

Form of revolt, means of artistic expression, zone for gender equality, and also a possible cousin of our very own kathak... can one dance take on so many shades? Once you check out the world of flamenco, you'll realise it is no less than a prism.

■ BY KALPANA SUNDER

# Flamboyant Flamenco



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Opening images: Flamenco is a colourful and vivacious display of intelligent technique, graceful movements, and of course, poignant emotions, fuelling your desire to hit the dance floor or stage!

Right: The city of Seville in Andalusia, Spain. Andalusia is known as the birthplace of flamenco.

Below: A pair of flamenco shoes, especially crafted to get the 'tapping' effect.

Bottom: Clapping is one of the most integral elements of flamenco dancing.

The raw, earthy voice of the singer surrounds us with its sensual, sorrowful lament. The spotlight falls on the woman as she lifts her skirt and twirls around, using her hands to anchor herself. The hand clapping and the rhythmic beat have us almost jumping to our feet. In the flickering shadows of candles, we are caught in the emotion and energy of the moment. We are at the swish La Carboneras in Madrid, a *tablao* — flamenco club — which is decorated in red and black, with paintings of dancers on the walls. Joanna Wivell, our guide from Insider's Madrid, talks about how she learnt flamenco from her Spanish teacher in Andalusia many years ago in return for English classes! Joanna says, "What I like about flamenco is the scope to improvise, the silence as much as the sound, the holding back as much as the expression, and the space to define your own style."

## ORIGINS AND ELEMENTS

Flamenco has its roots in Andalusia in southern Spain and probably in the gypsy people called *Gitanos*, who are said to have migrated from northern India and Arabia. It was an outlet for



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the oppressed locals who suffered persecution and hardships during the 9th to the 14th centuries under the Arab rule and the Spanish Inquisition. Moreover, the rhythms of North Africa were brought to Europe by the Moors. In 2010, flamenco was included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Flamenco has four important elements: the singing (*cante*), the dancing (*baile*), the playing of the guitar (*toque*), and the clapping and stomping (*palmas*). There are many forms and variations within the dance. The actual performance is interplay between all these elements and a rare moment when everything fuses and harmonises — what the Spanish call '*duende*'. *Duende* is flamenco's soul, when the dancer is possessed by the song and that energy opens up to anyone in the audience. I understand that, for men, the footwork is more important, and for women,



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Clockwise from top left:

Well-choreographed footwork and hand movements effectively bring out what is intended to be conveyed through a flamenco act.

The guitar is the life of a flamenco performance. Also seen here is a pair of castanets in each of the woman's hands.

The twirling of the dancer's skirt further adds to flamenco's elaborateness.

the hands take on a greater role. Traditionally, flamenco artists never received any formal training; they learnt the dance by watching their relatives and friends perform.

**PERSONIFYING GRACE AND POISE**

First on stage is Anna, a sensuous olive-skinned dancer with flowers in her hair and large loop earrings, who lived in Australia till she was 14. She performs her movements with grace, and as she picks up momentum, the encouragement from her friends spurs her on to greater heights. Fellow performers stomp and clap to the raucous beat as her moves become wilder and wilder. Like a woman possessed, she taps her feet and uses her hands to anchor herself, her face breaking out in sweat, her hair coming undone. Her expression shows pure rage one second and segues into exuberance in the next as she pounds the stage like she wants to break it! Next comes her companion Karen, a dark and dusky Mexican whose style is completely



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different: more sensuous and more meditative, as if she were conversing with herself. The lone male dancer in a white ruffled shirt holds his torso absolutely straight as he takes the floor and mesmerises us with his footwork. Most apparent is the chemistry and interaction between the singers, the dancers, and the musicians. I love the spontaneity of the performance and the verbal encouragement they get from their companions in the form of "que toma, que toma!" and "olé!"

Joanna educates us on the nuts and bolts of flamenco over platters of tapas and sangria. The dance conveys a gamut of emotions: It can be an *alegría* expressing happiness or merriment, or a flashy *bulería* — flippant and frivolous, often teasing — or it can just be *soleá*, full of anguish and despair. The mood can change from minute to minute, as if the dancer decides she won't be sad anymore and so she breaks into a joyous melody! The stories that the dance portrays could be of birth, death, lost love, day-to-day life, grief, or celebration. There is technique to flamenco: The tips of the shoes have nails hammered into them to produce the tapping sounds. A number



**FLAMENCO HAS A GREAT SIMILARITY TO KATHAK, WHICH, TOO, USES THE SHARP ANGLES OF THE BODY AND ARMS AS WELL AS THE BARREL TURNS.**

of flamenco's elements are onomatopoeic — derived from the sound of the blacksmith's anvil, the rhythms of horse's hooves, or the hoarse cries of vendors selling fish.

**FLAMENCO OUTSIDE SPAIN**


I am intrigued by flamenco's Indian connections. It has a great similarity to kathak, which, too, uses the sharp angles of the body and arms as well as the barrel turns. Arturo Ortiz, tourism counsellor at the Spanish Embassy, follows the Indian thread, telling me about the Maharaja of Kapurthala, who fell for a flamenco dancer called Anita Delgado in 1906. Eighteen years later, after many travels in India and Europe, a diary written, and disappointments and torrid affairs (one with the Maharaja's son), she returned to Europe.

Arturo narrates his hilarious endeavour to learn Flamenco when he was posted in Russia and how he gave up because he was "too clumsy". We speak about flamenco being a female domain and the male dancer being secondary to that. Joanna disagrees; she tells us about the time she took a group of English women to a flamenco show that had a slim male dancer in a ruffled shirt and a pair of jeans. After the show, one of the women came up to Joanna and told her, "I

**FASCINATING FLAMENCO FACTS**

- Did you know that, in 1997, a national competition was organised by the provincial governments in Spain, along with accredited flamenco clubs, for imprisoned convicts? More than 150 inmates participated, and the ultimate prize was a cash reward and a reduction in their sentence!
- The genesis of the word 'flamenco' is attributed to different sources. Some say it is connected with the Spanish word for the elegant flamingo bird. Others believe it has been derived from the word 'flemenc', which has the same meaning as 'gypsy'.
- The time span from 1869 to 1910 is dubbed as the golden age of flamenco. During this period, flamenco music and dancing grew at music cafés (*café cantantes*) for public shows.

don't think I have ever seen a pair of jeans look so good!"

The lights come on. The dancers are back in their ordinary clothes and celebrating the night with a toast as we chat with them. The energy and power of the performance stay with us for a long time, even after we have left the *tablaó*. I remember poet Manuel Machado's words, "Flamenco is to love and live, to understand and smile, at this and that, and something which is beyond." 

**WHERE TO WATCH FLAMENCO**

- Las Carboneras Tablao Flamenco in Madrid (Calle del Conde de Miranda 1, Madrid de los Austrias; Tel: +34-91-542 86 77; [www.tablaolascarboneras.com](http://www.tablaolascarboneras.com)) is a great platform for young talent.
- Espacio Flamenco (Ribera de Curtidores, 26 Madrid; Tel: +34-91-298 19 55) is recommended for stylish evening performances.
- Take Insider's Madrid's 'Flamenco Uncovered' tour, which offers various options, from flamenco lessons to guided visits to flamenco clubs. Visit [www.insidersmadrid.com](http://www.insidersmadrid.com).

Top: Flamenco is not primarily a feminine dance. Men, too, can occupy centre stage during a performance.