

WHAT IS BALKAN DANCE?

Dances of the Balkan countries (countries located on the Balkan peninsula, including Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria and the northern part of Greece, etc.) share specific characteristics, though there are many local variations. They tend to be done in short lines, open circles, or closed circles. Traditionally men and women often danced in separate lines, or in separate parts of a long line (i.e. men at the front, women at the end of the line). Recreational folk dance groups tend to have everyone dancing together in mixed groups, though you still see separate lines in some dances.

Music is at the heart of the fascination dancers find in Balkan dances. In addition to the familiar 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 rhythms, the Balkan countries also use many complex rhythms which are fun and challenging to dance to, such as 7/8, 7/16, 9/16, or even combinations of two different rhythms in the same dance.

The traditional instrumentation is simple but mesmerizing. Bulgarian and Macedonian dances are often performed to the accompaniment of the "gajda", a bagpipe found throughout the Balkans and the Middle East. (Indeed, in many cultures, including the British Isles, Spain, and elsewhere). Wooden flutes and kaval, zurnas, various types of drums, and stringed instruments such as gudulka, are common in the Balkan dances. Bouzouki has become popular throughout an ever wider area. And of course the modern accordion and clarinet, which allow use of multiple keys and span several octaves, are great favorites, often replacing earlier traditional instruments that were more limited in musical scope.

Balkan dance steps range from very simple traditional village dances, usually based on a walking step, to very complex dances with fast, intricate steps. Many of the lattermore complex dances have been choreographed specifically for performances, often by dance groups competing in local folklore festivals held in various parts of the Balkans. The energy level varies considerably, but the dances that really get us "hooked" on Balkan dancing are the fast, energetic dances with multiple steps. Line dance steps are traditionally called by the leader, or changed at the leader's whim, with the rest of the dancers picking up the step as quickly as possible when the leader changes.

The hand holds for Balkan dances include the simple "V" hold, in which you join hands with your neighbor, with hands held down at your side; and the "W" hold, in which hands are joined at about shoulder height, with elbows bent. Balkan dances may also use belt holds, front or back basket holds, shoulder holds, or no handholds at all. Usually, the right hand is held palm-up (to help support the dancer on your right, if needed), while the left hand is palm-down (allowing your neighbor on your left to support you).

FOLK DANCE ETIQUETTE

Folk dance etiquette is simple and based on courtesy and consideration for your fellow dancers. First and very important, NEVER make disparaging remarks about other dancers during a dance or class. So far all the folk dancers I've seen are human, and we all make mistakes. We bring an enormous range of ability and fitness levels to folk dancing, so be tolerant of others.

Don't join a line unless either you know dance, or you have asked someone who does know it if you can easily pick it up. Once the experienced members have seen you dance a bit, they can readily advise you to join or not. **Note:** If you don't know a dance, it is perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, to follow behind the line. Pick a good dancer to imitate and you can learn a lot! Good dancers often learn this way.

Join a dance near the middle or end of the line, if it is a line dance. To know which is "the end", you'll need to watch which direction the dance travels. Some travel both to the right and the left, and those dances have leaders on both ends ... so for those, only join in the middle. Join a closed circle dance anywhere in the circle, but be sensitive that certain people may prefer to dance together. Also, if the dance is done in a shoulder, belt, or basket hold, you'll be more comfortable dancing next to someone close to your own height.

Remember, if the dance is done in a front or back basket hold, don't cross your arms! Instead, reach out to each side, skip the person next to you, and hold the hand of the person once removed from you on either side.

If you do find yourself in a dance that's just too hard, smile and excuse yourself and DROP OUT rather than fumbling through the rest of the dance. Continue the dance behind the line, where you can concentrate on learning, without blocking the way of your neighbors.

Leaders often signal changes to the other dancers in the circle – they need to be toward the center, where everyone can see them. Even if you are trying to watch the steps, try to resist the tendency to pull the line inward – blocking the view for dancers behind you. And when you find yourself at the end of the line, if you pull toward the center you may force the leader to move the line around behind you, where almost no one can see his/her signals.