

*esquina*  
*Lomero Manzi*

# Time to Tango

If there is one floor Mike has assiduously avoided it is without doubt the tango floor... until now. By Mike Howie.





An Argentine once said to me that Elvis Presley and the military almost killed off the tango, and until recently I would have said it's a pity they didn't do a better job.

My lukewarm attitude to tango was a spinoff from the tourist scene that can overwhelm unwitting visitors to Buenos Aires. This involves fending off spruikers in Al Capone attire, begging your patronage of "a real live tango show". You'll know them when you see them: over-rouged older women in skin-tight dresses and men in tatty suits with fedoras worn at that jaunty little angle.

For the 20 years that I've been travelling to, and at times living in Latin America, I've managed to neatly pirouette around all things tango, even in the heart of tango town, Buenos Aires.

So it was entirely in the interests of research that I recently pulled on a pair of light blue, suede-soled tango shoes and stood nervously in front of Alejandro and Rosalía Barrientos the dream team charged with putting me through my very own week-long tango boiler-room.

So as a confirmed tango cynic, what can I report?

First, I did get a fleeting glimpse of what it's like to dance – no, 'feel' – the tango and I now understand why trying to master it can be simply addictive. I also discovered the tango backstory, which is utterly compelling.

This much is true. Between 1880 and the early 1900s an intense male-only clash of cultures took place in Buenos Aires. Six million European males arrived in time to meet a lost generation of young gauchos forced, as agriculture became mechanised, to look for work in the city. They were joined by a third and largely forgotten group – recently emancipated black slaves, many from Cuba. This third group remains a mystery, and the city is devoid of any trace of African culture. They were swallowed up by history, either as cannon fodder in wars against Paraguay and Uruguay, or as victims of a yellow fever epidemic.

So what's this got to do with tango?

It seems these displaced, lonely, down-at-heel males headed en masse to the houses of disrepute in search of a woman's touch. As they waited their turn they danced with each other, in the process splicing several disparate world rhythms and cultures – Latin, European and African. The result was the tango.

Some say it was about pretend knife fights played out to the lonely strum of a gaucho guitar. Certainly, those early tangos were of a physical, macho nature, with the occasional lady of the

night joining in to add a dollop of sensuality.

By the 1900s the sons of the uptown wealthy were sneaking downtown for mischief and along the way they learned the tango, taking it back to their sisters and girlfriends, and then further afield to their holiday homes in Paris.

By 1914, a male tango dancer was akin to a gangsta rapper today – mad, bad and a very dangerous influence on wholesome young females.



"If you go along to a milonga (tango hall) looking out to confirm preconceptions, you'll find them... characters in hair cream, fishnet stockings, patent-leather shoes; but if you really look, you'll see clerks, students, pensioners, snobs, little guys, skinny fellas, housewives, blondes, teenagers and bosses."

*Irene Amuchastegui, Tango Historian*

Enter Carlos Gardel, the first and greatest tango singer, who took tango from the bottom of the world to the dance parlours of Paris, New York and London. Gardel is still worshipped in Buenos Aires, where a freshly lit cigarette is placed each day between the fingers of his life-sized statue at his tomb in the Chacarita Cemetery.

Gardel set tango on a respectable course, even arranging for a male dancer to tango before the Pope. His Holiness was said



Carlos Gardel memorial



to have proclaimed, "I have no problem with this dance." From there, tango went straight into boom mode.

However, World War II saw most of the world too busy fighting to focus on tango. Only the Argentines stayed home to dance their nights away.

Enter Elvis and the military in the 1950s. Argentine youth fell completely under the spell of Elvis and rock and roll. Tango became an old folks' dance. The country also languished under a series of repressive military governments almost continuously up until the 1980s.

This proved the virtual death-knell of the tango and produced a baby-boomer generation with no idea how to dance it.

Jorge Dispari, teacher to the likes of Robert Duvall, says that in the 1950s the military didn't outlaw tango itself – they simply banned people from congregating.

