For the Love of Tango

Why I packed up my dancing shoes and headed to Buenos Aires

STORY BY CAMILLE CUSUMANO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK BENNETT

No clocks grace the belle époque walls of Niño Bien, a salon in Buenos Aires where I have danced tango for the past four years. I can't be late for my next date this Saturday night—across town at another old-dance hall—but not to worry. I've learned to track time in Argentina by the tandas, a series of three or four like-themed tangos that you dance with the same person, lasting about 15 minutes altogether.

I fit in two more tandas with Carlos, who hugs me as if it's my last day on earth, and Jorge, who tells me "You are a pluma (little feather)." Ah, but Ramón, who makes eye contact just as I'm slipping out of my nine-centimeter heels to head to Salón Canning, will have to wait until next week. And he will, too, as will my other favorite partners. An embarrassment of riches I call them, my stable of tango dancers, many of them friends I've been making since 2006. That's when I arrived in Buenos Aires for what was supposed to be a brief visit. I had been studying tango back home in San Francisco and wanted to experience the dance in its birthplace. I unwittingly fell head over stiletto heels in love with the dance—and the city they call the Paris of South America. Four years later, I'm still here.

And I'm still in awe of the things that attract visitors from all over the world—the French and Italian Renaissance-style buildings with their old-Europe balconies, for example, and the operatic architecture of such crown jewels as the world-famous Teatro Colón and the stunning enamel-studded Palacio de Aguas Corrientes. I never tire of walking under the broad-canopied jacarandá and plane trees that line streets where busy sidewalk cafés, jazz bars, restaurants, and chic boutiques form the heart and soul of the barrio. Museums span a spectrum, from fine art to a showcase of Evita Perón's life and times. The food is cheap, abundant, and delicious, from the plump empanadas to the pizza and pasta to the indigenous specialties, such as corn-based locro and humita. But for me, the city's most compelling allure remains the tango, day and night.

This evening, as I taxi over to Salón Canning to dance into the wee hours of the morning, I think about how lucky I was to have come to Buenos Aires in the heat of tango's renaissance. The dance had fermented around a basic hunger for love and intimacy among society's most disenfranchised, gauchos and immigrants, in the early 1900s. It reigned in unpeopled Golden Age from the 1920s to the 1940s, when you could walk down Corrientes, "the street that never sleeps," and hear live tango orchestras playing in cabarets, theaters, and salons.

Tango went dark in the '50s, under repressive military regimes that forbade public gatherings, and reignited in the '80s here and around the world when Argentina's last dictatorship toppled and democracy was restored. Still in the midst of its spectacular comeback, tango is on tap everywhere in the right-owl city—in salons, clubs, theaters, restaurants, workshops, plazas, and under al fresco gazebos.

Corrientes is a bit tired from wear these days, but it still sizzles with enduring hot spots, such as El Gato Negro, a café where you can buy spices and teas from around the world, and Café La Paz, a 1960s hangout for artists, musicians, and political dissidents. Corrientes runs for 69 blocks and right past the city's iconic Obelisco, a 220-foot-high landmark with a bird's-eye view of the many milongas—the venues where tango is danced—in this downtown area.

Although visitors can see professional tango productions at many places in the city, Argentines also welcome foreigners at their milongas. For a few pesos admission (be $5–$7), visitors can watch ordinary people dance "organic" tango—the social dance the way it has evolved—in old atmospheric halls and salons. Most milongas start parceos at linen-covered tables around the periphery of the dance floor and are divided into seating sections for men, women, and couples. Skilled DJs play crowd-pleasing music, and occasionally milongas will have a live orchestra and a dance performance for some part of the evening. For refreshment, milongas serve a simple menu of empanadas, pizza, salads, antipasto, wine, beer, and other spirits. Of course, visitors who'd like to dance can learn some basic steps and join the line of dancers on the floor.

At Canning, the host seats me at a table with friends. Now that I am well-seasoned and can move with the best of them, sometimes I love to simply sit and watch this dance that is more than a hundred years old. I notice that many couples, like me, close their eyes as they give themselves over to what is numerically called a three-minute love affair with a stranger.

A cabeceo, an eye lock and head nod from a man, breaks my reverie at Canning. I accept this traditional invitation and

Tango, an intimately woven into the local culture, is like a lively language between two people with a simple vocabulary of steps. Occasionally, a few virtuosos flashing accompanying dancers. Tango is on tap everywhere in the city, from milongas (above right) to a Boca night, one of the immigrant barrios where the dance originated.

meet him on the floor. I see that it is Gonzalo, a young man who likes to lead me in fancy moves like leg wraps or ungarabato (leg hooking). Most couples adhere to a basic vocabulary of steps, which includes caminando (walking), ocho (figure-eights), and giro (turns). But whether showy or smooth, social tango is always a dance of improvisation with no predetermined sequences, unlike American tango and other ballroom dances.

