

WHEN IN SEVILLE DO AS THE LOCALS DO - OLE!

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With shoes tapping furiously and arms snaking, Lourdes circled her partner on the tiny stage in the darkened taverna. In his tight jacket and tighter pants, the male dancer upped the pace, his sweat-drenched hair momentarily obscuring the fierce self-absorption of his expression. As keening, clapping, guitar and heels reached a crescendo all eyes were trained on the dancers and 'Ole!'s filled the air.

The salsa, cha cha, samba, even the tango – as a passionate novice Latin dancer - I've given them all a go. But while I've admired flamenco from a distance, I haven't dared come closer. The intricacy and speed of the steps, the graceful wrist and arm movements alternating with the complex rhythmic clapping, I decided early on that flamenco was for experts.

Yet I couldn't get it out of my system. I never passed up an opportunity to watch flamenco and was a regular visitor to 'flamenco for dummies' web-sites. But recently my timidity faced the ultimate challenge when I found myself deep in Sacromonte, Granada's old Gypsy quarter, in a dance club known simply as Cave, or *Cueva*.

In the weeks prior I'd had no choice but to immerse myself in flamenco; it is everywhere in Andalusian Spain. I spent days meandering through the capital, Seville, where around every corner street vendors peddled flowers, fans, combs, shawls and dance shoes, while shops advertised the latest flamenco dresses. Polka dots are hot this season.

With surprising self-control, I resisted the allure. After all, I was never going to wear those clothes. But I did allow myself one treat - a huge floppy yellow flower. And I knew exactly

how it should be worn from my time up north in Toledo.

That was where, walking past El Greco's old home, I had been surprised to hear drums and tin whistles and to see a large group of people assembling under the nearby orange trees - all of them wearing flamenco outfits.

As the pilgrims, for that's what they were, climbed into carts or onto horses or joined the ranks of walkers behind an antique wagon, strewn with flowers and carrying an image of the Virgin of El Rocio, I had plenty of time to observe them in all their form-fitting finery. I realized this was the first time I'd ever seen ordinary people in flamenco costumes. Instead of the intimidatingly perfect, toned, youthful bodies I was used to seeing at exhibitions, these flamenco enthusiasts came in all shapes, sizes and ages. Apart from their traditional costumes, they looked like ordinary people in the street.

Later, at the post-procession fiesta, as the *vino tinto* began to flow, I was surprised to see that everybody, including a man with a walking frame, joined in the dance. Sure, there were experts, taking their moment to star, but most of the dancers looked content with their own inexpert idiosyncratic version of flamenco. A little voice in my ear, close to where my yellow flower would look its best, whispered 'You could do that.'

But could I? After all, these dancers were all Spaniards, born with a flamenco gene. At least that's what I understood from Kurt Grottsch, the softly-spoken, affable director of Seville's Musee de la Danse Flamenco.

A German expat, Director Grottsch used to lecture in French and Spanish culture at Nuremberg University, but for the last four years had been in thrall to Seville and flamenco. As he put it, 'At first I was a bit afraid because every single day in my job I had to listen to flamenco. But flamenco is so rich in rhythms and visual expressions and history that I never tire

of it.'

And it's that history that Director Grotsch believes has made flamenco what it is today.

We have the Gypsies to thank for the glitzy, theatrical flamenco we know and love. They were the ones who, in the late eighteenth century, brought flamenco out of the closet and onto the stage. There have also been Hindu, Greek, Castilian, Afro-Cuban and French influences – and flamenco has absorbed them all. But the hidden origins of flamenco are the most intriguing. For three hundred years prior to its outing, when the poor of Andalusia got together, they sang and clapped and danced flamenco as a release from the hardships of their everyday lives. Meanwhile, they nursed a dark secret.

When Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic Monarchs, had conquered Andalusia in 1492 they forced conversion on their Moorish, Jewish and Gypsy subjects. The infamous Spanish Inquisition was recruited to ensure that *conversos* were real Catholics and punish them harshly for backsliding.

But proving you were a real Catholic was not easy. It meant not only denying your religion, but your whole culture. The Inquisition even employed spies, dubbed 'smellers', whose job it was to roam Andalusia sniffing out alien cuisines. People spent fear-filled lives trying to keep their religious affiliation and cultural origins a secret, even from the neighbours with whom they danced every evening. This wariness and subterfuge inevitably infiltrated the developing art form.

Traditionally, male and female flamenco dancers do not touch, but stay just out of reach, and it is also common to dance in same sex groups – both conventions which enabled people of Islamic background to participate. When, today, singers exhort women to 'lower your fine dark eyes' it sounds romantic, but probably originated as a warning. Is it any wonder that flamenco is

full of angst, and that ‘Ole’, meaning ‘You are brave’, is the universal accolade?

On my way home from the museum, I wondered if perhaps it was not only flamenco’s technical complexities that had intimidated me. Maybe I’d sensed these deeper, sadder more dangerous elements? And even though I knew I could never dance flamenco like a Spaniard, I decided I couldn’t leave Andalusia without at least taking a lesson.

Looking around for schools, Taller Flamenco sounded promising. Its Anglo name suggested that I could anticipate having an English-speaking teacher. It wasn’t until I arrived that I learned ‘taller’ has nothing to do with increased height; it simply means ‘workshop’ in Spanish. But, oddly, in the end, the title wasn’t too far off the mark.

My teacher, Angelina, though technically not tall, with her erect carriage and proud expression was definitely a ‘woman of altitude’. And while her English was far superior to my Spanish, she made no concessions, obviously believing that flamenco should be taught in its native tongue.

As I laboured to synchronise arms and wrists with loudly stepping feet, my reservations about my capabilities flooded back. I quickly understood why non-Spaniards often enrol for months-long flamenco intensives. But inspired by my survival of flamenco school, I decided to end my trip on a flamenco high by attending one last show.

As I sat that evening, beneath the white-washed curved ceiling of *Cueva*’s interior and watched Lourdes and her troupe in action, the tears I blinked away were tears of awe.

When the show finished and the floor was cleared for social dancing, I sat very still, reassuring myself that there was no compulsion to dance. After all, the weight of all that history was bound to leaden my feet. But the opening bars of the familiar music proved irresistible.

I slowly tucked my flower behind my ear, and with hands firmly on hips, strode out to

join my fellow pilgrims, breathing a soft 'Ole'.