A treat for your feet

Samantha Whitaker puts on her dancing shoes and finds the best places in London to learn Latin and ballroom dance



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GETTING INTIMATE: A couple perform the tango, an emotionally-charged Argentine ballroom dance that was 'beautified' for the courts in Paris and London

"If you can walk backwards, forwards and side to side, then you can dance," says *Strictly Come Dancing* judge Len Goodman. So why is it that, although keen, many people are too scared to take that first step into a dance school? Latin and ballroom teacher Sylvia Overton believes it stems from our inherent shyness at being face-to-face with another person. She works to overcome this initial discomfort, and says that dance can be a "tool for communication" that brings people together.

Sylvia teaches beginners in groups of 20-25 for one hour a week as part of a 10-week course in either Latin (cha-cha-cha, rumba, jive, samba and paso doble) or ballroom (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, tango and Viennese waltz). The courses are currently held at studios in Chelsea and Belgravia. She also coaches professional couples and brings the same sense of precision and care to her beginners' classes so that her pupils learn correctly right from the start. "Dancing is wonderful for giving people confidence in themselves," she says, and as the course progresses she sees a noticeable change in her pupils as their confidence and posture improve. Many even begin to dress more smartly, and look and feel more attractive. Men, in particular, enjoy the chance to regain control and take the lead.

At the Kensington Dance Studio, five minutes from South Kensington Tube station, co-directors Kele Baker and Ralf Schiller recommend their Wednesday drop-in class for absolute beginners. It costs £10 per session (reduced if bought in bulk) and there is no need to book. Over the course of the evening, beginner, intermediate and then advanced pupils are taught in the richly decorated ballroom studio, complete with candelabras and a glitter ball, ending with a social dance session for all levels to practise what they have learnt.

Beginners are taught two dances – one ballroom, one Latin. The session begins with a demonstration from the teacher and assistant, who then teach the basic steps. Eventually everyone pairs up and practises together, changing partners frequently. At the class I saw, the first of 2009, the ballroom was packed full of couples and single dancers aged 20-60, with an almost equal ratio of men to women.

Kele and Ralph, along with a host of assistant and guest teachers, including *Strictly...*'s Camilla Dallerup and Ian Waite, also offer four-week courses at each level, beginners crash courses on which four different dances are taught in just three hours, and 'Strictly Sunday' workshops. On Thursdays, up to eight private lessons take place at one time in the studio, including wedding dance lessons, which come in packages of five or seven sessions.

In South London, at a church community hall near Wimbledon, ACW Dance Studio teach drop-in sessions for beginners on Mondays and Fridays. Principal Alan Wake, along with a team of around 10 teachers, encourages pupils to attend regularly if they want to progress. The class is split into two groups – absolute beginners and improvers – and after a Latin line dance to warm up, both groups work on one or two dances. There is a good ratio of men to women, and the average age is around 40-55, although there was a keen group of teens at the Friday session I attended.

The Monday and Friday sessions are usually different, to cater for those who want to come to both, with around 35-40 people attending. Friday's session is followed by a two-hour social dance, with disco lights, a glitter ball and teachers on hand to instruct. Soft drinks are served and dancers can bring their own alcohol. There is also a tea dance on Thursday afternoons, which is run in a similar way. The social dances are open to everyone, even those not attending the group class. ACW Dance also offers private lessons and, more unusually, holds examination sessions for those wishing to take medals.

If you've had a few lessons and want to show off what you've learnt, look out for the monthly dance nights held by Stardust Ball at the Grand Hall in Fulham. Coordinated by Mark Kendal and Melina Hamilton, the event gives dancers of all levels an opportunity to practise and demonstrate their skills in a setting that captures the glitz and glamour of ballroom dance. The evening also includes a group lesson and cabaret by top professional dancers. Mark describes Stardust Ball as the "ultimate celebration of ballroom dancing's style and its power to bring people joy," and, as the credit crunch bites, it is this power that enables dance schools to continue to thrive.

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