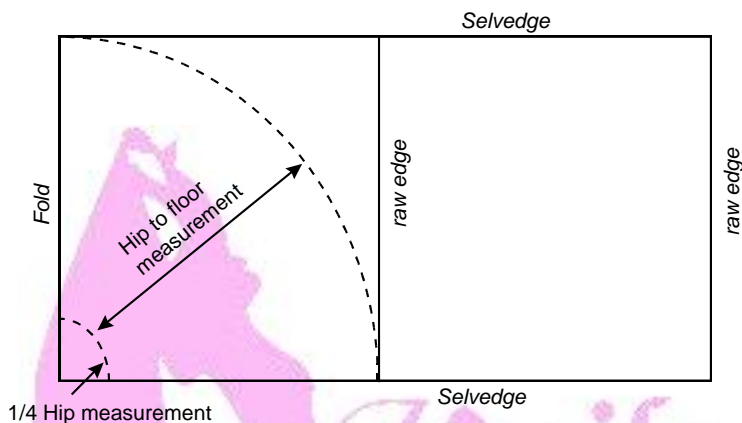


Your First Belly dance Costume

Part of the fun of belly dancing is dressing up in lovely sparkly costumes that emphasise and accentuate your every move! Here are a few ideas to help you make an outfit suitable for practice or student performances. Make it as simple or as complicated as you like - but remember to have fun! A basic costume might consist of matching bra and belt ("bedlah") with a circle skirt. To this you could add harem pants, a caftan, veils, scarves, more skirts, a waistcoat, head dress ... the possibilities are as endless as your imagination.

Circle Skirt

A circle skirt can be easily made from about 4 metres of fabric. Choose fabric that flows nicely and has some movement. Some fabrics that work well are dance satin, chiffon, disco sequin. Measure from your hip to the floor to determine the length of the skirt. Measure the widest part of your hips to decide how big you need the waistband to be. (I'll call it a waistband but it will actually sit on your hips not your waist.) Fold the fabric over and mark it out like this:



Cut another half circle on the opposite selvedge to save fabric. Sew the straight edges of the two halves together, or hem them if you want the sides to be open. Add more half-circles if you want a fuller skirt. Make a casing out of fabric scraps and attach it to the opening at the top of the skirt. Insert your elastic and make sure that you are happy with the fit around your hips. Hang the skirt up by the waistband for about a week to let the fabric drop and then get a friend to help you trim the bottom. Hem the bottom edge and your skirt is ready.

Bra and Belt ("Bedlah")

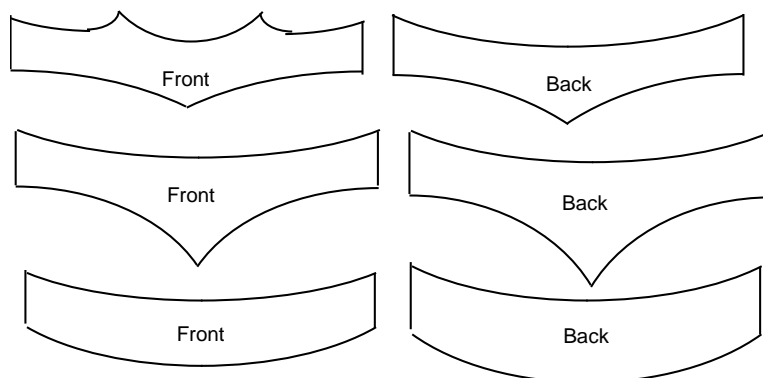
About 1 metre of fabric should be plenty to cover a bra and belt. Make life easier for yourself by using pretty brocade fabric that does not fray easily. Old evening dresses can be an excellent source for great fabrics at bargain prices. (You can also try to buy a bra that is already the colour you want and decorate directly onto the cups from there.)

You will need to purchase a good comfortable bra to decorate. Remember that the finished product must not look like underwear, so choose one with no lace, or lace that can be easily removed. It's easier to decorate a bra with a firm cup, but soft cups can also be used - just be sure when you stitch it that you don't ruin its shape. If you plan to do a lot of stitching on your bra try using a bra which is one cup size larger than your size - you can always pad it if it doesn't "shrink". Preferably use a back fastening bra - if you use a front fastening bra you will need to change it to the back - it's just not worth the risk of having it pop open!

