

Features

**LOVE @CTUALLY; INTERNET DATING IS NOW THE MOST POPULAR WAY TO TRY TO FALL IN LOVE. OUR SINGLE LIFE COLUMNIST LAURA TOPHAM LOGS ON AND HEADS OUT**

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Once considered the exclusive territory of adulterous men, computer nerds, and psychos using false identities, internet dating has lost its stigma. A survey last week revealed that online dating is now the most popular method of finding a partner in Britain, with 65 per cent of singletons turning to the net.

Gone are the sleazy chatrooms, pseudonyms and fake photos, now online daters upload entire photo albums, write lengthy descriptions of themselves and detail their exact preferences - and are happy to admit this is how they found their partners.

But do the internet dating sites deliver what they promise - and who are these single Londoners using the net to find love? Our writer, who says she won't commit, investigated five of the sites most popular with those dating around in the capital

CUPID NIGHTS ( [www.cupidnights.com](http://www.cupidnights.com) )

Lowdown: Online dating for Londoners <\>- perfect if you want to find someone who lives just down the road. Plus you can resort to bitching about Tube fares if you want to find common ground.

Price: After a free 48-hour trial, membership costs £14.99 for 30 days or £69.99 for a year.

Number of members: More than 11,000 active members - 85 per cent of whom live in Greater London (15 per cent in surrounding counties). I got 31 messages, all fairly flippant.

My date: Andy (left), 28, a TV producer from Kent, used a picture of himself flanked by two busty girlfriends. Described himself as 'laid back and chilled out. I'm a gambler by nature and live by the sword so will probably die by it too. I spend time away working so ball 'n' chains need not apply.'

Reality: The two girls in his picture are Page Three models he once met. Claimed on the date he is keen to settle down and have children and told me I was the only girl he has ever met from the site - but inside sources suggest this is far from true<\>.

The Date: Hakkasan restaurant, Hanway Place. Andy bought me lunch and was so relaxed he let me choose our meals and requested forks to save the embarrassment of chopsticks.

Worst moment: When he called my answer phone and discovered I'd lied about my name on my message.

My verdict: Not my type, but better looking in real life and more likeable.

His verdict: I relaxed immediately with Laura.

Date rating: 7/10

MATCH.COM

( [www.match.com](http://www.match.com) )

Lowdown: The world's biggest online dating site.

Price: £24.95 per month.

Number of members: 8 million worldwide. I got 31 messages.

My date: Guy (below), 37, a company director from Putney, described himself as 'easy-going and sociable, with an irreverent sense of humour. Looking for a fun-loving girl with a keen sense of independence and intellectual curiosity.'

Reality: I suspect Guy is at least 10 years older than he claims as his chest hair was white (his shirt was half unbuttoned - lovely). He also lied about his height as he was shorter than me. And 'easy going'? He kept moaning about the (excellent) service.

The Date: The Duke of Clarence, Old Brompton Road. Got off to a bad start - I felt angry and embarrassed when I arrived and discovered Guy had used my job to get us a table. And I'm surprised he says he wants an independent girl after he insisted on choosing my meal and ordering for me. Over dinner he started shooting me knowing looks and saying, 'You'll go soon because it's only work for you,' so I stayed for three hours to prove him wrong.

Worst moments: Discovering I had asked his friend out on another dating site. Guy telling me there was a barrier between us and I was 'holding back'.

My verdict: I don't fancy him looks- or personality-wise.

His verdict: I found Laura good company but I'm not sure there was much chemistry.

Date rating: 4/10

MY SINGLE FRIEND ( [www.mysinglefriend.com](http://www.mysinglefriend.com) )

Lowdown: Budding matchmakers register and describe their single friends: a perfect opportunity for bored married folk to meddle in your love life.

Price: Free until 15 February and then £20 for four months' subscription.

Number of members: 6,500 in London, 12,500 in the UK. I got only nine messages - I'm blaming my friend's (well-meant) description: 'Laura has bizarre gaps in her general knowledge and interesting personality quirks'.

My date: Nick (above), 27, a marketing executive from Fulham, is 'fun-loving, witty and smartly turned out. He is really sporty (plays football) and looking for a sporty girl.'

Reality: I expected a cocky footballer and was so worried by his desire for a 'sporty girl' that I asked my housemate if I should try to look flat-chested. But in fact Nick was quiet and sweet and not a fitness fanatic. He confessed he is also seeing another girl on the same dating site.

The Date: The Slug & Lettuce, Notting Hill. I was horrified when Nick suggested meeting in the Slug & Lettuce - I find them a bit lager-louty. Spent 15 minutes searching for it - before I discovered he actually meant All Bar One. I stayed for two hours before bailing to meet my mates.

Worst moment: When he asked what I was doing the following day and I said 'dating someone else' without thinking.

My verdict: I can see why Nick is on the site <\<>- he's the sort of person I'd recommend but wouldn't date myself.

His verdict: We got on well - thankfully there were no awkward silences.

Date rating: 6/10

DATINGDIRECT ( [www.datingdirect.com](http://www.datingdirect.com) )

Lowdown: The UK's largest online dating service. Most members are professionals between 25 and 45.

Price: £39.95 for three months or £99.95 for yearly membership.

Number of members: 3.2 million users in the UK. I got 138 messages in three days.

My date: James (above), 28, a web advertising manager from Muswell Hill. He wrote: 'I'm a people person - confident, creative and honest. I am looking for someone fun and feisty.'

Reality: On meeting I knew instantly he wasn't my type but couldn't tell before because his online photos are taken from a distance - and one is even of the back of his head. Describes his build as muscular which I don't agree with. I assumed James would be 'feisty' like his ideal date <\<>- but he isn't.

The Date: The Giraffe pub, Islington. Met for a drink but I scarpered after an hour when I realised I was zoning out of the conversation and mentally planning my dinner.

Worst moment: Not being able to remember his name.

My verdict: A friendly bloke but we didn't connect at all.

His verdict: At first Laura seemed hesitant, but she is a charming girl who would have no trouble getting a date.

Date rating: 4/10

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## HOW TO INTERNET DATE

1. Choose your dating site.
2. Complete an online profile describing yourself and what you're looking for.
3. You'll have a personal messaging email account created by the site where you can receive and send messages (that way, for security, no one has any real-life contact details).
4. Search for suitable dates by criteria such as age, location, income or education. Then message the ones you fancy.
5. Aim for quality and quantity of messages - the more you send, the more you're likely to receive. After exchanging messages, daters often chat on the phone before arranging to meet up.

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People from London and the South-East make up a third of all internet daters in the UK.

While the national average is one in seven people successfully passing the beautifulpeople.net rating process, in London the success rate is one in five.

Two out of five singletons between the ages of 21 and 50 do use, have used or intend to use an online dating service.

A third of internet daters admitted to lying in their profile, according to a Nielsen NetRatings survey.

The average age of dating-site members in the UK is 32.

The UK online dating market is worth £12 million and should grow to £47 million by 2008, according to dating site **parship.co.uk**.

DatingDirect.com gains 50 per cent more new members during January than in any other month.

On average, dating sites comprise 60 per cent males and only 40 per cent females. The reverse is true with speed dating and singles events.

Fifty per cent more people now judge the internet a safe and suitable place to find a partner, compared with just six months ago.

There are nine million single people in the UK.