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# The Beginner's Guide to Argentine Tango



A guide for the dancer beginning the journey of learning to dance Argentine tango.  
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## Welcome to Argentine Tango

Argentine tango has been thrilling dancers for more than 100 years. Tango is loved by dancers and audiences for its beauty, passion, drama and excitement. Learning to dance tango socially is based on improvisational movement and respecting both your partner and the other dancers on the floor. The essence of Argentine tango is about life and, especially, about the relationship between a man and a woman. Graciela Gonzales, a leading tango instructor, calls the dance "the history of love—for three minutes." In this guide, I offer a brief overview of tango history, what to expect in classes, the various types of tango danced at social events, the music, and tango etiquette. I've also included useful terms, a Beginner's checklist and some resources available through the Internet.

## Tango Yesterday and Today

The exact origins of tango—both the dance and the word itself—are lost in myth and an unrecorded history. The generally accepted theory is that in the mid-1800s, African slaves were brought to Argentina and began to influence the local culture. The word "tango" may be straightforwardly African in origin, meaning "closed place" or "reserved ground." Or it may derive from Portuguese (and from the Latin verb *tanguere*, to touch) and was picked up by Africans on the slave ships. Whatever its origin, the word "tango" acquired the standard meaning of the place where African slaves and free blacks gathered to dance.

Argentina was undergoing a massive immigration during the later part of the 1800s and early 1900s. In 1869, Buenos Aires had a population of 180,000. By 1914, its population was 1.5 million. The intermixing of African, Spanish, Italian, British, Polish, Russian and native-born Argentines resulted in a melting pot of cultures, and each borrowed dance and music from one another. Traditional polkas, waltzes and mazurkas were mixed with the popular habanera from Cuba and the candombe rhythms from Africa.

Most immigrants were single men hoping to earn their fortunes in this newly expanding country. They were typically poor and desperate, hoping to make enough money to return to Europe or bring their families to Argentina. The evolution of tango reflects their profound sense of loss and longing for the people and places they left behind.

Most likely the tango was born in African-Argentine dance venues attended by *compadritos*, young men, mostly native born and poor, who liked to dress in slouch hats, loosely tied neckerchiefs and high-heeled boots with knives tucked casually into their belts. The *compadritos* took the tango back to the *Corrales Viejos*—the slaughterhouse district of Buenos Aires—and introduced it in various low-life establishments where dancing took place: bars, dance halls and brothels. It was here that the African rhythms met the Argentine *milonga* music (a fast-paced polka) and soon new steps were invented and took hold.

Although high society looked down upon the activities in the *barrios*, well-heeled sons of the *porteño* oligarchy were not averse to slumming. Eventually, everyone found out about the tango and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the tango as both a dance and as an embryonic form of popular music had established a firm foothold in the fast-expanding city of its birth. It soon spread to provincial towns of Argentina and across the River Plate to Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, where it became as much a part of the urban culture as in Buenos Aires.

The worldwide spread of the tango came in the early 1900s when wealthy sons of Argentine society families made their way to Paris and introduced the tango into a society eager for innovation and not entirely averse to the *risqué* nature of the dance or dancing with young, wealthy Latin men. By 1913, the tango had become an international phenomenon in Paris, London and New York. There were tango teas, tango train excursions and even tango colors—most notably orange. The Argentine elite who had shunned the tango were now forced into accepting it with national pride.

The tango spread worldwide throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The dance appeared in movies and tango singers traveled the world. By the 1930s, the Golden Age of Argentina was beginning. The country became one of the ten richest nations in the world and music, poetry and culture flourished. The tango came to be a fundamental expression of Argentine culture, and the Golden Age lasted through the 1940s and 1950s.

Tango's fortunes have always been tied to economic conditions and this was very true in the 1950s. During this time, as political repression developed, lyrics reflected political feelings until they started to be banned as subversive. The dance and its music went underground as large dance venues were closed and large gatherings in general were prohibited. The tango survived in smaller, unpublicized venues and in the hearts of the people.

The necessity of going underground combined with the eventual invasion of rock and roll sent the tango into decline until the mid-1980s when the stage show *Tango Argentino* opened in Paris. Once again Paris was ground zero for igniting tango excitement worldwide. The show toured the world and stimulated a revival in Europe, North America and Japan that we are part of today.

