

At home with Cubans

Ana-Maria puts a salsa CD on the stereo and shoves her dark-eyed adult son in my direction.

'Bailar! (Dance!),' she yells over the music, rejoining her family on their floral chintz lounge suite and settling back with a smile.

Four generations of Cubans clap out the 2/3 salsa beat. Ana-Maria's elderly father taps his foot; a chubby toddler does the basic salsa step in a corner. A sausage dog yaps excitedly.

I've just walked in the door of my casa particular, one of several private homes in Santiago that offer accommodation to Caledonia's clients.

Having just had a sneaky manicure at a casa around the corner (1 Cuban peso – 60p – for

aquamarine nails with silver stars), I had planned on relaxing before heading out again to shake my stuff.

Still, with dance being Cuba's national pastime of choice (along with chess and sex), and since I'm now part of the family too, a whirl around the living room is just as good as a stint on a dance floor.

We salsa around a glass coffee table, past cabinets dotted with photos and ornaments and by the third time around, everyone is up and dancing. Two family friends who call by also have partners thrust at them.

After we leave, we dance up the street, our hosts waving to us from their balcony.



Out Of Office

Edited by Lisa Scott travel@ukmetro.co.uk

Sizzling in

Dance mad: A little light-hearted flirting and lots of doggy-style dancing are all part of the charm of Santiago de Cuba, says JANE CORNWELL

'I love you,' says Juan Carlos, his lips close to my ear, his arm around my waist. 'You make my heart go "boom".' He winds his hips theatrically as the music – salsa romántica, a sugary subgenre of Latin salsa – swirls around us. 'Juan Carlos, it will never work,' I say, winking over his shoulder at the bemused clutch of Cuban dancers I've arrived with. 'Que? I love you,' he says blankly, unperturbed by the fact we've known each other for all of three minutes.

Song over, I scurry back to the safety of my loose-limbed friends from the Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, an internationally esteemed company whose members double as our dance partners here in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's easternmost city, and home of son, the slow, elegant genre from which salsa was born.

Each morning, before we up the pace in our salsa lessons, we spin sophisticated circles around the stage of the Teatro Martí, a musty art deco theatre that doubles as a dance school. Our steps are dainty and mannered, and our partners are refreshingly courteous.

Sadly, Cuba's youth don't dance son any more. For them, it is old people's music, just like danzón, bolero and all the other dance forms that came of age last century. While they still dance salsa – for most, it's as instinctive as walking – they move to something raunchier, a bit more hip, on their evenings off.

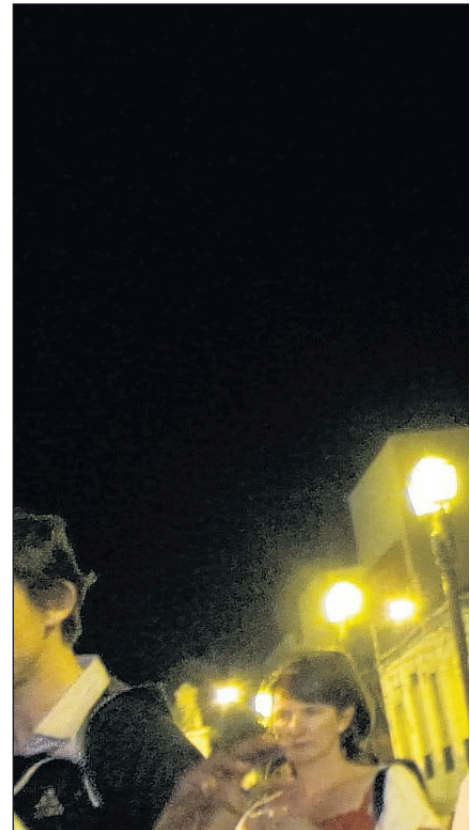
Their music of choice is reggaeton, a cocktail of Latin, reggae and electronic rhythms that is both annoyingly repetitive and insanely catchy. Reggaeton is everywhere in Santiago: thumping from clubs, discos and private homes; blaring out of taxi windows, from speakers on street corners and around hotel swimming pools.

Its Spanish lyrics can be as provocative as anything in hard core US rap but it's the dance that comes with it that really makes it controversial.

'Oh my God. What are they doing?' exclaims a fellow Brit on our first evening stroll around Plaza Dolores, a former marketplace swarming with locals.

With an outdoor café blasting reggaeton into the warm air, groups of teens and twentysomethings have split into pairs and are dancing perreo (doggy style). The women are moving their hips against their partner's crotch; the men are looking grateful and smug.

Reggaeton has enthralled Cuba since it arrived from Puerto Rico more than a decade ago. Recorded in makeshift studios and distributed unofficially – free CDs to taxi drivers is a common PR ploy – it is the soundtrack of many late-night Santiago



nightspots, most of them accessible to Cubans who, with an average wage of £10 a month, can't stump up the entry fee to more tourist-friendly venues.

Our group's kitty covers the Cutumba members who come out with us and one night, after dancing to a band fronted by the Buena Vista Social Club's Eliades Ochoa, we end up in a bar watching MCs compete in a reggaeton rap-off. Fuelled by rum, the crowd cheer them on. Some in our group try dancing perreo but we end up looking a bit silly and tarty. It is, we figure, a Cuban thing.

Having the Cutumba dancers around keeps things breezy, not sleazy. They pull out our chairs, ward off unwanted male attention, whizz us around the dance floor and even see us home.

'Mi amor,' ('My love') coos my salsa partner, Alexi, each morning: light-hearted flirting pervades all our classes – this is Cuba. It's in the water.

In between afternoon dance styling sessions, I take lessons in Afro-Cuban rumba – a far more sensual dance – with a genial (and shirtless) Idalberto. I get so hot that I head straight to the pool at the Hotel Santiago afterwards. 'Adios, mi princessa,' shouts Idalberto as I take off on the back of a motorbike-taxi. 'I love you so much.'

It's all part of the Cuban magic, of course. But for a few days after I get back and readjust to the real world, I love him so much too. Jane flew Cubana Airlines to Holguin from London and took a two-hour bus trip to Santiago. To return, she flew from Santiago to Havana, Havana to London with Cubana Airlines, organised by Caledonia Travel. See www.caledonia-languages.com for details. Prices and routes vary.



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