

Strictly tango

When Lucille Howe agreed to marry her partner of seven years, it was on the condition that they see what the tango could do for their dynamic. Two lovers, one week in Buenos Aires, and a population of 15 million with dance in their DNA...

Two people need to work on improving a relationship. And, as the saying goes, it takes two to tango – which is why, at 3pm on a humid Friday afternoon in Argentina, my partner, Rama Knight, has his size-nine brogue on top of my foot in an unfortunate misstep. Rama has two left feet. I have one of each. Rama is also accommodating, easily led and erratic. I am an alpha female: controlling, eager to please and slightly neurotic. This summer, we are getting married so, before we combine our sometimes opposing temperaments, we have decided to learn to tango, in the home of the dance, in a bid to rebalance our relationship, ready for marital bliss. Easy, right?

On the outskirts of Recoleta, we meet our coach in

this transformation, the legendary and formidable, Carlos Copello – five foot, six inches of Latin intensity, passion and authority. His slicked hair, Cuban heels and tailored suit enlarge his presence. ‘He is always a gentleman,’ translates his glamorous assistant, Maria Eugenia Brandulo, who, despite her beguiling beauty, insists that she has been single for as long as she can remember. ‘Tango is my lover,’ she says, sweeping her chestnut locks to one side.

It’s clear, as soon as Copello demonstrates the basic eight-step – forward, side, together, back, cross, back, side, together – that I need to loosen the hell up. ‘Wait!’ Copello yells as he throws off my frame and paces like an angered bull. *Relax...* Forget what tango is going to bring to my relationship, it’s >>>

>>> a personal growth experience dealing with such direct criticism. The problem, as Rama notes from the sidelines, is that I'm anticipating the next move instead of allowing myself to surrender. Copello moves from the eight-step to freestyle, in which he guides my hips to help me pivot from one side to another. 'Caress the floor with your feet,' instructs Brandulo. It's a sensual dance; intense, instinctive, held in a light embrace. Surrendering is not easy and I'm secretly fighting back tears. 'Letting go' is such a vulnerable state for me, it's emotional.

Dance infiltrating life

Submitting to the tango does not mean being submissive. This is a culture, after all, that celebrates strong women, including the beloved first lady of Argentina, Eva Peron. Today, her portrait is outlined in 15 tons of iron on the Health Ministry building in the city. Her remains have been repatriated to Recoleta Cemetery, and it's here that we reflect on our dance class in the narrow alleys of the crypts, where decay and faded grandeur remind us of our impermanence. 'You don't need to try so hard,' Rama observes, as he offers to take a portrait of me against the setting sun. 'I was proud of you – you picked it up quickly.' This is a trip of firsts for us: the first time in this city, European in its sophistication and Latin in its passion; and the first time for a while learning a new skill. As I watch Rama document Buenos Aires in photographs, I'm reminded of how well he lives off his wits, how confident he is in a new place, how enthusiastic he is about new experiences. With no need to talk life admin or domestic obligations, we do a different sort of dance around each other, and it's exciting.

That night, we eat a pre-theatre meal at El Mercado, the restaurant attached to the Philippe Starck-designed hotel, La Faena, which is also where we see Copello in his Rojo Tango Show. The restaurant's style is influenced by colourful markets – retro trinkets in cabinets and an ornate ceiling, made of gold panels procured from markets in Europe. On a bike tour, we learn that a plague of yellow fever in the mid-1800s drove aristocrats into the hills, so wandering gypsies hit the jackpot with vacant, furnished mansions to occupy. Luxury fixtures and decorations were looted and sold, and you can still pick up a swag of antiques and jewellery, alongside artisan crafts and bundles of holy wood, at the city's San Telmo market.

