



COLOMBIA Jane Cornwell sashays her way around Colombia's salsa capital – Cali

CALIENTE

CALI!

t's Saturday night at the Cañaveralejo Bullring in Cali, Colombia, and 15,000 people are beating out a *clavé* rhythm with their hands and feet. Boom... boom... boom... rumbles the stadium, drowning out the two presenters that are flashed up on giant screens either side of the stage and the cheerleading of youths standing on plastic chairs down the front. An *X-Factor*-like row of judges – visible to all in their open-sided marquee – exchange grins and shuffle their notes in anticipation.

We've already had two nights of glitter and grand spectacle over a relentless, brass-fuelled soundtrack. We've already seen several thousand salsa dancers from home and abroad competing in categories including groups, couples, cabaret and children. But now, on the third and penultimate night of the fourth Cali World Salsa Festival, we are about to witness the champions of champions – salsa dancing's very best. "Cali culture is salsa," the city's PR-savvy mayor, Jorge Iván Ospina Gómez, has declared before a bevy of TV cameras. "Through salsa we overcome social problems. Through salsa we will take on the world!"

And indeed, why not? Salsa is a massive industry in this balmy, good-looking city of more than two million people, situated an hour's flight from Bogotá in Colombia's inner south-west region, and flanked by the sugar cane fields of the Cauca Valley. The irresistible sound of drums, *güiro*, trumpet and maracas pours from shops, bars, clubs and private homes; from the taxis travelling hilly backstreets and palm tree-lined avenues, to the foyers of reflective glass skyscrapers and the speakers of multi-storey gymnasiums. Salsa is more than just a pleasant pastime for the Caleños. It is part of Cali's soul.

Here are the nation's hottest salsa bands: Grupo Niche, Orquesta Guayacan, Son de Cali, the all-female Orquesta Canela. Here are aficionados who can recite the entire back catalogues of international salsa giants such as Hector Lavoe (who lived here for six months),

Oscar D'León and Cuban institution Los Van Van, who have penned their very own homage to Cali. "When we perform in Cali, it is very emotional," the group's musical director Samuel Formell has said. "We don't need to play anything. We could just point the microphone at the audience, give them the first words and they would finish the concert!"

Here, too, is a dance style particular to the self-proclaimed *'Capital de la Salsa'* – a sort of piston-footed, below-the-waist style punctuated by hops, leaps and fancy footwork but without a lot of the twirls of, say, the Cuban or LA styles (salsa dancing is divided into several styles, according to cultural preference and the geographical area they hail from). Learn to dance Cali-style, however, and you can dance any style you like – and over 400 instructors, 70 registered dance schools and 7,000 professional dancers are on hand to show you how.

"Cali is a city that is devoted to salsa," says

"Through salsa we overcome social problems. Through salsa we will take on the world!"

Leoncio Caicedo of Salsa in Colombia, a London-based travel company that caters for clients everywhere from Europe to the US. "You have dancers, musicians, promoters, recording studios. There are artisans making the costumes; record collectors looking for old vinyl albums; kids who can dance as soon as they can walk. My parents always told me that no salsa means no dates," he adds with a grin. "I defy you to find anyone here who can't dance."

So why, exactly, do the sensuous rhythms of salsa pervade the lives of Cali's denizens? The country's ethnically rich population – Indians, Spaniards, Arabs, Africans – has created a melting pot of sounds, after all. There's the Caribbean region's accordion-led *vallenato*, along with clip-clopping *cumbia* and its subgenre, *porro*. The harps, maracas and *cuatro* guitars of *musica llanero*, the music of the (eastern) plains; *bambuco* from the Andean region; *joropo* from near the Orinoco River. There's rock and reggae. Jazz and fusion. Shakira and Juanes. But in Cali, salsa rules.

The theory goes that Before Salsa [sic], Cali didn't have any music it could call its own. Interest in salsa was piqued from the 1920s to

the 50s when radio broadcasts from Havana played mambo, *son* and *danzon*. Later, when salsa records arrived with American sailors in the nearby port of Buenaventura, the local African community embraced the music and took it with them to Cali. By the late 60s listening to salsa records had become a focal point for Caleño youth; the energetic dance style that emerged from the crowded *barrios* was partly a result of 33rpm recordings being played at 45rpm.

As salsa was being popularised by Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants in the clubs of 70s/80s New York, Cali's infamous drug barons spawned a thriving nightclub and music scene at home by sinking millions into the local economy. An annual band competition saw a proliferation of homegrown orchestras develop a trademark sound with an emphasis on melody and lyrics, elements of indigenous music and percussion arrangements that allowed for improvisation and solos. When their number declined during the late 90s recession (they are currently back up to around 80; most of whom are out in force during December's humungous Feria de Cali event), the dancers kept salsa alive.

Modern-day Cali feels safe, even cheerful; the Colombian tourist board's current tag-line is *'Colombia: the only risk is wanting to stay'*. So it's no wonder, then, that travel agencies are wising up to Cali's enormous appeal for Latin dance enthusiasts. A salsa holiday in Cali gets *salseros* punishing the dance floor in ways that would make all of Cuba blush. Forced to dance between tables and chairs in Havana? Here are proper salsa clubs with big, roomy dance floors: at the open-air Las Brisas the crowd join in on cowbell and *congas*. At Tin Tin Deo – its walls adorned with photos of Celia Cruz, Eddie Palmieri, Tito Puente – they throw their heads back and sing along.

