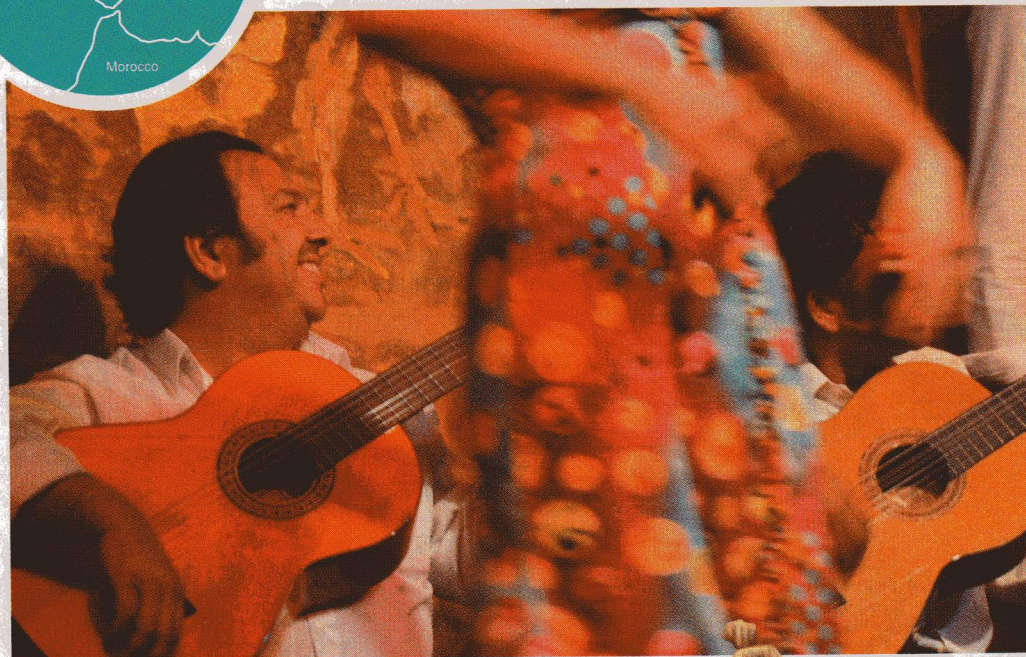


First-class stamps



Seville isn't just one of Spain's most beautiful cities – as flamenco's spiritual home, it's also the most vibrant.

Helen Ochyra (pictured below) learns how to twirl and stomp with the best of them



A string and a prayer *Los Gallos (above) offers great music and atmosphere as Helen practises (below)*

The balls of my feet are flaming, my thighs are tense and a filmy skin of sweat is forming across my back and shoulders. The feeble fan whirring away in the corner does nothing to cool me down as seven pairs of red-rub feet drum a rhythm on the hard wood floor and one pair of firm, unyielding palms insistently claps out the beat. This is my first flamenco class. And it hurts.

Flamenco is all about the *compás*: rhythmic cycles that underpin the music and around which dancers improvise their movement. But this improvisation is not, despite what blasé, shoulder-shrugging Sevillanos may have you believe, something that comes naturally. Flamenco dancing is fiendishly difficult and requires much practice.

Seville, home to more flamenco schools than anywhere else in Spain, and to a genuine, gritty flamenco bar scene, is the ideal place to be initiated. At Taller Flamenco we learn the fundamentals, beginning with a warm-up that stretches muscles I

hadn't considered important, including each finger in turn. The beginner's class imparts the coordination required to make flamenco appear effortless. Some chance.

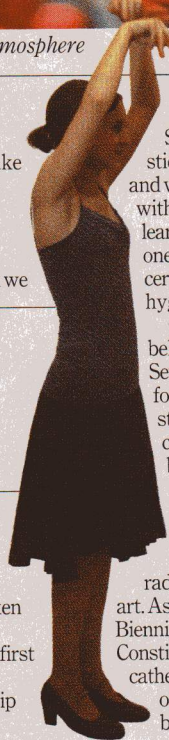
Our teacher, Carmen Rasero, claps her hands along with the music, providing a beat to which we

Flamenco is taking over the city

start basic footwork. We learn the three main steps – *golpe*, *medio* and *tacón* (stomp, half and heel) – which form the basis of all that showy footwork. Broken down like this, it is fairly straightforward, and before the first hour is up we are all dancing a basic fandango (a lively courtship dance) more or less in unison.

We are also all looking rather less than gorgeous. Sweaty socks are peeled from sticky feet and hairstyles are wet and wild as we look at each other with slack, glistening faces. We've learned flamenco lesson number one: it isn't pretty. And it is certainly not a friend to personal hygiene.

On leaving the school, I feel I belong just a little bit more to Seville – and vice versa. I search for signs of the dance in the streets. But flamenco is like a rip current, invisible at first as you bob along Seville's architecturally splendid surface – yet its force is definitely there, in the way people move, in the heat, on the radio in cabs you take and in street art. As part of this year's Flamenco Biennial, the *Avenida de la Constitución*, which skirts the stately cathedral, was dressed in billboards of some of Ruven Afanador's bordering-on-disturbing photos.



Featuring large Spanish ladies gesticulating wildly at the sky, pouting with dark, lipstick-stained mouths and surrendering themselves to an invisible but potent rhythm, this is flamenco also as form, as style, as icon.

Flamenco hides away in the Thursday morning flea market on Calle Feria. It looks like a junk sale, but among the knock-off DVDs, gaming paraphernalia and household accoutrements, a flounce of ruffled skirt peaks through. Look a little closer, and you notice local women behind the stalls trying frilly flamenco dresses over their jeans and T-shirts, twirling in front of streetside mirrors to check out the fit. Flamenco-inspired fashion is integral to Andalucía, and not only in the dresses you will see swirling above the stamping feet at the tourist *tablaos*. There is a new generation of flamenco fashions, pushing the limits of tradition and stirring up the conservative Sevillanos.

