid fear of *cabeceo*, a head-nod with eye-lock that is the traditional invitation to meet on the floor and dance a set of tango, initiated by man or woman. “The *cabeceo* has a steep learning curve,” says Carmen Iglesias, a native of the port city, “but it also separates the dabblers from the dedicated. You have to really want to dance to get over the initial fear of rejection.”

If Argentines insist tango “takes a lifetime-and-a-half to learn,” perhaps that's because it is a body language. There's always new vocabulary to master, like the *cabeceo*. With hundreds of floor miles, I find the secret is organic to much human enterprise: You may learn the external footwork, but when you lean into a stranger, you have to trust, forget what you knew and triangulate: two bodies to one music.

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Gustavo, my man of the moment, puts on music by Osvaldo Pugliese, considered one of the most passionate composers. He pulls me onstage to dance in front of the crowd.

¡Ay, caramba! I may speak tango, even with strangers, but I'm not a performer. I close my eyes and surrender. A smile settles on my face. Next thing I know the crowd is applauding. Just before Gustavo puts on another song for us to dance to, I notice he shares my excitement. I come away understanding that while tango is regional in origin, the passion and connection its channels are universal.

La Boca is a great place to watch street dancing. Most hotels carry the free tango map guides with information on workshops and performances.