

Your First Contra Dance

Thanks for checking out your first contra dance! Here are a few tips to help you have more fun.

Dress to move

Contra dancing can be aerobic! Most dancers like to wear short-sleeved shirts and skirts, pants or shorts, depending on the season. Don't forget to dress in layers – what may be comfortable at the start of the evening might be too hot by the second or third dance. Some folks, who find that dancing really makes them sweat, bring a spare shirt to change into at the break. Generally, contra dancers are an informal bunch and dress to reflect that.

Please wear comfortable shoes. The most important feature is a smooth sole that will slide across a wooden floor. Contra dancers have used jazz shoes, leather dress shoes, bare feet, duct-taped bare feet, character shoes, dance sneakers and regular sneakers with or without suede glued to the sole.

"Hi, would you like to dance?"

Contra dancing is social dancing. The best way to improve your dancing is to dance with people who are more experienced than you. More experienced dancers know this, so you may be surprised to get many invitations to dance from people you haven't met before. Although contra dancing is a couple dance, it is, in the larger sense, a "team sport." If new dancers get to dance frequently with more experienced partners, they learn the basics faster and everyone has more fun.

Usually, people change partners after each dance. Men ask women to dance and women ask men to dance. Sometimes men dance with men or women dance with women.

One surefire way to make sure you have a partner for the next dance is to ask someone. Otherwise, rather than sitting down at the side of the hall, stand up and walk toward the front of the hall. Some people take sitting down to mean that you would like to rest.

It's not you. Really. It's not

Sometimes, you may ask someone to dance and be turned down with a "no, thank you." Or you may want to rest for a few minutes and listen to the band or talk with friends. Don't take a refusal personally, because it's not personal. However, it's usually not considered good manners to turn down a dance with one person, only to accept the next request from someone else.

Tell her/ him about it!

There may be some things your partner does that you do not like. Some dancers like to spin and be twirled; others don't. Some dancers, especially newer ones, find fast swings to be dizzying and disorienting. If your partner does something you don't like, tell them in a kind manner: "Please, no twirls," or "Let's slow down; I'm getting dizzy." Nobody wants to be the kind of dancer who has a good time at their partner's expense. On the other hand, nobody is a mind-reader, either, and a little communication goes a long way toward heading off frustration.

Jeepers creepers, where'd you get those peepers?

Eye contact. There's a lot of it in contra dancing. Practically speaking, it keeps dancers from getting dizzy during the swings. But it may strike people new to contra dancing as too personal or intimate. It's not meant to be. If direct eye contact makes you uncomfortable, try looking at your partner's ear, forehead, shirt collar or earring to keep from getting dizzy during swings.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

And the same goes for the dance floor. You may see some dancers being flirtatious on the dance floor, and for some people, that's part of the fun of contra dancing. But dancing with someone does not obligate you to continued social contact with them if you do not want it. While some of our dancers found dates, and others found spouses, most people are here because they like the live music, they like to dance, and they like hanging out with people who have similar interests.

Everyone is making mistakes.

Everyone is making mistakes. Everyone expects everyone else to make mistakes. Smile, say "sorry" if you bumped into someone, and think about how to get to the right place for the next move on time. The point is to enjoy the music, have fun and spend a night out with people (all of whom are making mistakes.)

If you have any questions about the evening, you can always speak to the caller during the break or talk to the person at the front table who greeted you when you arrived. If they can't answer your question, they can help you find someone who can.