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Montevideo, Uruguay

Marlon Bishop immerses himself in the southern American nation's carnival celebration – a drum fest that resonates with the country's spiritual past

Every year in early February, the lethargic streets of Montevideo erupt with the sound of the drums. Thousands of drummers flood the narrow streets in the historically black neighbourhoods of Palermo and Barrio Sur at Carnival time, marching to the rhythm of *candombe*. They play in troupes of up to 70 at a time, their drum strokes ricocheting off the walls of the well-worn buildings. The result is a rumbling earthquake of sound that hits you in the chest like a hammer. In front of the drummers, feathered women dance in the naked summer heat and men wielding banners block out the night sky with colourful flags.

This two-day event, called the Llamadas ('The Calling'), is a scene that seems incongruous with the Uruguayan capital's reputation as a quiet and reserved – even boring – kind of place. Sandwiched between Argentina and Brazil, little Uruguay is one of South America's most peaceful and prosperous nations. Its people are of mostly European heritage, and they spend their time eating pizza and listening to classic rock'n'roll from the 60s.

Candombe music, however, comes from a different side of Uruguayan culture, developed by the small Afro-Uruguayan community concentrated near downtown Montevideo. The music is an intricate rhythmic conversation performed on fat-bellied barrel drums that come in three sizes, known as the *chico*, *piano*, and *repique*. There is no singing and no harmonic instruments, just the roar of the drums tumbling down the open streets. According to historians, the rhythm was preserved from its Bantu origins at the dances of enslaved Africans, then known as *tangós* in colonial times. Today's Carnival processions are said to come from mock battles between Afro-Uruguayan social clubs, which would take place in the streets during holidays.

These days, candombe is an important national symbol, played throughout the country across lines of class and race. But for the Afro-



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Uruguayans of Montevideo, it means something more than Uruguayan pride.

"It's a spiritual thing," says Miguel Garcia. "When you play the drum, you enter another dimension. You can't explain it in words. It's our identity. The energy of the music connects us to our ancestors."

Miguel, 34, is one of the musical directors of De Isla de Flores, one of the few predominantly black candombe groups that marches in the Llamadas. He's strong and small-framed, with an arm full of tattoos relating to *umbanda*, an Afro-Brazilian religion. Miguel's group doesn't have the financial resources available to some of the larger candombe troupes that put on staged spectacles. They have no fancy sets, choreographers, stilt-walkers or fire-breathers. But what De Isla de Flores lacks in pizzazz, it makes up for in history. Its members come from the very families who preserved the music across the generations, from the very streets where the rhythm was nurtured.

One of them is Pedro 'Perico' Gularte, 73, a master of the challenging *repique* drum. Perico's left hand is covered in rocky calluses,

scars proudly earned over decades of playing the drum. He says that there are advantages in having members from candombe's old-school. "We'll show them how to play with swing," he says. "People today are playing too fast, it's not danceable. They forget that the music and the dance must complement each other."

The whole community scrambles to sew costumes and paint banners for months before the Llamadas, donating what little money they can afford to make sure the troupe looks smart on the big night. When the event comes, the group is ready, their drums gleaming with new coats of red and blue paint.

"Candombe is a source of happiness, but it's also a form of resistance," Miguel tells me. From the colonial era through the dictatorship of the 70s, candombe has often been persecuted. Still, the drums played on, giving Afro-Uruguayans a voice even when they couldn't speak out with words.

When it's time to march, Miguel hangs his drum over his shoulder and says, "Time for *guerra* [war]," he says. As the booming piano drums begin to play and the beat picks up, I look at Miguel's face and see he's gone to another place. **N**