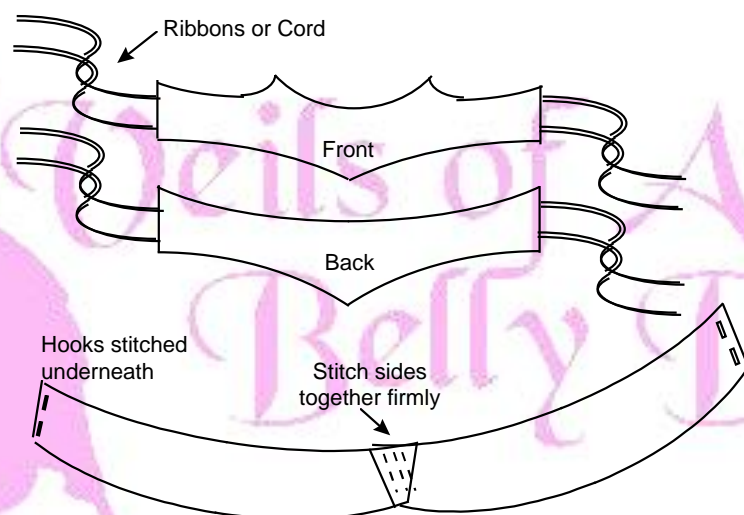
Cover the cups with your chosen fabric, cutting on the cross of the fabric so it has a bit of stretch. Alternatively, you could use fabric paint or even leave them as they are if you are happy with the colour. Cover the shoulder straps with fabric that matches your costume or cut them off and replace them with matching fabric strips or ribbon. Some people like to replace the side straps too, or you can easily cover them using fringing, stretchy sequins, braid and/or fabric paint. Add a strip of fabric or sequins over the clasp at the back to hide it. You could also put an extra hook or some velcro in for extra insurance. (Important note: Velcro is fine for a back-up but NEVER rely on velcro to fasten your costume.) Decorate the bra with sequins, beads, fringing, glitter, jewellery, coins, embroidery, appliqués, even Xmas garlands ... use your imagination. Visit op shops and swap meets and look for old jewellery and ball gowns with attractive trims and appliqués.

To make a belt you need to first make a pattern from calico or similar to make sure you have a perfect fit. There is nothing worse than dancing in a costume that feels like it might come off at any moment. (A badly fitting costume can

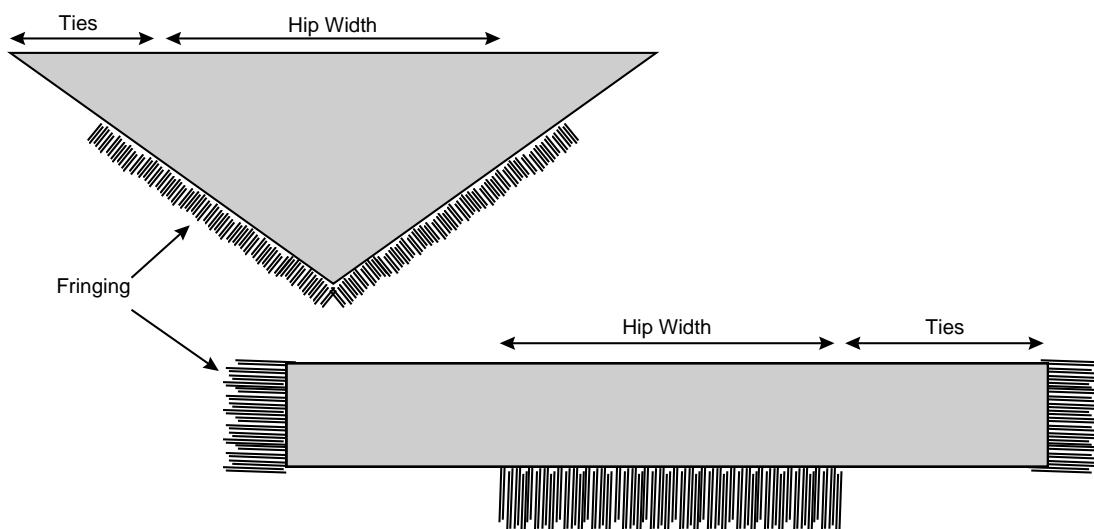
also be very disconcerting for the audience.) Decide what type of shape you would like. Some sample shapes are shown below.