The spirit of tango finds its way into our dining. Rama chooses the drinks and orders our food with authority. In the spirit of newness, I eat meat for the first time in months; braised beef, cooked in a mud oven and served with creamy mash. Then, it's showtime, and Dehouche, the bespoke travel firm behind our trip, have arranged seating in the orchestra pit. The experience is so sensory and visceral that, as the accordion player and double

bass player egg each other on with playful phrasing, I brush Rama's arm with my nails. As professional dancers tangle their limbs and cut the air with legs like switchblades – tango, after all, was supposedly based on a knife fight between male rivals – I can see couples in the audience being affectionate. It's a sexy dance.

Rama is itching to learn to tango, too. 'I don't really have a dance sensibility,' he says as a disclaimer, 'but it's time I got in the driving seat.' What he lacks in coordination, he makes up for in bravado. 'This dance is for a man's man!' he boasts, as he tries to keep pace with Brandulo. We agree it's not in the British culture to be so close to our partner without an apology, but Rama is tactile by nature and, when I'm inserted as his partner, I feel safe in his hold. Finally, we're dancing together and, while I'd like

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to say we seamlessly transfer from one step to the next in perfect synchronisation, we are, in fact, all over the place. While Copello despairs, we laugh and try harder. It's testament to our confidence in our relationship that we don't read this failure as a sign of incompatibility: I love that Rama doesn't take himself too seriously, and I can be a patient teacher.

'I want to buy you tango shoes,' Rama later insists. Who am I to argue? Brandulo takes us to a store that sells the Maleva brand, and

Rama looks on as she wraps the patent straps around my ankles. Shoes are a time-honoured fetish and, since they caress the floor, hook your partner's thigh, and display the arch of the instep so coquettishly, we can't help but flirt over the act of choosing them.

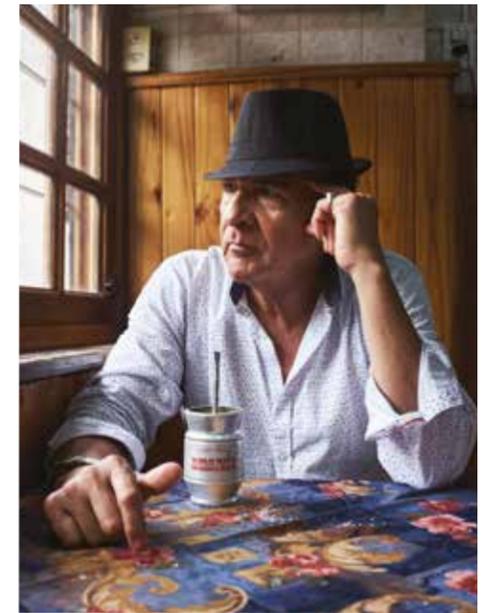
In sync and in love

On our last night, we're torn between traditional melonga, or tango dance hall, and a tip-off from staff at our stylish hotel, Hub Porteno. We go with the inside info and hit a show called La Bomba de Tiempo at the hip Konex theatre. In this performance, 17 percussionists respond to 70 coded signs from the conductor in an improvised riot of rhythm. Now that Rama and I are attuned, we pick up on each other's moves: when we slow, when we speed. It's tribal and intoxicating. Three hours of athletic dance is like 12 hours of therapy, and the endorphins leave us grinning like idiots.

Whether it's tango, tribal or tiptoeing around an issue, we all dance around each other daily. It may be the most open and honest way of communicating. Tango taught us to celebrate our genders and listen to each other's bodies, but the experience and vulnerability of learning a new skill revealed our most authentic selves – and that's who we fell in love with after all.

- With thanks to Dehouche, a British-run travel specialist, with offices in Brazil and Argentina, that offers personalised experiences of South America. For more information, call 0871 284 7770, email info@dehouche.com and visit dehouche.com
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Passion and professionalism in the Rojo Tango Show at La Faena hotel; the city of Buenos Aires is awash with images relating to its iconic dance; coach Carlos Copello cuts a figure of Latin intensity as he takes a break for a mate, the traditional South American tea; many of the city's pretty townhouses have a new lease of life as dance schools; resident dancers tempt diners to the city's many restaurants; Lucille learns from the master himself; it's a colourful city in more ways than one; street art pays homage to the tango

