

Flamenco in Granada

The string magician of Sacromonte

By [Stephan Orth](#)

Granada is the city of music: on every corner, guitar players court tourists' favour and money. But not all of them know their business – who really wants to understand the soul of Flamenco has to set off when most of the tourists are in bed.

First dark yellow, then reddish: when the walls of the Alhambra slowly start changing their colours at dusk, dozens of tourists whip out their beeping and sparkling cameras on the Mirador de San Nicolás. "Holy shit it's beautiful", an American lady with tank top says, and she's right: nowhere else than on the famous lookout point you can feel better the grandeur of Spain's most beautiful castle.

But something bothers. Someone bothers. Three young musicians have gathered around the stone cross in the middle of the square, struggling with Paco de Lucía's "Entre dos Aguas" with their out-of-tune instruments. The two guitar players and the cajón-player are scratching and scrubbing and beating all out as if it was a question of who finishes first. It's obvious: the one who is not looking for the architectural but for the musical soul of Granada, should not do try to find it at San Nicolás.

Graná, as the locals say, is the city of the Alhambra and the city of guitars. The majestic Moorish castle makes it easy for itself and for tourists. Self-pleased it dozes on its Sabikah hill in the heat of the summer and looks great both day and night.

But it's not so easy with guitars. There is no doubt that most of the street musicians who perform in the lanes of the medieval centre between the cathedral and the Paseo-de-los-Tristes-square play quite well. Also the regular evening six euro shows in tourist bars like the Chien Andalou are worth a visit from time to time. But who wants to find out what is real flamenco in Granada, has to stay up until late and must know the place. Or must be lucky enough to take a stroll with Mark Shurey.

A move for love to music

The 38 year old guy sits in the restaurant Corrala del Carbón sipping at his café con leche. He's dressed all in white, his hair tied back in a thin tail. "If you want to find the soul of Flamenco, you have to go out late at night, you have to go where the musicians meet after their concerts", Shurey says. The British man studied medicine and guitar, in 1999 he moved to Spain in order to begin a new life – being Flamenco the centre of all.

"20 years ago I saw a concert of Paco de Lucía on TV, and that changed everything. I got addicted to it", Shurey tells. He is not the only one who came here for music, and to learn from the Habichuelas, Morentes, Mayas and Heredias, the legendary gipsy families of Granada. People from Morocco, France, Holland and Germany come here to learn everything about this kind of music. Many of them tell the same story: only that moment was necessary, maybe only a few seconds of a Rumba or a Fandango, in which

this music grips you in a way that you will never forget. The Spanish call this moment of deep emotion "duende", which is the main object of dance, play and song.

In Andalusia, the gitanos (gypsies) from India have been cultivating this style of music called Flamenco nowadays since the 19th century. Yet then it was not only about expressing their own hard lot by means of music. It got round quite quickly among people of the city and tourists in Spain that this uncouth art has plenty of energy and passion. Thus, the gypsies made more money with music and dance than working in the silver mines or as day labourers.

In the wicked *Cafés cantantes* the shows got more and more professional but they were also adapted to the taste of the masses. Purists like the composer Manuel de Falla or the writer Federico García Lorca complained even at the beginning of the 20th century about the decline of the rebellious authenticity of Flamenco.

Part 2: aprons with Flamenco pattern

These two should have done a journey through time to Granada in the year 2010 before complaining: the boxes in a kebab restaurant reproduce Flamenco pieces kitschified with insipid synthesizer drums, outside a man with a wig and a red dancing dress celebrates his stag night, and every souvenir shop offers aprons with Flamenco pattern.

This is of course not what Shurey was looking for when he came to Granada. "Flamenco is a lifestyle, it's about not to care about rules, to be free." And – and maybe this is also important – it's about being sad from time to time. "In our modern Eastern culture this is not okay, people take antidepressants or drink alcohol and try to suppress negative emotions." However a Flamenco artist just gets onto stage and vent it all out.

It is now about 1 o'clock in the morning, and we finally can start looking for real Flamenco. Our first stop is a little bar in the old part of town called Mercantín. There is only one more customer sitting at the bar, it seems that the soul of Flamenco is not here. "Hola Pimientito!", the barkeeper welcomes us.

Hello "little pepper"? "These nicknames are weird" says Shurey serving us two Alhambra beers. These nicknames are not always flattering. His refers to the fact that in the past his dreadlocks looked like peppers. But [Pimientito](#) is well accompanied – just think of the legendary singer Camarón (shrimp), the guitar player Tomatito (little tomato) or the dynasty of musicians Habichuela (kidney beans). You could make a real good salad with this.

"If they give you a nickname it is a sign of respect", emphasises "little pepper" Shurey. As a foreigner it was not easy for him to be accepted as a musician. He's been struggling for years, having lessons with the best Spanish musicians. "There is only one option: you got to get as good as them."

In the Zambras of Sacromonte

The barkeeper claps a couple of bars whilst listening to the music of the hi-fi, but apart from that there is nothing going here tonight in terms of music. So we leave the place and go to El Eshavira, a hidden bar with two floors in a tiny little side street of Calle

Azacayas. This one is full of people, but after a little round Shurey knows that none of the top musicians of town is here. No spontaneous concert tonight. He seems to be a little disappointed now. "You never know what you are going to find on such an evening." It's half past two in the morning.

So let's go to the holy mountain of Flamenco, to Sacromonte, the higher part in the East of the town. Here live the gypsies, and here they play their music in the zambras- typical gypsy flamenco caves in Granada.

The bar that will save us tonight is called La Bulería. A small white terrace, a bar, lots of schnapps but no beer, soft guitar sounds from a little room behind. Shurey listens concentrated, just a moment, like an animal picking up the scent. He runs inside, and a few seconds later he comes back smiling and says: "You are a lucky guy."

A guitar hero called kidney bean

The cave-like room is illuminated only by a bright lamp, the rough white walls are covered with paintings of flamenco dancers and men at bar tables. A young guitar player with long black hair, unbuttoned red shirt and pink trousers with patches is sitting there. He is playing a very complicated Alegría at breathtaking speed. A man who wears a white hat points at the strings and celebrates each virtuously played melody with a croaky "olé".

The guitar player is 21 years old, his name is Juan Habichuela, and if Shurey is right, he will be one of the most famous gitanos of Spain within ten years. Tonight he is playing for about 20 visitors, half of them are tourists. The man with the hat accompanies him as a singer. He could be his father. His voice is much stronger than you might expect if you see his slim build. Every word sounds like joy and pain, death and life, love and hate. You really would appreciate if poet García Lorca came around during his time trip, to see that his famous words are true, and that only those who still haven't seen it would say he exaggerated: "This singing is really deep, it's deeper than any well or any ocean of the world. It is descended from the first sob and from the first kiss."

After many more tangos and bulerías, even Shurey who has seen many concerts and who has been living here for eleven years, asks guitar player Habichuela for a souvenir foto. "Little pepper" next to "kidney bean", a pretty picture.

On our way back home it is so late that they have turned off the illumination of the Alhambra. Doesn't matter. Tonight this is really not important anymore.

Juan Habichuela with singer: "If you want to understand the soul of Flamenco, you have to go out late at night ", Mark Shurey says.

Unique atmosphere: if you want to find Flamenco in its most original form you have to visit Granada's zambras during the night. Right in front you see Mark Shurey, British, who has come to Spain eleven years ago to dedicate his life to Flamenco.