Here, too, is Juanchito, a whole suburb devoted to salsa, a 20-minute taxi ride across the Cauca River, and home to a wealth of clubs including the cavernous Changó's. A group of salsa enthusiasts from London are colonising one of the snug red booths the night I visit, their footwork fuelled by shots of *aguardiente* and regular weekly instruction by Queen Salsa, one of the few salsa organisations in the UK to teach Colombian-style. Resplendent in a sparkly catsuit, the Turkish-born Mina Queen Salsa is dancing super-fast on one of Changó's two dance floors with Ricardo Murillo, Colombian World Salsa Champion 2005 and director of the dance academy Stilo y Sabor.

Stilo y Sabor is one of a handful of salsa schools aimed at teaching children how to dance Caleño style. Salsa, for many young Caleños, offers a way out of the poorer barrios. Many who can't afford university go on to earn their »



Clockwise from far left: Mina Queen Salsa; couples from the Swing Latino school; Juan Carlos launches his partner Leydi Rivas up into the air; Cali's Plaza de Caycedo; Swing Latino dancing stars; representatives of the Son de Luz school perform the eye-popping 'salsa split' move



and Bogotá), it is the dancers from Cali itself that dominate the final.

Decked out in sequins and barely-there bodysuits, blinking huge, fake eyelashes and tracing arabesques with their arms, a procession of couples and groups takes up position and bursts, suddenly, into action. By Grand Final night only the jaw-droppers are left: the Chiqui Babys, a group of glammed-up tots who swivel about as if on castors. A dance troupe that run along each others' backs with circus-style skill, then build a human pyramid and send a real, live dove fluttering skywards. A peroxided crew who seem to spend their routine in mid-air, then top it all off by wielding yo-yos.

Every act feels like a winner. Once announcements are made (to hysterics and hugs) the clavé rhythm starts up, ushering on Cheo Feliciano and his 15-piece orchestra. As the judges get up to dance to the irresistible sound of drums, güiro, trumpet and maracas, so do the rest of the crowd. 15,000 people – each and every one of them dancing salsa. ●

ONLINE www.salsaincolombia.com
www.festivalsalsacali.com

THE 5 BEST CLUBS IN CALI

Las Brisas de Jamundi

A small holiday resort in a tropical setting just outside the city that attracts dancers from the best schools in Cali and their friends who just want to have fun.

www.balneariolasbrisas.com

Tin Tin Deo

A Cali institution that plays both salsa and musica del pacifico (African-influenced music from Colombia's Pacific coast) for a mixed and happy crowd.

www.tintindeocali.com

Zaperoco

A snug tavern in northern Cali that sees Caleños *rumba*-ing (partying) most nights, but particularly on a Friday.

www.zaperocobar.com

Changó

In the nightclub-loving Juanchito district, an essential part of any visit to Cali. (Juanchito is best not visited on one's own).

www.chango.com.co

Siboney

A classy superclub in the Menga district.

livelihood through salsa. Some make it onto the international stage. Stilo y Sabor's new downtown headquarters teems with tiny tots performing ridiculously rhythmic routines with the same sort of acrobatic prowess as their teachers. "There are still those who have negative stereotypes of Colombia," mayor Gómez says. "Cali salsa will change their vision!"

All over the city, at schools such as the internationally acclaimed Swing Latino and the equally prestigious Rucafé (home of the World Rueda de Casino Salsa Champions), classes for all ages begin early in the morning and continue until late at night. Intensive courses promise to turn even the most goofy-footed foreigner into a smooth-stepping professional. Demonstrations by instructors and long-time students are dazzling for their quick-time moves with names like 'shake your bones' and 'punishing the floor tiles'; for the way they translate what they hear with their feet; for their wide Colgate-smiles.

Many such dancers-cum-athletes are on-stage at the Cañavalejo Bullring during September's fourth annual Festival Mundial de Salsa. A week-long celebration of the culture of salsa, the event spans everything from dance workshops for couples and groups (salsa, samba, *chachachá*) to salsa-related talks by specialists and *melamano* competitions in which aficionados try to outdo each other with lost tunes from the salsa archives. There's an exhibition of paintings and album covers devoted to Nuyorican 'father of Latin boogaloo' Joe Cuba, who died in February 2009. Cheo Feliciano, a frontline vocalist in Joe Cuba's band in the 50s and 60s, plays the bullring on Grand Final night.

Festival Mundial de Salsa invites dancers from all over the world to compete and/or put on a show – a daunting task in a city where corkscrew turns, splits and backflips are de rigueur and many dancers are as tiny and doll-like as Russian gymnasts. A couple from Canada are elegant but not showy enough; a flamboyant Spanish duo still pales in comparison. Only Mina Queen Salsa manages to raise a roar of approval with a clever routine that is part bellydance and part fancy Colombian footwork. And while there are dancers here from all over the country (there is ongoing competition between salseros in Cali