## **Argentine Tango Basics**

Argentine tango is an improvisational dance based on the four building blocks of walking, turning, stopping and embellishments. The dance is like a puzzle that gets put together differently each time. Women and men bring their own styles and embellishments to the dance which contribute significantly to the excitement and unpredictability of the experience. Even though dancers follow certain conventions, they never quite know how someone will construct a dance, add an embellishment or interpret the music. The surprises possible within the dance are what make the dance so addicting. It really does take two to tango, because the dance isn't just about the man leading and the woman following. Both partners have important things to contribute—like all good conversations.

Tango is danced counterclockwise around a floor just like a horse race. Dancers try to stay on the outside edges of the floor and away from the center space. If you were able to look down on a tango dance floor, you'd see dancers move as if floating down a river—flowing smoothly forward sometimes and occasionally stopping for a spin in a shallow eddy.

## **Is Argentine Tango the Same as Ballroom Tango?**

No. They started out from the same roots, but location, time and the ever evolving nature of dance have made them separate dances. The American and International ballroom tangos you may see on PBS, are very different from the tango danced socially in Argentina. Argentine tango is different from the ballroom tangos in its posture, embrace, improvisation, movement, balance, steps, and music. It's completely different from the top of your head to the bottom of the soles of the shoes you dance it with.

If you have a background in ballroom tango, just think of Argentine tango as a completely new dance—not as an enhancement of the one you already know.

## **Is Argentine Tango the Stage Dance?**

Quite a few people develop an interest in dancing tango because they have seen a stage performance of tango. The tango you see on stage is related to social tango, but it is also very different. Stage tango is called "fantasia" and is more theatrical and exaggerated than social tango for the simple reason that the audience must be able to see it performed from the back row.

Watching a performance is a wonderful opportunity to see tango and (hopefully) hear a live tango orchestra. Once you've heard a bandoneon played live, you'll never forget it.

## **Attending Tango Classes**

When you're a beginning tango student, attending a class is the best way to get your bearings in the dance. Sign up and attend regularly. Every good dancer I know is good because they signed up for the first series of classes and attended all of them. Learning to dance tango is a wonderful commitment you make for yourself and consistency is as important to achieving this goal as it is for all others in your life. Signing up and coming to one class a month here and there will just be frustrating for you.

A good tango class should introduce you to the following elements of tango: walking, turning, stopping, navigation, musicality and some embellishments. Tango is a dance based on walking so you must practice this essential element. The good news is that you already know how to walk, you just need to practice taking a partner with you. All great tango dancers work on their walk. In fact, one of the best compliments a tango dancer can receive is, "Look how well he walks!" No matter how experienced the students, I've never seen a good tango teacher start a class without walking exercises.

After you've "walked your miles" you'll learn how to turn, how to stop momentarily on the floor, how to navigate a crowded floor, how to listen to and learn the various types of tango music and how to add your own signature to the dance in the form of embellishments. Because tango is an improvisational dance, you should also be exposed to that aspect of the dance as well. Tango is a dance you create on the fly with another person. It isn't about memorized steps that go together the same way every time. This is one of the most beautiful aspects of tango and is the one that makes the dance endlessly interesting.

## **Do I Need a Partner?**

You do not need a partner to start learning to dance tango. There are always a variety of people taking classes and it's unusual for everyone to come with a partner. In my experience, more people come without a partner than with. If a class has a gender imbalance, a teacher can ask people to rotate so everyone has a chance to learn. Don't let the lack of a partner stand in the way of learning.

## **Tango Teachers**

If you're lucky to live in a city with at least one tango instructor, try them out. They can be your first guides to the world of tango. In addition to teaching classes, local teachers usually help arrange (or know of) workshops with visiting instructors and opportunities to dance tango socially. If your city has more than one instructor, take several classes from all of them. Attend their practices and dances. See whose teaching and dancing style you like and whose method of instruction feels right for you. In my experience, the best tango teachers are the ones who bring out the best in you rather than try to get you to conform to a particular style (which interestingly enough is usually theirs). If you feel welcome in a class, chances are it's the right one for you.