"In the mid-fifties it wasn't unusual for 1000 people in a dancehall to stop at 4 am, and then couples would sneak out at ten-minute intervals until the place was empty by around 10 am."

That's when the dance slumbered, ignored by the rest of the world, until an explosive and unforeseen rebirth in 1985. A small group of weekend dancers slipped quietly into New York for a one-week engagement that turned into a five-week toast of the town.

"They left as unknowns, and came back Argentine heroes. New Yorkers were fascinated by the likes of a man, nicknamed the Wardrobe for his girth, who had a panther-like walk on the dance floor," says Octavio Maroglio. Maroglio founded the Argentine School of Tango in response to a wave of captivated foreigners whose yearning to learn resulted in the second tango boom.

"Teaching tango is new. In the past you learnt from your parents or by simply sitting in milongas and watching," says Maroglio.

The choreographer of the '85 New York show was Juan Carlos Copes, a legendary tango dancer who was seen on television in the 1970s by 10-year-old Alejandro Barrientos. When Alejandro

eventually knocked on the maestro's door and danced for him, he was promptly invited to join Copes' dance troupe.

As I stand before Alejandro and his wife Rosalía, their first piece of advice is, "Chewing gum and underarm deodorant are important tango tools."

It's soon abundantly clear why, as tango is all about the embrace, which is close and intimate at all times. It's vital that breath is fresh and underarms are sweet.

For a week I make my way to their apartment building, push the buzzer, give them time to clear their small living room of all furniture and then embark upon an hour and a half of intense body and mind exercise. Some days it's headache-inducing.

"You must lead with your chest Mike!" bellows Alejandro as I attempt to lead Rosalía, a world-class tango dancer.

In tango the man leads, directing his partner across the floor from the centre of his sternum while maintaining a smooth walk. A female tango dancer can quickly sense if this vital ingredient is lacking. It's like shaking hands with a wet fish. In tango you dance to the melody, not the rhythm, and it's the man who finds the first bar of the first eight-beat musical phrase and decides the vocabulary of steps that will take four feet on a journey across the dance floor.

"Come to Buenos Aires and if you dance tango you can have ten different women embracing you each night," says Jorge Arias, the lively owner of Tango Moda, a boutique tango clothes store in the impressive Palacio Barolo. (It's situated on Avenida de Mayo, just around the corner from where a C-grade actress named Eva met her future husband, Juan Peron).

"It's so sad you people have grown weary of the human embrace," says Jorge, relishing the story of the American woman with relationship problems whose psychiatrist sent her to Argentina to embrace men...on the tango floor.

Watch two dancers join for the first time. They'll stand still for several seconds, she with her eyes closed, while he gently shifts her weight to the foot they'll start on, then giving her ample



opportunity to throw in *anchos* (leg hook movements), *boleos* (leg swings) and *barrriadas* (leg sweeps).

I repeatedly hear, “It’s all about the embrace.” Tango teacher Jorge Firpo says the difference from other dances is the complete connection between two dancers at all times – sternum to sternum. It’s not uncommon for two dancers who’ve never met to entwine their bodies and lose themselves on the dance floor with an intimacy that can be off-putting to your average Kiwi bloke.

The contrast with tourism-targeted “show tango” is striking. Show tango is about dramatically projecting out to an audience. Real tango is about only three components: the man, the woman and the music.

The addicts, and they are many, say it’s about finding yourself in a moment of suspension where you and your partner are serene, although there’s always an inner tension.

The latest tango boom is very much in full swing. In Italy alone there are over 400 tango conferences annually, and in Buenos Aires it’s a huge industry with tango hostels, teachers, guides and even “taxi dancers” – men who escort single foreign females to milongas to dance only with them, making them feel, well, special. Warning: an abundance of teachers with questionable talent have jumped on the tourism bandwagon.

In the ascendancy are solo females from around the world who fly in to tango their hearts out. Tania Ortolania, a Swiss woman I met with one year’s tango lessons under her belt on her first visit to Buenos Aires, leads a two-week intense round of milonga-hopping till 4 am, sleeping all day, then late afternoon tango lessons.