A cortina, or short piece of non-tango music, marks the tanda's end, and Gonzalo regales me with a repertoire prosaic (forty remark). My dancing is "divine" he says, and

guides me back to my seat. All of this—the dance's spontaneity, the theatrical spirit of the milongas, the close embrace of tango that each time relives the primal urge for oneness—prompts me to tell people that tango is learned from the feet up, but danced from the heart down. It is as much a freeform dialogue as the cortáceos (Castilian Spanish) I am learning to speak here.

Now that I speak fluent tango, I love taking friends who visit me to La Boca, one of the city's barrios where the dance was born. They watch me tango with perfect strangers, the street performers who set up shop with hats/boxes around the cobbled pedestrian alley, at Caminito. La Boca preserves tango's roots—of the—century atmosphere, including the tenements, the Crayola-colored tenements, once crowded with nearly Italian immigrants, but now packed with fun shops and tango kitsch. Strolling the inner courtyard, I can almost hear the immigrants channeling their disillusion and grief into guitars and the bandoneón, the concertina that gives tango music its human-voice quality.

Those of us who want the whole world to dance the dance that elevates the common hug to a lyrical art form feel validated. In 2009, the United Nations (UN) gave Argentine tango preserved cultural status, designating it part of the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Oscar Cirilo, a seasoned milonguero friend who learned his first steps by copping Perón's dancers more than 50 years ago, says the UN's international seal of approval means "tango belongs to everybody" (and he loves that in Buenos Aires' milongas, he dances with more foreigners than ever before).

As for me, a foreigner hopelessly hooked on tango, it is the locals like Oscar to whom I gravitate for their deeply organic feel for the dance and music of their forebears. And there's Ramón, waiting for me back at Niño Bien. We meet in the middle of the dance floor and embrace. The violins cry, the bandoneón moan. I meet his stride, the entrance step to tango. But unlike in Spanish for "wait," and as I've come to think of the step as the moment we are measured time and only the present spreads blissfully before us—no past or future. Good thing, because no clocks grace the belle époque walls of Niño Bien.

Camille Cusumano, author of Tango, An Argentine Love Story (Seal Press, 2008), lives and writes in San Francisco and in Buenos Aires.

Your AAA Travel Agent can provide more information about travel abroad. Visit your local Auto Club branch, call (800) 336-4532, or go to AAA.com/travel.

Three to Tango . . .

STAGE SHOWS

Tango fantasia is what Argentines call stage tango, with its spectacular choreography. Most tango shows offer a dining option. Prices run from about $$$ (show only) up to $$$$ (show, gourmet dinner, VIP seating).

- Piazzolla Center Center, 2200 Carlos Gardel, (54-11) 4867-4263, info@piazzollacenter.com.ar
- El Viejo Almacén, 799 Balcarce, (54-11) 4307-7388, info@elviejoalmacen.com
- Esquina Homero Manzi, 3407 San Juan Avenue, (54-11) 4957-0488, info@esquinahomeromanzi.com.ar

"ORGANIC" TANGO

For extraordinary listings of milongas, pick up the Tango Map Guide, El Tanguero, La Milonga Argentina, and B.A. Tango, available free at most hotels and milongas. Here are some local favorites:

- Confitería Ideal, 384 Suipacha, (54-11) 5265-8069
- Salón Canning, 1037 Scalabrini Ortiz, (54-11) 4832-6753
- Niño Bien, 1462 Humberto Primo, (54-11) 4307-0607 (call)
- Gustito Porteño, 3330 San Juan, (54-11) 4361-9524 (call), angelesgustito@yahoo.com.ar

CLASSES

Most dance halls feature a lesson that begins an hour or so before the milonga starts; call ahead to confirm. You don't have to bring a partner. Some recommendations:

- La Escuela Argentina de Tango (an classes for all levels, Location in Centro Cultural Borges at Viamonte and San Martín, (54-11) 4312-4890, info@borges.org
- TangoTeaDance offers private and group classes. Also, for a reasonable fee, you can hire a so-called tango dancer to accompany you to milongas and dance with you. (54-11) 4383-3947, info@tangoteadance.com, tangoteadance.com