## **Learning from Video**

If you don't have any local instruction available, there are many videos available to study. If this is your case, you will need a partner to study with. Even if you are studying by video, I recommend occasionally traveling to take classes (group or private) and attend dances to have the experience of dancing with others. You can learn much from tapes, but real hands-on experience is irreplaceable.

An extensive guide to instructional video is available at [Video Resources for the Tango Dancer](#).

## **Attending Workshops**

As you become comfortable with the important elements of tango, you may want to attend (in your own city or elsewhere) special weekend workshops that provide the opportunity to meet and learn from some of the world's best professional dancers. In addition, several week-long workshops are held in Argentina and around the world which also offer an incredible chance to combine travel with learning tango.

Visiting instructors come to town for many reasons. Find out in advance from both the local organizer and dancers if the type of instruction, the style being taught and the level of dance experience expected in the class is right for you. If the visiting instructors are offering classes for beginners, check them out. You never know who will provide just the right information to make something clear.

Early in your study of tango, you'll probably take workshops from as many different instructors as possible. Over time, however, you'll find certain instructors have a teaching and/or dancing style that fits your inclinations and you'll probably narrow down the number of people you study with. You have an amazing variety of teachers and places to dance available to you—worldwide.

## **Taking Private Lessons**

Private lessons from either local or visiting teachers are a great way to have someone evaluate and make recommendations about your own dancing. When an instructor can look at your dancing without having to look at 40 other people at the same time, you can really learn a tremendous amount. One hour of private instruction with a great dancer can save you many hours of frustration and help you avoid painful mistakes—both emotionally and physically.

My recommendation regarding spending your money on private lessons is as follows (1) start learning in group classes to see if you like tango, (2) attend group classes for at least two months to begin to master the basics, and, (3) attend milongas (tango parties) and dance and watch. Once you've done these things, then look around and see if there is a local instructor you'd like to schedule a private lesson with. Or perhaps a visiting instructor is coming you'd like to study with. Most visiting instructors teach private lessons in addition to any workshops they teach. Keep in mind that different instructors may have different requirements for private lessons (such as requiring you to bring a partner) and may be in very limited supply.

If you don't have local instruction available, traveling for private lessons is going to be one of the only ways to get personal feedback. Here my recommendations are a little different. Search around on the Internet for either local teachers nearby or teachers who may be holding a workshop in a city you're interested in visiting. Talk to everyone you can about their recommendations regarding whether the teachers are appropriate for beginners, their style, etc. Tango dancers love to talk about tango, so don't hesitate to call or email someone. Then set up a few private lessons spread out over a couple of days. Don't try to pack too much in one day—your brain needs time to understand and your muscles need time to assimilate new movements.

One word of caution about private lessons. Be wary of instructors who approach you about taking lessons from them. Some teachers love to approach beginners and try to make them believe that there is a shortcut to learning tango through private lessons with them. It's been my experience that instructors who tell you how much better you could be if only you had a few private lessons from them are usually just out for your money. There are no shortcuts. Save your money for instructors who are there to enrich your experience of tango and not their pockets.

## **Practice, Practice, Practice**

One of the most important aspects of learning tango is practicing on your own. If there are weekly practices in your city, pick one or two or three and go. If not, rent space at a studio (this usually costs about \$10-15 for a hour of practice time) or dance in your living room. I've found that regular practice is the most

important element in becoming a proficient tango dancer. It's also a good way to meet other people in the tango community who have more experience with the dance. They can be a great resource to answer questions.

## **Tango Shoes**

The search for great tango shoes is part of the fun of dancing. Tango is typically danced in shoes with leather bottoms that stay on your feet well. Shoes with straps for women and lace-up shoes for men are the most common. Women also need to wear shoes with a heel. In the beginning, open-toed shoes for women and slip-on shoes for men are usually disasters. There are shoes designed specifically for tango dancers, but your main consideration should be to find shoes that support your feet, don't squish your toes, and are comfortable enough to dance in for several hours. I don't recommend using ballroom dance shoes because they have little to no support and suede soles.

