

# THE DANCE ODYSSEY



Where in the world are the major ballroom centres?  
**Marianka Swain** goes on a voyage of discovery

**A**s we've learned from our series on the standard 10 dances ("Perfect10"), ballroom is a truly global pursuit. The most popular styles bring together elements from different countries spread across the world, from African rhythms and Cuban motion to Argentinian passion and American swing.

Last month, the UK took its turn in the spotlight, hosting the International Championships at London's Royal Albert Hall, but our global prominence may be in danger of fading, suggests teacher Matthew Lewis: "We have a great tradition of dance – many of the competitive styles have their origins elsewhere,

but Britain became the perfect host to them, in both the social and competitive arenas.

"However, if we want to remain an intrinsic part of dance culture, we have to think about which elements make a great ballroom centre and how we can continue to develop them. Other countries have made incredible progress recently and we're in danger of being left behind."

Competitor turned coach Elena Rice agrees: "You have to foster a great environment for dancers, teachers and audiences. That involves infrastructure, financial support and integrating dance into the wider culture. I've recently been working

in the US and the Far East, both of which fit those criteria brilliantly – they're investing in dance, from promising Juvenile competitors through to top studios and events that attract the best performers in the world."

Matthew thinks the well-established dance centres still have plenty to offer: "Many leading industry figures are still in places like the UK, maintaining that tradition of dance, and the studios and performance spaces have incredible history. However, it will be interesting to see whether that continues over the next few generations or whether the global power centres begin a gradual, inexorable shift." ➤

**"WE HAVE A GREAT TRADITION OF DANCE –  
MANY OF THE COMPETITIVE STYLES HAVE  
THEIR ORIGINS ELSEWHERE, BUT BRITAIN  
BECAME THE PERFECT HOST TO THEM,  
IN BOTH THE SOCIAL AND  
COMPETITIVE ARENAS"**

# DANCE HOTSPOTS

## BLACKPOOL

The Blackpool Dance Festival is one of the oldest and most prestigious events on the calendar, with a rich history stretching back to 1920, and the city is home to iconic venues such as the Tower Ballroom and Winter Gardens. "It also has a hugely popular contemporary dance scene to balance that history, which could be key to its continued prominence," notes Matthew.

## LONDON

The capital (and its surrounding area) is teeming with teachers, dancers, studios, shows, festivals and competitions. "As well as having a great tradition of teaching and celebrating dance, it's also helped bring it into the mainstream through stage and TV shows, and the cosmopolitan mix translates into constantly evolving styles," says Matthew. "If the ballroom world can embrace that, London will remain a key location."

## MOSCOW

From the International Open to the Champions' Cup, the Russian city has hosted several major competitions and has a strong pool of talent. "But traditionally, lots of eastern European competitors have developed their careers elsewhere – the US or the UK," says Matthew. "If the infrastructure in place for styles like ballet can be extended to ballroom, Moscow could be a strong centre."

## BEIJING

As we've seen from the Olympics, China has invested in sporting excellence, and that extends to dancesport. "Although ballroom may not have cultural roots there, it's becoming increasingly popular, and government backing is a major asset," explains Elena. "It will be interesting to see whether it grows as a social pursuit, perhaps in the form of Pro-Am, or more as a competitive and performance art."

## HONG KONG

As well as hosting international competitions and festivals, Hong Kong is renowned for its showcases of top ballroom dancers, like Galaxy of Fame. "It doesn't yet have the depth of some dance centres in terms of teaching and infrastructure, but there is major financial backing for ballroom, so it should continue to develop," notes Elena.

## FLORIDA

A number of dancesport competitions, from the Triple Crown and Superstars to Paul Killick's glamorous Miami Pro-Am contest, are hosted in Florida. "It offers a great lifestyle as well as excellent dance opportunities, and many events reflect that, combining stylish settings, intense competition and big cash prizes," observes Elena.

## SALT LAKE CITY

The Mormon stronghold is experiencing a dance "stealth growth," believes Elena. "A number of professional companies, like Ballet West, have started to gain wider recognition, and there's now a particularly strong ballroom scene. That could be reflected in competitions and events in the years to come."

## LOS ANGELES

Home to many leading coaches and a major dance industry, both competitive and commercial. "Film and TV offer other opportunities for work, and *Dancing with the Stars* has made ballroom one of the hot styles," explains Elena. "But it's not just a glamorous location – the growing number of top coaches and pros makes it an increasingly important training centre."

## BUENOS AIRES

The spiritual home of tango offers a rather more specialised ballroom experience. "It can't compete in terms of range and infrastructure, but many dancers still make a kind of pilgrimage there, and get a huge amount out of it," notes Matthew.

## MELBOURNE

Home to WDSF World and Australia Dancesport Championships and a growing number of studios, Melbourne arguably eclipses the capital in ballroom terms, "although there are rival locations helping bring Australia to global dance prominence, such as Perth, where *Burn The Floor* creator Jason Gilkison runs a studio," notes Matthew.