

My Love Affair With Tango

By [Stuart Lawson](#)

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Nine years ago. The temperature was minus 25 degrees Celsius in the middle of the winter. I was heading to the metro, bundled from head to foot against the elements, looking down and feeling down. The spectacular offer of being on the board of Menatep and Trust Bank had fallen off a cliff after the authorities jailed the owner and dismantled his empire. It looked like my Russian romance was over, and it was time to head back to an uncertain future in Britain.

Walking in the Moscow winter requires the "Moscow shuffle," a sort of sliding gait that stops you from tripping on the deadly patches of black ice that build up on the sidewalks over the cold months. It is also a slalom course of avoiding the luxury cars parked across the sidewalks. Of course, if you spend too much time looking down, you run the risk of being impaled by a stalactite in the spring but, hey, minor-league worries.

As I passed a rather sinister-looking Palace of Culture, one of the Soviet-style monstrosities that dot the Moscow landscape, I heard a strange, somewhat mournful, sound. It has an irresistible rhythm that I couldn't initially place. Repetitive, but compelling.

Rat da dah. Rat da dah.

Tango? In the middle of the Russian winter? From an ugly Communist building?

The chance to find out was too interesting to pass up and, anyway, I didn't have anything else on the agenda for the day. So I nosed past a bored security guard who waved me up a flight of stairs. Always following the music, I penetrated deeper into the gloom.

The stairs opened up into a wide, columned room that resembled some sort of assembly hall. Shadowy figures shifted in the twilight. At first I couldn't work out what they were doing. They seemed to be moving randomly.

Then I understood. They were dancing — but by themselves.

After a few minutes, a loud clap reverberated from one end of the room, and a diminutive figure called out something in Russian. The figures extracted themselves from the columns and formed couples. Tall, short, fat, thin. Faces obscured in the darkness. The music started again. Then it dawned on me.

A tango class.

I immediately knew that I had to participate. It just seemed so romantic, the heat and passion of the dance contrasting with the surroundings and the frigid weather outside. There was only one slight problem. I have three left feet and no real sense of rhythm. But the teacher took pity and invited me into the circle. (Naturally, this being Russia, she was a heart surgeon in her spare time.) And so began my love affair with tango in Russia.

Despite a minute of glory on the steps of the British ambassador's residence with Miss Russia — another story best left for another time — my dancing career was short lived when I realized that I was a great tango dancer — but only in straight lines. Still I became entranced with Moscow's nascent tango community and found ways in the various banks that I subsequently ran to sponsor tango festivals for around six years.

My finest tango hour was when I co-opted HSBC, which I was running, to sponsor a competition to find the three words that most accurately describe tango. It was a great idea because it matched our corporate advertising and highlighted our global reach. (We had, after all, a presence in Buenos Aires and Moscow).

About 2,000 people participated in the contest, and predictably most started with "passion" and then offered a word describing a form of movement. Interestingly, professional dancers spoke of "separation" as one of the emotions of the dance, a reference to the sadness of the end of the dance when the couple parts.

But the winner was the contestant whose entry I found the most imaginative: "Chemistry, physics and geometry." The winner and his girlfriend were sent to Buenos Aires to learn how to tango on the streets.

Over the past 10 years, tango has caught the imagination of both young and old in the Moscow community, and more than a dozen tango clubs have sprung up.

The other night I attended the city's 10th annual tango festival. I still can't dance, but the magic lingers. Russia's cold is no barrier to the warmth of the dance.

Stuart Lawson is executive director of Ernst and Young, Russia and CIS.

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