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IT TAKES TWO  
*To Tango*



# Cover Story

## It Takes Two to Tango



If by any chance you should find yourself in Buenos Aires this August, you have to get down to the World Tango Championship, which forms part of the annual **Buenos Aires Tango Festival**. The competition has been running since 2003 and involves two categories: Tango de Pista or Salon Tango, which is very strict and requires dancers to use traditional milonga moves, and Tango Escenario or Stage Tango, which is a freestyle form where anything goes. So whether you are a purist or an experimentalist, you'll find a style to your taste.

What are the roots of this most smouldering of dances? As you might expect, there's a degree of mystery and conflicting theories but the general story goes something like this. Its origins lie in the dances of slaves and freed slaves (1853) around the port area of Buenos Aires. During the following 50 years, the city experienced massive immigration from Europe, swelling its population from 180,000 to over 1.5 million. The immigrants brought dances such as the polka from Poland and the habanera from Cuba. They contributed to a spicy fusion that turned into something resembling the tango we know today. Each barrio, or district, started to develop its own style, created by the milongueros of the area.

At the turn of 1900, it was very much the exclusive preserve of the mixed race underclass but as news travelled of this exotic and risqué entertain-

ment, the rich went slumming it and brought the new dance fashion home to the social elite. From there, it was just a short time before the craze went global and the 1920s and 1930s saw the popularity of tango reach an all-time high. From 1930 through to the 1950s, Argentina went through what was described as the Golden Era and the tango could be heard on the radio and seen on movie screens all around the world. The tango's popularity was typified by 'King of the Tango,' dishy Carlos Gardel, a composer and musician. Born in Toulouse in France in 1890, he started his career in Buenos Aires performing at private parties for the well-to-do but it wasn't long before he reached national and international fame, appearing in films commissioned by Paramount. When he was killed in a plane crash in 1935, the whole world mourned.

But the tango is primarily a physical medium and Argentina has also had its fair share of dance legends. Arguably, the first of these was Carlos Estevez in the 1920s. He's better known by his nickname Petroleo, which yes, means petroleum, on account of his slick, oily movements. However, he was a traditionalist and the woman was something of a passive ragdoll in proceedings. His contemporary, Antonio Todaro, was more progressive and developed a style in which the woman had more freedom to move.





Stage Tango, or Tango Escenario, developed from being an interval entertainment to a main feature and style in itself. This is thought to be an evolution of Orillero-style tango, a street tango considered too vulgar for the salons, with its very close contact, gyrating hips and wild use of floor space. However, tango hasn't always been liberated. During the period of military rule (1976 - 1983), public gatherings were prohibited, the doors of the clubs were closed and tango went underground and into decline. Afterwards, it experienced a resurgence and now comes in a variety of forms including Fantasia, Tango Nuevo, Finnish Tango and Queer Tango. At the beginning of this millennium, a new style of music emerged fusing chillout, traditional tango rhythms and whirling soundscapes called Electrotango. One of the leading bands of this genre is Argentina's Gotan Project.

Whether it's in the form of film, music or dance, tango remains sexy and adventurous and never a style to sit on its laurels; care to dance? The next one's a tango.

And if that doesn't whet your appetite, watch this beautiful [tango dance video](#).

## Vocabulary

**It takes two to tango** - admonishing idiom, meaning it takes the active participation of both parties to create a problem situation, sometimes used in relation to pregnancy

**Milonga** - an Argentinean ballroom dance

**Freestyle** - without constraint or regulation

**Purist** - someone who believes in following traditional rules strictly

**Smouldering** - slow burning, here: with suppressed sexual emotion

**Swelling** - increasing in size

**Spicy** - strong in flavour, here: sexually exciting

**Fusion** - combination, mixture

**Resembling** - similar in look or character

**Milongueros** - men who spent their time in dance clubs

**Preserve** - limited to a few only

**Risqué** - slightly rude or shocking, sexually suggestive

**To slum (it)** - the activity of the social elite visiting places of entertainment in poor districts

**To typify** - to give a perfect example

**Dishy** - of a man, attractive, handsome

**Well-to-do** - rich

**To commission** - to order a creative piece of work

**To mourn** - to feel and demonstrate grief at the death of someone

**Slick** - skilful, smooth

**Rag doll** - a soft child's toy made from material

**Contemporary** - existing at the same time

**Interval** - a break during a performance

**Vulgar** - poor taste, crude

**Gyrating** - rotating, moving around a central point

**Hips** - the joints that connect the top of the legs to the body

**Military rule** - a state in which the army controls the government of the country

**Gathering** - the meeting of many people

**Prohibited** - forbidden, banned

**To go underground** - to operate secretly

**Resurgence** - revival, renewal of popularity

**Queer** - here: term for homosexual

**Swirling** - moving in the air in a circular movement

**Soundscapes** - a composition or atmosphere created by various sounds

**Genre** - category

**To sit on one's laurels** - idiom: to be complacent

**Care to dance?** - phrase used as an invitation to dance

**To whet your appetite** - to increase interest in or desire for something