No matter what shoes you dance in, everyone should add pads to their shoes. I recommend Spenco pads because they are incredibly comfortable, resilient and long lasting. Dr Scholl's foam pads are OK, but avoid the expensive and useless blue gel-filled pads. They seem like a good idea—a waterbed for your feet—but are extremely disappointing.

For more information about [Tango Shoes](#).

For more information about [Spenco Shoe Pads](#).

## **The Family of Tango Dances**

There are actually three tango dances—each with its own music—in Argentine social dance. During the course of an evening of dancing all three will be played and danced. The first is simply tango. This is the dance most people would recognize as tango and the dance most beginners learn first. Its music is typically based on a slow, steady four-count beat. The second dance is called milonga. Milonga is a faster-paced dance based on simplified tango steps. It has much the same rhythm and feeling as a polka. Milonga music is historically older than tango music, but the dance itself is actually newer. Milonga is a dance simply for fun. The third is tango waltz, called vals or vals cruzado. Tango waltz music is based on the classic 1-2-3 of waltz, but in this type of tango, dancers typically dance on the ones.

The word "milonga" has three uses in tango. It means, (1) the dance milonga, (2) the music you dance the milonga to, and (3) a tango dance party. It's possible for you to dance a milonga to a milonga at a milonga. And believe me, that's a great thing.

## **Styles of Argentine Tango**

Within Argentine tango there are various styles you may hear people refer to. They will say, "Oh, he's milonguero dancer," or "She dances salon style." Styles are as unique as dancers and I think it's rather foolish to try to categorize either. Just remember if you hear terms like "salon," "milonguero," "fantasia," or "orillero" someone is talking about a certain style.

As with any evolving art form, trying to pin down the rules is impossible. Every day, new styles come forward and dancers find ways to play with them and incorporate them into their dance. In the past few years, styles known as *neuvo* and *liquid* have appeared. Who knows what's coming next? All we know is that it's coming.

For descriptions of the various styles see [Styles of Argentine Tango](#).

## **Tango Music**

The history of tango music is as rich and interesting as the dance. Tango music in Argentina followed much the same evolution as swing music did in the United States. It started as simple rhythms played for dancers by orchestras led by some colorful and charismatic bandleaders. Over time, simpler rhythms evolved to more complicated ones and finally edged toward more jazz-like interpretations less suitable for dancing but wonderful for listening.

Tango music is probably most distinguished from other types of music by two things: the bandoneon and the lack of drums. The bandoneon is a German instrument that looks and sounds like the offspring of an accordion and an organ. In fact, the instrument was invented to provide organ-like music to church congregations unable to afford a real organ. Like a lot of immigrants to Argentina, the bandoneon found its way into the culture and left an indelible mark on it.

You may also notice that there are no drums in tango music. The beat is kept on a bass and the lower register of the piano with (usually) bandoneons, violins and the upper register of the piano providing the fascinating rhythms.

When you start dancing tango, you'll most likely be dancing to the most rhythmic music from the 1940s and 1950s known as the Golden Age of tango. Music from the late 1930s is also great for learning how to hear the beat and feel the rhythm. As you become more experienced, later music (including that of modern tango orchestras) with its more modern jazzy rhythms becomes very interesting to interpret.

To develop your understanding of the music, you may want to consult the guide [Music for Dancers New to Argentine Tango](#). It lists the CDs best-suited for dancers first learning to hear the rhythm of Argentine tango music.

## **At the Milonga (Tango Dance Party)**

The pure joy of dancing tango is found at the milonga. A milonga refers to the event where tangos, milongas and waltzes are danced.

### **What is a Tanda?**

At a milonga, music is played in sets called "tandas." Usually three or four songs are played by the same orchestra followed by the "cortina" (the curtain) which signals the end of the tanda. If you ask someone to dance and they accept, it is assumed that it will be for the entire tanda.