Cultural baggage



■ Music

Mujeres Flamencas, Various Artists, K Industria An evocative selection of female flamenco artists; tracks by La Nitra, La Tobala, Maya and La Niña de los Peines.

■ Film

Carmen, Carlos Saura Saura's 'opera within an opera' version, with a dramatic subplot exploring the lives of the actors.

■ Literature

Song of the Outcasts: An Introduction to Flamenco, Robin Totton **Amadeus Press** An entertaining, informative beginner's guide to all things flamenco.



A fan of fans at Juan Foronda (inset), one of Ruven Afandor's stunning street ads (above) and Casa Placido (top right)

Carmen tells me that what we learn in class is the traditional form of flamenco. 'What people dance in the bars and listen to at home is a more modern, popular form called *rumba flamenca*.' She explains that it is influenced by the Cuban rumba, brought back to Spain in the nineteenth century, and it has a slower tempo than the fandango or the super-fast *bulerias*, which encourages speed and agility with its double-quick meter, and sometimes incorporates drums. It is less conventional and far freer in form. It is said that after a couple of glasses of wine, anyone can dance the *rumba flamenca*. Given my earlier performance (and the state of my aching limbs), I'm not so sure.

Post-siesta – after all the hardcore exercise it's a custom I gladly adopt – I venture out into the city to try to catch that most elusive of Sevillian sights: an impromptu flamenco performance. It's not something you can plan for, nor can you expect to turn up at the 'right' time. Your best bet is not even to try until midnight. Then you should head to one of the bars that despite making it on to the tourist trail (meaning you have some hope of actually finding it) is still packed with locals ready to dance.

Casa Anselma in the trendy Triana district on the other side of the Guadalquivir River, doesn't even pretend to run to a schedule, so I show up after dinner and enjoy a glass or two of red wine while waiting for things to kick off. It's small and cramped, so I sit at 'the back' – six feet from the stage – against the tiled walls and listen to the brooding, imposing Anselma, dark-haired and serious, singing a haunting tune.

The way she pours out passion and wraps herself in mystery makes me feel hopelessly foreign. I feel I'm

imposing on this most Spanish of atmospheres. But as the night wears on and the bar fills up with twirling dark-haired Sevillanos who take to the floor, the atmosphere loosens up – and so do I. The previously languid crowd starts to react to the thrum of the guitar and the dancers' untiring footwork, and, as I down more and more of the cheap local *tinto*, I can't stop myself from moving as part of the crowd. High-spirited locals, at ease with the rhythm, put on a gutsy, gleeful display, and I realise that flamenco is not an impenetrable phenomenon, but, rather, an open and democratic forum for self-expression.

I don't, though, take to the floor. I am still an *aprendiz*, a novice, and I am not yet ready for my induction into this dark and turbulent world. I decide tonight is not the night, and end the evening



Seville from Triana

unsullied. When they say anyone can dance the *rumba flamenca*, they must mean anyone brave enough. When the show winds down, I return to the streets. I don't know if it's the intimacy of the venue or the intake of wine, but flamenco seems to be taking over the city. People spill out of bars still throbbing to claps, stamps and screams of '*¡Ayayay!*' and '*¡Olé!*'. A group of teenagers gather in a dusty tree-lined square around a pair of chicos strumming guitars in the manner of a friendly duel. A pair of women of a certain age cluster in an open doorway lazily stamping a rhythm while swapping gossip.

I arrive bright eyed and surprisingly loose of limb for the next morning's class. The chunky heels which had seemed cumbersome before now seem tailor-made, thrusting my hips forward and my curves out. My thighs seem stronger thanks to yesterday's workout, and I have stripped down my attire to better deal with the heat.

At first I grapple with my feet while my arms hang impotently in the air above my head. I am not living up to my sexy shoes. 'The problem isn't your footwork, it's when you think too much about your footwork,' Carmen tells me. Trying to take her advice, I stop thinking in the present and allow my mind to drift back to the night before. I travel in my head and, finally, I find my feet. They seem to have memorised some steps, leaving my arms free to master their twirling movements.

I forget all about learning a routine, and simply enjoy the dancing. I march across the floor, feet stamping, arms circling and skirt swinging. The classroom is dimly lit, almost sepia. I've still got wine in my veins. I catch sight of myself in the mirror. I look every inch the vibrant, stomping flamenco señorita.

Seville info



Getting there

Ebookers has flights with Iberia to Seville from £189 return.



Sleep

Taller Flamenco can arrange homestays from €40 a night (see below).



Eat

Casa Placido C/Mesón del Moro 5 (+34 954 56 39 71). Open daily 12noon-4pm and 8pm-12midnight. Meal for two with wine: around €20



Dance

Taller Flamenco C/Peral 49 (+34 954 56 42 34 / tallerflamenco.com).
Escuela Flamenca Juan Polvillo C/Castellar (+34 71 954 90 91 15 / escuelaflamenca.com).
Casa Anselma C/Pagés del Corro 49 (no phone).
Juan Foronda C/Sierpes 33 (+34 954 22 76 61) Combs, fans, shawls and flamenco gear.
La Carboneria C/Levies 18 (+34 954 22 99 45).
Los Gallos (Pza. de Sta. Cruz 11, +34 954 21 69 81, tablaolosalgallos.com)



More info

See the latest edition of 'Time Out Seville & Andalucía' (Ebury, £8.99 from timeout.com/shop).

