



THE GUIDE | BERLIN



## “In spring, open-air dance classes are held beside the river”

*Lara Brunt* gets a lesson in ballroom dancing in Berlin

**EVER SINCE WATCHING** Baz Luhrmann’s flamboyant 1992 film *Strictly Ballroom*, I’ve harboured a secret dream to learn to dance. Which is how I find myself in Berlin’s trendy Mitte district on a sunny Sunday afternoon. While the legendary techno clubs in neighbouring Friedrichshain are still thrumming, I’m standing on the creaky parquet dance floor of a century-old ballroom getting ready to waltz. With two left feet, however, I’m feeling a little apprehensive.

Berlin was once home to hundreds of dance halls during the “Golden Twenties”, but Clärchens Ballhaus is one of the few that remains. Opened in 1913, the grande dame

survived WWII bombing raids and Communist-era decline, before theatre impresarios David Regehr and Christian Schulz revived its fortunes in 2005.

Today, the two-storey dance hall is more popular than ever. The roster of classes – from cha cha and tango, to salsa and swing – lures an eclectic crowd of all ages, and weekend dance nights with live bands draw hundreds of dancers. In spring, popular open-air dance classes are also held beside the River Spree, overlooking Museum Island.

With its pockmarked façade, Clärchens oozes faded grandeur. Upstairs, the Spiegelsaal (Mirror Hall) has an air of artful dilapidation –

## BALLROOM BASICS

### 1 Practise the box step

This basic dance step is named after the pattern it creates on the floor, and is the first step to mastering ballroom dance.

### 2 Get into frame

Having “perfect frame” – or stance – is essential. Keep your shoulders down, your elbows up high, and always stand up straight.

### 3 Put it all together

Look over your partner’s right shoulder then do the box step. Always follow a 1-2-3 rhythm, and make sure you know who’s leading.

### 4 Add some movement

Once you’ve mastered the basic box step, add some clockwise rotation. You’ll be gliding around the dance floor in no time.



think gilded stucco, peeling paint and cloudy mirrors – but my drop-in beginner’s lesson takes place in the ground-floor ballroom. A huge glitter ball hangs overhead, while the wood-panelled walls twinkle with tinsel.

Eight couples, ranging from millennials to retirees, join me and my husband on the dance floor, as a cover version of Elton John’s *Candle in the Wind* plays. “The rhythm is perfect for the timing of the waltz,” says our instructor, Anton, who has taught dancing for a decade.

The lesson begins with Anton demonstrating how to do the box step, the foundation of the waltz. Once we’ve mastered this, we repeat the step until it becomes second nature. Next, we

line up facing our partners and decide who leads and who follows. We move down the line, dancing with different partners and occasionally treading on toes. Anton then demonstrates how to move into hold. Elbows high and arms slightly aching, we’re soon box-stepping like the best and learning to turn.

After our 80-minute session ends, we nab a table on the edge of the dance floor and order hearty Wiener schnitzels. As the dance gets into full swing, couples glide effortlessly around the floor, while others move with more gusto than grace. The atmosphere is utterly infectious, and soon, we’re up for one more twirl. [ballhaus.de](http://ballhaus.de)