

# The truth about tango

Rosie Hilder debunks the elusive dance's most common myths. Illustration by Emiliano Guevara

## Tango



Tango's basic eight-step

Why do people keep nodding at each other?' 'Is it true I don't have to wear heels? And what's going on with all the miserable faces?' Such are the questions inexperienced tango dancers might find themselves asking on entering a milonga for the first time. If the elusive art of tango leaves you with more questions than your taxi driver's monologue, let *Time Out* help you sort tango fact from fiction.

### 1 'SEEN ONE, SEEN THEM ALL.'

It may take two to tango, but there are at least three ways to glide across the dancefloor. At a tango show (see p147), you'll see tango *escenario*. This is the realm of fast fancy footwork, slick choreography and multiple costume changes, and is almost the antithesis of the improvised *tango de salón* of milongas (see p145). Spinning across the floor at a milonga is far more likely to lead to crushed toes and stern looks than a round of applause. In tango halls the couple's embrace is close, feet are almost pegged to the floor and the legs do the, well, legwork. The latest movement to emerge, tango *nuevo*, is popular in modern milongas and consists of an open embrace, frequent changes of direction and a firm disregard for the rules.

### 2 'BUT IT'S SO SEXIST!'

The tango fairytale goes like this: a lonely damsel in killer heels sits on her side of the room longing for prince charming's *cabeceo* – a beady stare, chin jut or nod – in her direction. After she accepts with a ladylike nod, her knight in shiny shoes meets her on the dancefloor, holds her close and dictates her every move for the three or four songs that make up a *tanda*. In reality, the woman is not so passive. Ladies, you can ask a guy to dance by staring at him, and if his *cabeceo* doesn't impress, just say no by looking the other way. Many *tangueros* also consider the dance to be a dialogue between the couple, rather than a simple case of the man leading, but *Time Out* thinks the man still wears the metaphorical, as well as the literal, trousers. True equality exists at gay milongas (see p146), where men and women switch roles mid-*tanda* and can approach their desired partner directly – simply asking, 'Bailás?' will do.

### 3 'I'M NOT GLAMOROUS ENOUGH.'

There's no denying that when danced well, tango has the power to transform the most unlikely

contenders into a pair of demi-gods, but the required dress code largely depends on the style of milonga. At conventional halls, women always show off their assets, with some glitz and sparkle thrown in for good measure, and men wear smart shirts, straight cut trousers and classic tango shoes. If you're more comfortable in jeans, harem pants, trainers or pumps, take refuge at a modern milonga. Disappointingly, you're unlikely to see men dancing in fedora hats anywhere other than at a show, but don't let that put you off buying one, you might just reignite the trend.

### 4 'IF TANGO IS FUN, WHY DOES EVERYONE LOOK MISERABLE?'

Though you'll struggle to get a smile out of the true *tangueros* as they concentrate on their steps, it's not to say they're not enjoying themselves – most consider the dance to be the absolute height of pleasure. Professional dancers often despair of tourists' cheesy grins in take-home shots from shows, so aim for a mixture of stern, aloof and passionate if you're planning on posing. At milongas, solemnity switches to smiles and flirtatious chat after each dance, and between *tandas* it's all carefree cavorting as the music changes to jive, swing or Latin beats.

### 5 'I DON'T HAVE A PARTNER SO I CAN'T DANCE TANGO.'

Arriving with a member of the opposite sex is the easiest way to tell the room you're not available to dance, so fly solo if possible. If you must go with your partner, sit at separate tables unless you only plan to embrace each other. Also remember that there's a strong sense of community in most tango halls, and new faces (however serious) are unlikely to be called to the floor until someone else has done a test dance. You can get around this problem by hiring a **Tango Taxi Dancer** ([www.tangotaxidancers.com](http://www.tangotaxidancers.com)). The service provides an experienced dancer who'll explain what's going on in the milonga and twirl you round the dancefloor when no one else will.

Don't panic if this all seems a bit much. The best way to demystify tango is to try it yourself. There are plenty of workshops for beginners, and teachers are usually forgiving. Classes are followed by a *práctica*, where you can put your best foot forward without fear of reprisal. See the listings for more information on shows, classes and milongas.