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Photos: Jeroo and Gustasp Irani

# SUN, FUN and TANGO in BUENOS AIRES

*El Caminito is not just about tango but holds the soul of Buenos Aires in its dancing streets, discover Gustasp and Jeroo Irani*



Would you like to do the tango with me and have your wife take a photograph of us?" asked a dusky Latina woman, eyes flashing; raven hair swinging like a black curtain on her shoulders. As we seemed unsure of whether to take her up on her offer, she added, "It will cost you \$18..."

We were in El Caminito, the bohemian but touristy area of the La Boca neighbourhood in Buenos Aires where this sensual Latin American dance originated. The price she stated put us off and she and her partner soon drifted away to do some nubile contortions to lure other tourists. We walked along the cobble-stone streets and past the colourful corrugated iron houses and artists' studios, initially amazed that the neighbourhood's frayed air and its reputation as a tourist trap did not deter tourists from thronging to its heart.

Caminito, in a way, gave us a glimpse of Buenos Aires' soul for there was a lot of tango on display... at sidewalk cafes and street corners. Couples bent like stalks in the wind, displaying a bare shoulder here and a glimpse of a shapely leg there. Stiletos clicked and ample hips swayed — the music and rhythmic movements strumming our senses with their sheer spontaneity.

In the early years of colonial expansion in Argentina, La Boca housed African slaves. Later, in the 1830s, Italian immigrants from Genoa streamed in followed by other hopefuls from elsewhere in Europe. They lived in cramped tenements and the overlapping sounds and rhythms and intertwined lives gave birth to the tango. Factory and port workers would congregate to dance in the central halls of the tenements in order to hook the attention of the few women available at the time. The dance form evolved further in the brothels of the city and the saucy, verging-on-the-outright-sexy dance attracted an eclectic, if dubious, fan following of gangsters, prostitutes and artists. But as tango became the rage in Europe, it soon found mainstream acceptance in the city and country of its birth as well.

Today, in Buenos Aires, tango thrums everywhere, a combination of dance and song accompanied by the sob-like quality of the bandoneon, a Latin American accordion with buttons. The bustling Argentinean capital seemed to let down its collective hair as it twirled and swirled to its national dance — there were choreographed shows in historic venues, in glitzy nightclubs and cafes and in *milongas* (traditional dance halls). If you don't want to dance, book a table and watch as bodies spin and glide sometimes in the jerky contortions of the Nuevo Tango, which started in the 1990s and doesn't follow the rules of the classic tango.

We saw a show at Esquina Carlos Gardel in the Abasto neighbourhood where one of the Gods of tango, Carlos Gardel, song writer and tango singer, used to dine. (In those days, the Esquina was a restaurant). After a short movie about the history of the tango, an eye-engorging choreo-



Clockwise from left: A couple dances in a town square in San Telmo, Argentina; A giant mural depicting a tango move under a flyover in Argentina's capital Buenos Aires; A memorial outside the National Academy of Tango in Buenos Aires; Dancers sway at the Esquina Carlos Gardel.

graphed spectacle unravelled — of shimmering costumes and incredibly accomplished dancers who strutted, sashayed and swayed through all the intricate movements of this ballroom dance. The eyes of the dancers smouldered with desire and locked seemingly for an eternity; backs ramrod straight, movements occasionally studied but always with fluid grace. The dances were accompanied by melancholic lyrics that we could not understand but were told that they were about love and loss.

Buenos Aires, we found, cannot have enough of tango nor can it stop lading it out for the tourist. The dance is now on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mankind. We even saw a mural of a couple bent in a tango move on a wall near San Telmo, the capital's oldest neighbourhood. The bars there had small dance floors where professional couples danced for diners and tipplers. As other wannabe dancers joined in, we too clumsily attempted some of the seductive moves... only to retreat when someone's flying leg caught us on the shin and a portly woman whipped into us as she and her partner spun as though they had been caught in a gale! After that we were tangoed out!

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**FACT FILE**

Argentina is a great stand-alone destination and there are convenient connections via various airlines' European, Middle East and US hubs. Buenos Aires can also be done as part of a South America tour or an extension to a jaunt to the United States.

Buenos Aires has a vast choice of hotels, hostels, guest houses and rental apartments. The best time to visit is from April-June (autumn) or from September-December (spring).

For more information visit Inprotur (Argentina Tourism Board) at [www.argentina.travel/en](http://www.argentina.travel/en)