

## **7days**

### **Fling yourself around**

Sunday 3 May, 2009

#### **Between the beach and the desert, a traditional Scottish dance finds itself taking off a long way from home**

You hear them before you see them.

A solitary bagpiper leads a group of six dancers, clad in intricate costumes of kilts, aboynes and tartan ensembles onto the stage, where they take a bow, and in perfect unison, jump into the first dance of their energetic routine - the Highland Fling.

Despite little knowledge in the Middle East of this traditional dance form, Highland Dancing is picking up in the UAE, according to dance teacher Carissa Crowley.

Australian-born Carissa was just four-years-old when a Scottish neighbour bullied her mother into signing her up for classes.

Carissa dragged her feet in protest to the first class, but hasn't stopped dancing since. Today, she runs the very first Highland Dancing Studio in the UAE and her students come from all over the world. "The dance studio started as an experiment in Dubai around 18 months ago," says Carissa, teacher and founder of Highland Dance Dubai.

"I wanted to teach in the UAE, as I did in my home country, but quickly discovered there was no Highland Dancing taught here. So I established my own Highland Dancing studio - for weekend classes only, as I really didn't know what sort of response I would get. "We started with three dancers, but now we have 20 dancers from many different nationalities based in various emirates."

Previously staged for kings and noblemen, Highland Dancing is a form of traditional Scottish dancing performed to the accompaniment of bagpipe music. It is considered one of the oldest forms of folk dance in the world.

According to tradition, old kings and chiefs of Scotland used the Highland Games as a way of choosing the best men for their army, with Highland Dancing being one of the various ways that the men were tested for strength, stamina, and agility.

While it may have been a test for men back in the day, at Carissa's Dubai class there are no agile males, only girls from countries including Australia, Scotland, Canada, New Zealand, as well as one little girl from the Philippines. It's estimated that around 95 per cent of all Highland Dancers today are female. So perhaps men today just aren't man-enough for the challenge!

"The dancing is not easy to learn. Highland Dancing is a highly competitive and technical dance form, requiring hours of practice and training over a period of years to perfect," explains Carissa. Drawing comparisons with both ballet and Irish dancing, Highland Dancing - simply described - is danced on the balls of the feet, with the arms placed on the waist or in the air, the feet pointed and the knees and legs precisely turned out. Each performance lasts around two minutes, and the health benefits are certainly something to dance about.

"As the dances are performed on the balls of the feet and involve lots of jumping, Highland Dancing builds bone density and promotes weight loss, muscle definition, strength, stamina, flexibility, balance and tremendous endurance," says Carissa.

"The precise ballet-based positions also help a dancer to be graceful too."

Carissa and her troop of Highland dancers are much in demand lately. They have performed at many events, including the Dubai Poetry Festival and the St Andrews Day Ball, as well as at Dubai Mall and Dubai Festival City. "When we danced at Dubai Mall, a lot of local people approached me and asked questions about the dance," says Carissa. "It was very interesting, and I think for many local people, it was the first time they had ever seen such a dance. "Each performance lasted 30 minutes and we had a huge crowd that stayed the watched the entire thing," she says.

Carissa, who has 16 years of Highland Dancing experience, believes that there is huge potential for this type of dance in the UAE. And maybe one reason is because traditional Emirati music uses a similar instrument to the bagpipes used for Highland Dancing.

"The UAE has had bagpipes for many years, as bagpipes made from goatskin are a very traditional instrument in this part of the world. "Now though, we are offering the dancing to go with the bagpipes," she says.

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