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Tango Passion in Buenos Aires

Who can resist a dance trip that has “passion” in its name? Certainly not I. So when a friend suggested I join a group of dance enthusiasts traveling to Buenos Aires, Argentina to learn the tango, I never thought twice before I said “yes”!

It was only a week before the trip that I panicked. How was I, a woman of a certain age who had not been on a dance floor in 20 years, going to keep up with a group of dedicated dancers from two dance organizations—Forever Dancing (www.foreverdancing.com) and Alliance Dance Institute in Arlington, Virginia, as well as others from Louisiana and Brazil.

Most intimidating, how could a novice learn one of the most beautiful, yet complex, dances in the world? But images of Rudolph Valentino danced in my head, so I plunged head first-- or should I say feet first--into a trip that proved to be a perfect blend of dance lessons, glitzy tango shows, and late evening dancing at Buenos Aires’ many tango ballrooms (milongas).

The trip was organized by Fabio Bonini (www.dancingtrips.com). Fabio Bonini is a professional dance performer and instructor who have specialized in taking dance enthusiast to both Argentina and Brazil since 2000.

Everything about the weeklong trip focused on tango. Its history, its music, its shows and, of course, its dance steps. Mixed in were sightseeing and shopping trips, especially for tango shoes.

You could even wake up to tango music, as I found out by mistake when I turned the wrong knob in my hotel room. Startled awake at 7 a.m. by the plaintive throb of tango music, I learned that dance music is piped into the rooms at the La Mansion Dandi Royal, our tango home for the week.

La Mansion Dandi is a theme hotel that bills itself as a “residential tango academy”. Created by owner and tango legend Hector Villalba, the hotel is located in an exquisitely renovated century old mansion located in the heart of San Telmo. Buenos Aires, which is made up of many neighborhoods-- or barrios, offers a rich array of atmospheres. San Telmo is Buenos Aires’ historic tango and antiques district.

La Mansion Dandi is within walking distance to San Telmo square, a not to be missed visual event. Each Sunday it teems with energy and excitement when the outdoor antique market (Ferias San Pedro Telmo) occurs. Here you can watch mimes and street tango dancers while you bargain for trinkets and antiques. And there is music everywhere, from guitarists to a 10- person sidewalk orchestra.

At the Mansion Dandi Royal you eat, sleep and dance the tango. The hotel’s tango memorabilia, marble entrance, sweeping staircase, and wall murals portray turn of the

century life when the tango was born. It sets the perfect stage for the tango “intensive” flair of the trip. Although it has only 15 guest rooms, it has two tango ballrooms. One of these served as our studio for morning dance lessons, where Argentine tango experts taught our small group. Guests can avail themselves of a staff that can guide them to the most famous milongas or tango dance clubs, as well as tango TV cable channels, and free group lessons in the afternoon.

Each day began in the hotel’s “Salon de Tango”, a typical Tango Ballroom with its original 1925 wooden floors. This grand setting serves as restaurant, the site of the afternoon tango lessons and La Mansion Dandi’s dinner show and milongas. This show was one of three “*tango de fantasia*” evenings on the trip, all at dinner clubs. The show at La Mansion Dandi was unique in its portrayal of the evolution of the tango over the century. It created a good starting point on our first night in Buenos Aires for our exploration of the dance.

This elegant ballroom was where we had breakfast, graciously served late. This was undoubtedly to accommodate guests who tottered in on sore feet after an evening of milonga cruising. Buenos Aires abounds with tango clubs, or ballrooms. It is not unusual for Argentines to leave the dance floor at 6 a.m., when the ballrooms close, and head for the cafes and then to work.

However, this was no tour for tango spectators. We had to be active participants. Even the novices could not just watch. Fabio Bonini makes sure that the trip is geared for every level. Our midmornings featured group dance lessons with a variety of instructors, always a professional Argentine tango couple. We learned the Embrace, the Walk and adornment techniques. And of course, there were lessons to perfect the Basic, Forward Ocho, Back Ocho, Parada, Sandwich, and Grapevines. For the highly serious, there was the opportunity for private lessons on the mornings we did not have a group class.

Star power was added to our experience since our instructors were also the highlighted dancers in *tango de fantasia*’s dinner shows we saw. And for the single women, of which I was one, there were dance “assistants” hired for the group. You never had to be a wallflower or dance with someone with two left feet.