Make a separate piece for the front and the back. Usually the back needs to be a little bigger than the front - this will depend on your figure. Put your costume skirt on and make sure it is sitting on your hips properly, and then pin your pattern to the skirt to see how the belt will fit. If you want to use hooks to fasten the belt, make sure you have enough overlap. (Always choose good strong fasteners. Trousers hooks are excellent for dance costumes and are very secure if you stitch them on firmly.) If you are using ties, make sure you haven't got too much overlap. Keep adjusting the shape of the belt until the fit is just right. When you are happy with the shape, mark out the pattern on some heavy canvas and also your decorative fabric. If you want a thicker belt, use more layers of canvas or line the inside of the belt with felt or wool. Some people like to use Petersham or buckram for extra stiffness. Stitch your belt materials together inside out, turn them out and stitch around the edges for extra reinforcement. Attach your fastenings, double check the fit, and you are ready to decorate your belt to match your bra.



If this sounds like a bit too much work, a large triangular or rectangular scarf can be just as nice (see diagram over the page). Use fabric that matches your bra and decorate as creatively as you like. Cut the fabric on the cross for a better fit and be sure that you have plenty of length so you can tie it up easily. If you are using fabric that is fairly stiff you will need to cut a curved shape or it will gape at the back.

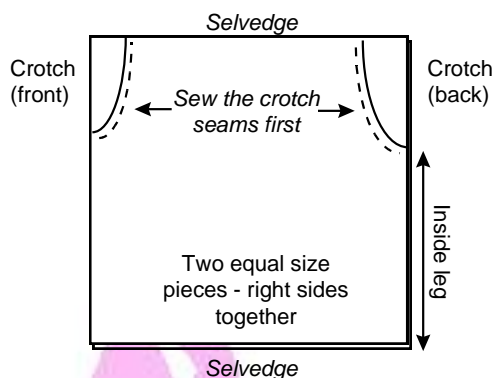


A scarf is also great to wear to class - you and your teacher will be able to see your hip movements more easily.

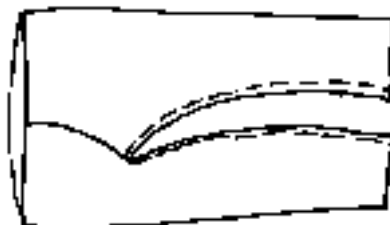
Harem Pants

Harem pants can be worn underneath your skirt or by themselves. If you plan to wear them without a skirt, make them from opaque fabric. Sheer harem pants look great underneath a skirt or two. You will need from 2 to 4 metres of fabric depending on how baggy you want your pants to be. When working out the length of the pants, remember to add a bit extra to allow for the bagginess.

The pants pattern is similar to that used for track-suit pants, but with the waist line cut lower so it sits on your hips. The easiest way to make a pattern is to use a pair of pants that fit you. Measure from the waistband to the hip line and mark this on the front and back seams. Then measure the back and front crotch curves and mark out your pattern like this:



After sewing the crotch seams, sew the inside leg seam like this:



