

Iconic *bailaora* María Pagés, centre-front, and her group dance in front of mirrors. This showcases their choreography from all angles, with the mirror also serving as a symbol for how dance arrives 'from that moment one takes to look within oneself'



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

JEREZ FLAMENCO FESTIVAL

JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA, SPAIN

Daily dance classes, countless live shows and a diet of tapas and sherry: Jan Fairley feeds her appetite for flamenco culture at the Festival de Jerez

Escaping to Jerez de la Frontera in the early Andalus spring from winter in the UK is thrilling on many counts. Jerez is famous for three things: sherry, horses and flamenco. At the end of February each year, for 14 days it's flamenco that matters: while there's plenty of sherry on offer and Arab stallions are doing their daily workouts at the equestrian centre, Jerez buzzes with people from all over the world who arrive with only flamenco in mind. It's the annual event that allows an unparalleled focus on flamenco's dynamic cocktail of dance, song, and guitar, and Jerez is by reputation the modern crucible of the art.

It's a beautiful, ancient, compact, easy-to-walk-around city and it draws dance students from everywhere. Indeed, five months before the festival kicks off, all 1,000 places for courses are filled within weeks of being advertised, with people eager to take master classes in dance and choreography with top teachers from Matilde Coral to Andrés Marín. The bonus of a ticket for the main evening performances at the Teatro Villamarta is part of the attraction.

The focus of the 2009 festival was the role of women in flamenco and it began in thrilling style with the premiere of *Lluvia* (Rain), by dancer-choreographer Eva Yerbabuena. She stepped barefoot out of the audience at the



Rocío Molina, framed here by two male collaborators, likes to inject a great deal of feeling into her performances; 'I think I'm sincere with my way of dancing'

Teatro Villamarta onto the stage, a metaphor for a 19th century Andalusian girl walking out of the country into the big house and the melancholic confines of marriage. Nine out of 12 major shows were by female-led companies celebrating women's historic role in flamenco, and the fact that today women appear on the main stage not merely as dancers and singers, but choreographing major works and leading their own companies. Of course there were many male dancers and musicians in every performance, with distinguished figures like Javier Barón bringing shows to the Villamarta. Exceptional guitarists like Moraíto Chico, Tomatito, Pepe Habichuela and Gerardo Núñez gave scintillating midnight gigs with their groups at the Bodega Los Apóstoles. At one of the daily press conferences held at noon in the old palace headquarters of the Sherry Association (in Spanish, but open to keen members of the public), Jerez festival director Isamay Benavente told me: "There's a revolution going on in flamenco at the moment and women are in the vanguard, innovating by using flamenco in different ways to tell their own inner stories."

Benavente is just one of the many women involved in today's thriving scene, closely supported by Pilar Sánchez, the city's female mayor, another keen flamenco fan. They in turn are supported by Bibiana Aído Almagro, minister for gender equality in the Zapatero government. In her previous job as head of the Andalus Flamenco Development Agency, she actively encouraged women to lead their own companies with developmental grants and infrastructural help. It has paid off hugely: Jerez today is as much a showcase for new ideas and talent as for the continued creativity of stars and veterans alike.

While I was not attending dance classes I found plenty to do in the daytime. I followed a handy map showing flamenco routes through the city, the most interesting one taking in



Santiago: the one-time Gypsy neighbourhood where a strong vein of flamenco has been nurtured in families. On the way I passed the Centro Andaluz de Flamenco, where there's a fascinating flamenco archive, a studio theatre permanently running films, plus flamenco discussions during the festival.

In Santiago itself I found only one of the old flamenco patios where extended Gypsy families live: they are fast disappearing, giving

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way to new developments instead. I made a pilgrimage to various streets, bars and other places enshrined in flamenco-lore, like the Church of La Merced from where top singer José Mercé takes his name. Still there's only limited time for such activity, as it's an absolute necessity to follow the Andalusian custom of a good siesta. Jerez is all about the dedicated pursuit of flamenco, and unless you're happy to miss late-night surprises, you



Clockwise from far left: Flamenco show *Viva Jerez!* which premiered at 2008's festival in the Teatro Villamarta; a poster for flamenco singer Tomatito in Jerez; popular tapas bar Café El Arriate; singer Macarena de Jerez is joined by her children for an encore; a local flamenco joint

need reserves of stamina to manage the four shows in different venues each evening, as the first begins at 7pm and the last finishes any time between one and three in the morning!

The first concerts of the day are in the Palacio de Villavicencio, part of the ancient Moorish Alcazar Fortress. In 2009 they featured intrepid female guitarists who represent the first generation to make inroads into this hitherto all-male domain. Antonia Jiménez, Celia Morales, Laura González and Mercedes Luján played beautiful solos and accompanied spirited guest singers. My favourite singer was local girl Macarena de Jerez, dressed in blue frills. In dramatic voice, with a veteran guitarist at her side, she delivered a stirring mix of forms from *tientos*-tango to *malagueña* to a fiery *fandango* about male betrayal. Her family were in the audience and to everyone's delight her two small children joined her for the encore, her tiny son eager to dance.

Each evening at the Teatro Villamarta saw a remarkable sequence of stunning shows as top stars from María Pagés to Rocío Molina showcased new or recent award-winning works. There was just time afterwards to refuel with tapas in places like the Café El Arriate, and before midnight to call at the Sala Compañía, the place for cutting-edge shows: the witty moves of Pastora Galván showed her to be the next artist to watch. These concerts alternated with superb Bodega gigs. Then it was on to one of the late night *peñas*: standing room only with local artists and plenty of beer 'til the small hours. Jerez festival-goers ought to arrive with the full force of their appetite for flamenco intact and energy to match. ●

DATES Festival de Jerez (Cádiz, Spain), February 27 to March 13 2010, www.festivaldejerez.es
ONLINE The festival programme is available in English at www.flamenco-world.com and www.deflamenco.com



Another celebrated dancer and choreographer, Eva Verbabuena (born María Garrido) was given the name 'Verbabuena' by friends, after flamenco singer Fransquito Verbabuena



HOW TO GET THERE

- Direct flights to Jerez de la Frontera are available from all major UK airports with a wide selection of European airlines.
- Led by Jan Fairley, the *Songlines Music Travel* trip to the Festival de Jerez runs in early March 2010, see p23 for more details.

FEET TAPPING?
Songlines Music Travel has a new selection of trips for 2010, including the Jerez Flamenco Festival. See p23 for more details.