Cortinas are an interesting little detail at a milonga. A cortina is unique to each DJ. Some will select one cortina for an evening and some will use a different one for each tanda. Some are humorous; some are grating on the ears; some are simply beautiful music. In any case, the cortina is supposed to be a piece of music that people know not to dance to. It's your signal to smile, say thank you and (possibly) change partners

### **How Someone Asks for a Dance**

In Argentina, men ask women to dance with a look—a certain glance, movement of the head toward the dance floor or smile that says, "Dance with me?" This can take place from far across the room if the right eyes are caught. If a woman wants to accept a dance with a man, she smiles back and (most important) keeps looking at him while he approaches her. The slightest glance away is usually interpreted as meaning "I've changed my mind and don't want to dance." This system is very wonderful and full of pitfalls. What if the asker is looking at the woman behind you? Did you really see a "yes" or a "maybe?"

Because we are caught up in this Argentine art form, the practice of asking people to dance with the eyes is also followed to some extent. In many areas of the world, however, you may ask someone to dance directly or with your best Argentine eyes. As in the dance, practice makes perfect.

### **Accepting a Dance or Saying "No, thank you"**

Accepting a dance is as simple as saying "yes." You can do this with your eyes—be on the look out for people who ask the Argentine way—or by accepting a direct invitation.

It is also perfectly acceptable to say, "No, thank you." If you accept a dance remember it will probably last for the remainder of the tanda that is playing—three or four songs if you start at the beginning. If either one of you decides that one or two dances is enough, however, either person can simply say "thank you" and begin leaving the dance floor. Once you say "thank you" to someone in a polite manner, the dance with that person is over.

### **Dancing at a Milonga as a Beginner**

As a beginner, you'll either be eager to dance with everyone or hesitant to be seen as a beginner. If you're eager to dance, go for it. Just remember that tango is danced in lanes that keep moving and the more experienced dancers tend to stay toward the outside. If you're hesitant, I can guarantee you that everyone in the room has been a beginner at one time and understands how nerve wracking it can be to look around and see everyone gliding by when you only know three movements. Even someone who has been dancing for only two weeks longer than you have will look like they've been at it for years longer. I can't explain it; it always looks like that.

The way to become a good dancer is to show up and dance. As Woody Allen once said, "98 percent of success is showing up."

## **Useful Tango Terms**

The following terms are often used to describe some of the basic elements of tango.

adornos	embellishments
amague	a fake
arrastre	a drag
barrida	a sweep
boleo	no translation (a particular embellishment that can be done high or low)
caminar	to walk—the basic walking pattern of tango
cruzada	the cross
corrida	a rhythmic run (double-time walking)
enrosque	a twisting movement during a turn
freno	a brake (blocking a foot)
gancho	a hook (a type of embellishment)
giro	a turn
lapis	literally means a pencil (to draw a circle on the floor)
mordida	literally means a "bite" (used when the feet form a sandwich)
ocho	an "eight" (part of a turn)
parada	a stop
salida	literally means "exit," but in tango it's a basic entrance to the dance
sacada	a displacement

For a more complete list of terms, see [Ed Loomis' Guide to Tango Terminology](#).

## A Beginner's Checklist

Here is a list of things you should be able to accomplish as a beginner.

### For Leaders:

1. Know how to ask someone to dance
2. Follow the line of dance and stay in your lane
3. Walk smoothly
4. Keep your own balance
5. Keep the rhythm (even at the expense of executing fancier steps)
6. Be aware of where you and others are on the floor
7. Know how to walk, turn, stop and lead a few embellishments
8. Know how to interrupt a step to keep from hitting another couple
9. Know how to put basic elements together to make a dance

### For Followers:

1. Know how to accept or decline a dance
2. Wait for the lead
3. Walk smoothly and walk to the cross well
4. Keep your own balance
5. Keep the rhythm
6. Be aware of others on the floor
7. Know how to walk, turn, stop and execute a few embellishments

Once you have mastered the elements on these lists, you are an intermediate dancer. As an intermediate dancer you will work on how to dance more improvisationally, how to improve your posture and balance, how to interpret the music on a more sophisticated level, and how to combine many basic elements to form new dance steps or perhaps create your own.

## A Few Internet Resources

[FAQ about Dancing Argentine Tango](#)  
[Video Resources for the Tango Dancer](#)  
[Argentine Tango Clothing](#)  
[Argentine Tango Shoes](#)  
[Spenco Shoe Pads](#)  
[Styles of Argentine Tango](#)  
[Guides to Tango Music for Social Dancing](#)  
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