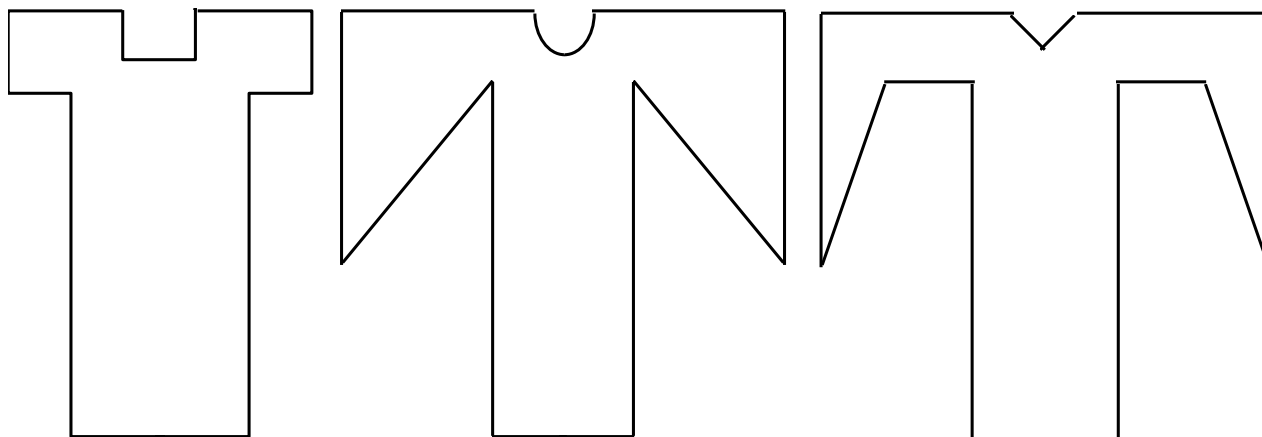
Make an elastic casing for the waistband and the pant bottoms, insert your elastic and your harem pants are done. Do not make the pant bottoms too tight or you will cut off the circulation to your feet!

Veil

A veil is a lovely accessory for your dancing and can also be used as a costume cover-up in between performances. The most basic veil is simply 2.5 metres of sheer fabric. Use fabric that flows nicely; if it is too stiff it will lose its effect. Opaque veils can be fun, but for your first veil a sheer fabric is best. Chiffon is perfect for sheer veils and is readily available in a good variety of colours. Hem the edges and add a string of sequins if you like. If you feel ambitious, sew or glue sequins randomly or make patterns on your veil. Use fabric glue that will dry clear and flexible.

Caftan

If you prefer a more covered up look, a caftan is ideal. In its most basic form, it is simply a "T" tunic that reaches the floor. You can make an opaque caftan to wear with a belt or hip scarf, or you can make a sheer one to wear over a decorated bra with matching belt or hip scarf over the top. You can wear harem pants, a skirt or both underneath. You can vary the neckline, the sleeve length and shape. You can have splits up one side, both sides, or none at all. (For no slits, add flare to the skirt to allow for movement.) You can add darts to make the caftan more fitted. The variations are endless. Here are just a few examples:



A largish caftan also makes a perfect costume cover to wear between performances. Make sure the neck hole is roomy enough for you to get your head through without ruining your hair and make-up. Putting a long zipper down the front makes the caftan very easy to get into and out of, without compromising on your cover. Strategically placed hooks, press studs or velcro can also be good for fastening smaller areas. However, don't use long strips of velcro as the "hook" side can catch on your costume and it makes a horrible ripping noise when you unfasten.

You should always cover your costume when you are not performing. Covering your costume adds to the sense of mystery and allows you to gain maximum impact from your costume when you appear. It is also courteous to the other dancers to cover your costume while you are part of the audience.

Other Ideas

These are just some basic ideas for your costume - there is a whole range of options and accessories you can try. Lots of jewellery is almost mandatory, and armbands or gloves can add some extra appeal. Head dress is a whole new subject ... you could wear head scarves, a padded roll, a turban, a fez or even a tiara depending on the type of look you are after.

Belly dancing offers a dazzling array of costume choices. There is glittery cabaret style with tonnes of beads and sequins, metres and metres of gorgeous fabrics, or glamorous gowns and slinky fitted skirts. There's earthy and folkloric with coins, bells and metal jewellery; tribal style with choli tops, tassels and shisha mirrors; the 'gypsy' look, with peasant blouses and lots of colourful skirts and scarves ... just to name a few.

Look at what other dancers are wearing, and ask them about their costumes and where they got their ideas. Look at books about the Middle East: Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, Persia, Tunisia etc. Look for Belly dance music CDs in the World Music section in CD shops - the CDs almost always feature a dancer in a lovely costume on the cover. Check out Arabian themed movies for inspiration (but be aware that if you are trying to portray a specific ethnic group or historical period movies are almost never accurate!). If you have internet access, search under terms such as "belly dance", "Middle Eastern Dance", "Danse Orientale", "Raqs Sharqi" and you will find a wealth of information and ideas.