Understandably, with the male leading the dance, it’s said to take a man three times as long to even reach an acceptable level for social dancing.

For respected teachers like Alejandro and Rosalía, the tango is an intense vocation. They teach private classes by day and group classes in the early evening before performing in a genuine tango show in Boedo. In the winter season they’ll teach in Japan or Korea – and they are still married after 10 years.

The best advice is to forget the tourist tango shows and explore the many down-home milongas where you’ll witness anything from short, fat balding men entwined with statuesque models, to a young guy with a carefully coiffured Mohawk dancing with a mature woman.

On my last day I hear a couple of Kiwi accents at an automatic teller machine. They’re from the Petone Tango Club. It’s their first time in Buenos Aires, and the last milonga they attended was held in the Tararua Tramping Club hut.

*New Zealander Mike Howie knows Buenos Aires intimately, having owned an apartment in the city for several years. He has gained not only a thorough insight into the city but also developed a great respect for its people.*

*Mike organises small-group tours to Buenos Aires for independent and inquisitive travellers.*

[www.howdybuenosaires.com](http://www.howdybuenosaires.com)

### Southern Cross Travel Insurance

For 10 days travel to Buenos Aires, Argentina (World cover) for a Southern Cross member buying online aged 70 and under, with no pre-existing medical conditions, the premium is \$95. For 10 days travel to Buenos Aires (World cover) for a Southern Cross family of two adults and two children aged 70 and under, buying online with no pre-existing medical conditions, the premium is \$180. See [www.scti.co.nz](http://www.scti.co.nz) for more information.

## Tango must-do’s:

### Confitería Ideal

An elegant 1930s-era grand milonga (dancehall) and the best place to get upfront and close to the tango. [www.confiteriaideal.com](http://www.confiteriaideal.com)

### Escuela Argentina de Tango

For a quick introduction to tango this is a good place to start, with an array of classes from “tango walking” classes upwards. [www.eatango.org](http://www.eatango.org)

### Alejandro and Rosalía Barrimientos

If you are really serious about learning tango the only way is to take private classes, preferably with a couple – one to dance with and one to critique. [www.rosaliayalejandro.com](http://www.rosaliayalejandro.com)

### Esquina Homero Manzi

Situated in the working-class neighbourhood of Boedo, this is without doubt one of the best tango shows you’ll attend and is very good value. It features the history of the tango with a live band. [www.esquinahomeromanzi.com.ar](http://www.esquinahomeromanzi.com.ar)

### Tango Moda

This is a small store on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor of Palacio Barolo and apart from the array of men’s and woman’s tango clobber it’s the view over the city which is stunning. On the first Tuesday of each month Jorge throws a small tango milonga dance. [www.tangomoda.com.ar/](http://www.tangomoda.com.ar/)

### Howdy Buenos Aires

10 day small group tours covering music, wine, food and tango in Buenos Aires. [www.howdybuenosaires.com](http://www.howdybuenosaires.com)

## Where to Tango in New Zealand

**Auckland:** [www.tangonz.org/index.php/Auckland.html](http://www.tangonz.org/index.php/Auckland.html)

**Hamilton:** Contact: [dance@planet-dance-company.com](mailto:dance@planet-dance-company.com)

**Tauranga:** [www.tangonz.org/index.php/Tauranga](http://www.tangonz.org/index.php/Tauranga)

**Taranaki:** Contact: [taranaki.salsa@gmail.com](mailto:taranaki.salsa@gmail.com)

**Manawatu:** Contact Paula: [tango.abrazo@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:tango.abrazo@yahoo.co.nz)

**Nelson:** [www.tangopassion.co.nz](http://www.tangopassion.co.nz)

**Christchurch:** Contact: [christchurch@tango.gen.nz](mailto:christchurch@tango.gen.nz)

**Geraldine:** Phone: (03) 6938066 for information.

**Dunedin:** Contact Karyn: [karyntaylor.artist@gmail.com](mailto:karyntaylor.artist@gmail.com)