One of the special events of the trip was a *Dance Showcase* organized as a cultural exchange for Argentine dance students. The more experienced dancers in our group perform American dances, such as the Hustle and Foxtrot, while the Argentines demonstrated their dances.

“I want to create a gateway between countries, with dancing making it possible to interact with a foreign culture,” said Fabio Bonini, leader of the tour.

And his tours, which are his passion, do just that. Bonini started in the dance business in 1998, leading a performing ballroom dance troupe for Costa Cruise lines, before he branched out to organizing international competitions in his native Brazil and starting www.dancingtrips.com and beginning his affiliation with Alliance Dance Institute.

Our sightseeing experience, while taking us to all the major sites of the city, also focused on tango. This included La Boca, the former immigrant neighborhood off the Rio de La Plata, with its brightly colored houses and museum showing the living quarters of the newcomers, who lived 6 to 10 to a dwelling.

It was here, and in the environs south of the city, that the tango had its beginnings in the bars and brothels. The wailing melodies of the bandoneo and haunting lyrics of the tango speak of loneliness and nostalgia of the men who came from Europe, often without their families. As one Argentine said: “Tango is not about the music and the dance. It is about the heart.”

The erotic steps of the dance and the close embrace that characterizes Argentine Tango foretell of its beginnings among prostitutes and pimps. They played out seduction and passion with the dance. The hooks of the dance show power and the influence of its early beginning among gauchos. In the early days, it was a dance for men, who used it to mirror combat in a ballet-like style. In fact, in the early 20's tango ballrooms were for men only, because the dance was not seen as appropriate for ladies...except those of the night.

In the barrio of Boca, we experienced our second *tango de fantasia* show at La Boca Tango. Here a Disneyland-like movie set of a immigrant neighborhood is the backdrop for an engaging street drama of love, jealousy, passion and—of course—dance. It takes you back in history. Dinner is in a typical tavern, where you dine on, what else but Argentine beef! The evening ends in the Boca Tango nightclub, which houses a museum of tango memorabilia on the second floor, and stages a glitzy show on the first floor. This show is all tango: seductive and showy-- with its sequined costumes, gelled hairdos, and high-kicks.

We ended our trip in Abasto, the barrio where Carlos Gardel lived. Gardel, the icon of Argentine tango, is in fact not Argentine. Born in either France or Uruguay, depending on who you believe, came to Argentina as a baby at the turn of the century. He began his career singing in the bars of Abasto. His baritone voice and 3-minute tangos propelled him to recording stardom in Latin American.

Paramount Studios captured his charisma and fueled the international popularity of the tango in the USA and Paris. His early death in 1935 in a plane crash in Medellin, Colombia contributed to making him an idol. In Argentina he is revered much like Elvis Presley is in the USA.

He now rests in Charcarita Cemetery in ritzy La Rocoleta, another neighborhood and a stop on our tour. This is where Argentina's wealthy and famous—including Evita Peron - now dwell in elaborate tombs guarded by marble angles. Gardel's tomb has a life sized tuxedo clad statue. One can usually find a cigarette burning in his marble fingers, left by admiring fans.

In Abasto, one can tour the house where he lived or take in one of Buenos Aires' premier tango dinner shows at Esquina Carlos Gardel. This is where our trip ended with a show befitting our last evening. We were by now tango aficionados, if not yet experts. Esquina Carlos Gardel is a large showplace, famous with the tourists. But the dinner and dancing was excellent, and featured renowned tango "maestro" Juan Carlos Copes, as well as a dance troupe that took your breath away.

But alas, all good things must come to an end and as we said "adios" to Buenos Aires and each other, many of us planned to come back. In my case, I plan to try it out for a month to check it out for retirement. This is appealing due to its large ex-patriot community, urbane appeal, and excellent US dollar exchange rate.

And who wouldn't want to retire where you can always be dancing the tango!

Charlotte Taylor

For More information on how to join these trips visit www.dancingtrips.com or call Fabio Bonini at 703-200-4520. His upcoming events include:

In 2008:

April 29-May 05, 2008- Dance in Floripa, an island in the south of Brazil called that countries "magic island" where the biggest ballroom festival in Brazil will be held.

September 27-28, 2008- DC Dance Challenge, in Washington, D.C., where the competition will be held in the Spanish Ballroom at Glen Echo Park, listed on the National Register of Historic Places

In 2009:

Another "Tango Passion" in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but with different shows, tours and restaurants.

In 2010:

To celebrate 10 years of "Dancing Trips" at Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where it all started!