

Flamenco

In order to really experience flamenco, you have to be in Spain and, perhaps more specifically, in Andalucia. For it is here in the south where the origins of the art first drew their strength in the scantily populated hills and small villages. Flamenco, as we know it, didn't develop until the 16th century. It was then that the three repressed and persecuted minority cultures - the gypsies, Jews and Moors, came together around the campfire.

Each donated something of their own distinctive, yet advanced, musical background. And it is believed that here first developed the clearly sophisticated, yet early, forms of flamenco. In recent years a number of different folk musics have been added to the general heading of flamenco, though they may be quite different in origin and sometimes much older.

To understand the art you have to understand one of its basic requirements - *duende*. This mystical property has little to do with the virtuosity of playing the guitar or being able to dance. Instead, it is the inherent spirit of the performer, the driving force, the gracefulness, the charisma. It is more important than any amount of technical ability and can be seen in the flick of a wrist, the timing of a chord or the emotion of a wordless song. Without *duende*, real flamenco is dead and uninspiring.



The Four Arts of Flamenco

Today you can split flamenco up into four distinctly different arts - singing, dancing, guitar-playing and *jaleo*, which is the rhythmic clapping that's so predominant. Each, of course, can be performed separately, but it's only when they all come together that you can really appreciate the full impact of flamenco.



Within these arts are four different levels of ability. The *flamenco jondo* is the purest state of flamenco. Profound and emotional, it can best be compared to the original blues of America. It is almost entirely non-commercial and only fully appreciated by the real enthusiasts. *Flamenco intermedio* is related to the *jondo* but is not so deeply moving nor so difficult to perform. *Flamenco chico*, on the other hand, is the lighter side of the art which has more popular appeal. This can cover a variety of moods and expressions, usually lively, amorous and sensuous. When performed well, this is a delightful spectacular.

And finally, there is the popular flamenco that's so often seen in the tourist establishments up and down the country. At its best, popular flamenco can be fun. At its worst, it can become a crude mockery of a noble and beautiful music.

So, what will you find?

Well, obviously you are unlikely to experience the inspired and truest forms of flamenco without visiting some of the region's more famous flamenco clubs. But, on the other hand, who can

tell? You may equally well find it fifty metres from a tourist hotel, or in the back of a bar. Most likely, however, is that you will come across a mixture of the *popular* and *chico*. And, if it's good, then you're going to have a great time.

Though you'll find occasional flamenco acts in the bars and hotels, there is only one permanent *tabla* in town, called Venta Luciano. Established around 30 years ago, it hosts good dancers and musicians in an atmospheric setting overlooking the chirimoya orchards, barbecue included. Excursions can be booked at hotels and travel agencies or you can reserve yourself (958 63 13 79) and take a taxi or drive. It lies 3 km from Almuñécar along the old road to Granada. <http://www.ventaluciano.com/>

