

Dance in Cuba!

Part I: Matanzas, Cuba

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Before leaving on the trip, Hannah held a short workshop for us girls to get to know a few basic folkloric steps and rhythms. If such a small taste thrown at us then felt foreign, we were in for a real culture shock when we arrived in Cuba!

As soon as we arrived in Matanzas, were settled into our casas and fully refreshed by a unique Cuban dinner, each group of girls would walk from their respective casas to the center of all of our activities at the home of two very hospitable Cubans. Salsa classes took place in the evening under the stars out in the courtyard of the casa with a group of local professional dancers. There were enough men and boys to partner all of us girls on the first night and a few women available to teach us the more feminine movements of the upper body, which would then impact the movement of the hips. During our first lesson we learned the basic traditional Cuban salsa step, which really took most of the evening. It was quite a shock for each one of us girls, who are dancing at the advanced levels at McDonald Wilson, to find ourselves in a beginner type role! As soon as the basic steps, counts and pauses began to flow naturally from our bodies we were able to focus on the more subtle movements of the body. These subtleties seemed so technical to us, however the movement was so natural for the Cubans, a feeling that was born within them was going to take us a lot of practice and repetition. After spending some time on basic salsa steps on the spot, we were able to partner with the men and women for the second half of the class to experience partner dancing and being lead by a professional. If we weren't strictly dancing with one partner, we would all get into a circle, with our partner for the moment, and then after a few steps travelling around in the circle the men would rotate and we would find ourselves with a new partner. This method of teaching was an excellent way to experience each professional's unique, personalized style of dance. Each professional had a different means of moving their hips and feet, chest and shoulders and their hold. Such differences in their styles demonstrated the fact that there isn't one single way to dance the salsa and one should take the basic steps and other combinations and make them their own. Our second night of salsa lessons we warmed up with the basics, added a few turns and flavour to make small combinations and spent a lot of time dancing two at a time, each girl would dance in the center of a circle with a pro to show off her new found skills. We were also treated to a few demonstrations by the professionals and Hannah as well which were exceptional and gave us something to aspire to!

Since our evenings were spent salsa dancing in the warm heat, the even warmer days were spent in the local studio space of Matanzas professional folkloric group learning Afro-Cuban and rhumba styles. Our daily classes consisted of Afro-Cuban dances and rhumba drumming. The folkloric dances we experienced on day one were to be danced for two different Orishas (Gods/deities). One was a masculine dance for Ogún, the Orisha of iron, war and labour, who clears a path through the forest with his machete. We would move forward down the room in rows taking small basic steps focussing on the masculine bush-whacking movements of the arm with our machete while keeping the rhythm in our chests and shoulders. The second dance was for Oshún, a popular, beautiful Orisha who is seductive and fertile. This dance consisted of the same basic Afro-Cuban steps from side to side however every few counts we would add a turn or

stay on the spot to accentuate the sensual hip movements. This Orisha has a flirtatious laugh; therefore the professionals would encourage us to laugh as we were dancing. Each time the rows would dance down the room, the professionals were always ready to jump in and mirror you so that their movements would become contagious and we would pick up on a certain way of using our chests and arms. Since there was somewhat of a language barrier, a simple thumbs up and a smile from one of the pros meant the world to us girls for our interpretations of the dance were making them proud. On the second day of folkloric dance, we learned the dance for the Orisha Yemayá, older sister to Oshún. This dance was very similar to the other female deity, very feminine with movement of the hips and great usage of the long, traditional folkloric skirts we would wear. This third Orisha concluded the Afro-Cuban dances we would learn in Matanzas however we would go on to learn Oyá (ruler of wind) and Chango (ruler of lightning, fire, dance and drums) in Havana. After two hours of dancing during the daytime we would take one hour to learn rhumba drumming. These rhythms were the ones we first heard in our workshop with Hannah before leaving Calgary, they were certainly different to listen to and try to seek out the rhythm and drumming them was not much different! There are at least four different rhythms occurring at one time during a song which made it very difficult to concentrate on the specific beat you were drumming. In the end, each rhythm came together to form a marvellous piece of music. Once our three days of drumming were up we had found our rhythm and sounded almost as good as the professionals playing live for us each class! On our last day of dancing in Matanzas we began learning the rhumba which we had been drumming for the previous two days. We learned two of three rhumba styles, the oldest known style Yambu, a slower female solo dance, and Guaguanco, a faster complex duet. During Yambu, the women perform the slower basic step with turns and hip circle movements while the men watch on and flirt. We would gather in a circle to perform these steps on our own then as we changed our movement we would draw another girl into the circle to change places. During Guaguanco, the rhumba basic step speeds up and the woman uses a scarf or her long skirt to protect her from the vaccination of the man by whipping his sexual energy away as they flirtatiously dance around each other. The goal of the male in this dance is to catch the female off guard with his pelvic movements and striking of his hand or scarf.

This amazing cultural dancing experience in the side streets of Matanzas sadly came to an exhausting end after three and a half days, but would soon be expanded as we were about to continue on with lessons in vibrant Havana...