

## The Arts

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### In Search of the "Real" Flamenco

Flamenco has become a beloved dance form world-wide. In the west we are familiar with flamenco as a dance that includes heel stomping, hand clapping, finger snapping and lots and lots of Attitude... with a capital A. But what do we really know about it? September is the annual flamenco festival in Andalucía, the home of flamenco, and we were fortunate enough to be touring around and visiting small towns in the region. (See [Andalucía](#) in Destinations).



Flamenco is not just dance; it is the joining together of three major forms of artistic expression from vastly divergent cultures incorporated into one – singing (Cante), music (Toque for guitar playing), dancing (Baile). There is also clapping (Tapoteo) foot tapping (Zapoteo) vocalizations (Jaleo) finger snapping (Pitos).

Jews arrived in Northern Spain as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century and migrated southward into Andalucía. They brought with them their wailing intonations, complex vocalizations, and exuberant dancing by males and females separately. The men especially performed wild stomping and leaping as the music increased in tempo. The women tended to circle dancing with occasionally women taking the center to perform spontaneous movements. Spanish Jews are called Sephardic from the Hebrew name of Spain: Separad.

The Romani people or Gypsies migrated from Rajasthan in Northwest India and settled in Iberia starting in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They brought with them the nomadic tradition of sitting around a camp fire after the days work was done to socialize and recant their stories. Eventually the stories were sung and to keep time, hands were clapped or drummed on hard surfaces. Barefoot young girls would dance around the fire swirling their skirts and the entire family would join in. In Romani tradition young women were hands off to ensure their virginity until married and so when men joined the dance there was no touching; hands were often held behind their backs, and only the eyes could lock on their dancing partner to express their passion. Spanish Gypsies were called Gitanos or Jitanos.

When the Moors invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 711A.D, as often happens between conquerors and conquered, the best of both worlds came together in a cultural epiphany. In fabled Andalucía, where the Moors held sway for some 800 years, east melded with west in perfect synchronicity. Around 822 A.D. one of the most famous Moorish singers, Ziryab (the blackbird) introduced the guitar and other string instruments to Iberia.



Here an exotic stew of Gypsy, Jewish, Moorish and Christian peoples became one integrated culture that existed in (more or less) peaceful coalition for eight centuries and achieved extraordinary heights in art and science... hence the exotic, thrilling Flamenco we know today as well as magnificent architecture, impressive gardens, world-class artists, unique gastronomy, to name just a few artistic achievements. The scientific advances are far too numerous to mention here.



Lebrija is a small traditional town just outside of Seville and is considered the cradle of flamenco. Lebrija is a typical charming town with all streets leading down to the central square and the City Hall. Two major families populated the town – Peña and Malena –with each developing their own style of flamenco. Moorish style of construction was a square outer building with a central courtyard often times with a pool or fountain and gardens to cool down the intense Iberian summers. So instead of a camp fire, families now gathered around a courtyard fountain for their evening get-togethers. We visited such a house and saw where the family would gather and entertain themselves and friends in the privacy of their own courtyard. In Lebrija we also walked through a local craft market and watched traditional pottery-making at a local factory.



Another small town near Seville is Arahál, with a long tradition of flamenco. Here we visited the Museum of Women in Flamenco with a fascinating presentation of the “greats” of flamenco. It is a new museum and so far all descriptions are in Spanish but there are already plans to enlarge the collection and add language descriptions for the tourists who are sure to visit. After the museum we went to a local bar “Bodega Mazaroca” for a sumptuous lunch of local specialties. For dessert we were treated to an informal vocal performance by beautiful young Rosario Muñoz Casado accompanied by 15 year old David Rodríguez on guitar. David is destined to be the next “great” flamenco guitarist we were informed, and after their performance we could see why. We also enjoyed the more seasoned performances by Pepe “El De los Cavales” on guitar and Paco Esquivel singing.



The most famous flamenco performers are Gitanos, known for their power and passion, such as the performers from Peña Flamenco. They bring to their art the oppressed minorities' expression of deep personal grief and the lament of persecuted ethnicities. Gitano flamencos regard the Cante Jondo (profound or deep song) as a form of prayer with the object of achieving the state of "Duende" an intensely focused trance-like state of emotion. Federico Garcia Lorca in 1933 described it as "Los Sonidos Negros" or the dark sounds. Watching such a performance elevates the viewer almost into a state of ecstasy. The Baile Grande is a profound dance that closely resembles classical Hindu movements which the Romani brought with them from the Indian subcontinent.



For the flamenco aficionado Seville is the heart of the action. Begin with a visit to the Museum of Flamenco [www.museoflamenco.com](http://www.museoflamenco.com) where you will learn about the 7 principal styles. Alegria: happiness. Seguirilla: death, deep hurt. Soleá: loneliness. Tango: passion. Guajira: sensuality. Farruca: elegance. Buleria: seduction. You will also see screens of famous dancers and some of the original outfits they performed in. Proceed down to the theatre where you will have a live performance with singer, guitarist and dancers. It is an intimate authentic setting, so do not be shocked when the dancers spin and sweat spirals off of them onto the audience.



Every two years Seville has a flamenco festival (la Bienal De Flamenco) and since we were visiting this year we were able to catch a couple of performances at Teatro Central. We saw one experimental performance by Flamenco Big Band with well-known flamenco guitarist Gerardo Nunez. Frankly it was not my cup of tea as I much prefer traditional canto. We also saw Bayles de Jitanos with Compañia, Antonio Molina and 'El Choro' a dynamic performance and a very enjoyable night.

As I can never get enough flamenco I intend to catch the action in New York for the annual festival in February.

With great thanks to the Tourism Office of Spain [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info) as well as the Tourist Board of Andalucía [www.andalucia.com](http://www.andalucia.com).

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