

Life & Style



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There's a whirr, a green clock flashes and I'm connected. A face appears on my computer screen and suddenly I'm talking to Matt from London: "Hi Victoria, is this your first time?" Yes, I'm a Skye Candy first-timer and I've no idea how I'm going to get through the next six minutes.



This is Skye's new video speed-dating device, the brainchild of 39-year-old British graphic designer Melonie Ryan and just one ripple in the new wave of dating events surging through London. Skye Candy, free to use, is officially available to anyone registered on Skype from 14 February. After signing up and choosing your partner preferences, you can "date" up to 10 people in one session, for six minutes each. After your video chat, you have one minute to rate your date - Yes or No - and the option of swapping contact details afterwards.

Just in time for Valentine's Day, London's dating scene has stepped up its game plan. We've moved on from walking into a bar, whipping out a tacky chat-up line and, if we're very lucky, finding the love of our lives. Now our sense of adventure is fuelled by a need for instant gratification.

Love coach Matthew Hussey believes we Brits are still inherently bad at asking people out. He says: "The internet has capitalised on this problem - all these online dating sites (like friend referral site MySingleFriend.com and the gay version PinkCloverClub.com or, worse, Beautifulpeople.com for attractive people only) cut out the hard bit of having to physically ask someone for a drink. Interactive stuff may take away the fear factor but it's important to see someone in the flesh, too."

With that in mind, does Skype live up to the hype? Well, the clock is ticking and there's no question that our conversation is flowing but I can't help feeling I'd rather have one face to face. Six minutes don't leave me with much, so I only give Matt a friendliness rating of "kinda good" from a possible "hi 5 superstar" or "boo hoo".

Sure, it's an idle alternative - all I've have to do is click a few buttons - but Skye Candy does bridge the gap between the unreality of talking to someone without being present and having a shared experience. Testament to its success are the 12,000 beta users worldwide, 612 of whom are Londoners. But if some single city dwellers enjoy the anonymity of this service, others prefer to be more proactive, which the introduction agencies have switched onto.

For example, Sharon Hegarty, marketing director of bespoke London matchmaking service Just Courting, says: "We offered experience dates early on. A third of our clients choose to cook meals or play rounds of virtual golf as they're good ice-breakers, especially if you're a first-time or nervous dater."

Indeed, there are limitless opportunities for London's single adventure seekers. The first Shoot Dating event took place last year at The Turkish Bath House off Liverpool Street, and the company's CEO, Brett Jefferson Stott, has hopes for a 2010 event after he saw three couples swap numbers. Here, singletons are grouped together and given different photo tasks to complete within 30 minutes. You might find yourself photographing a stranger or having to find some fancy dress. "People have a great sense of adventure. Give them a lovely venue and some fun games and they just want to get creative," says Jefferson Stott.

If you want a lover with a good appetite, Anna Venturi's first Italian cookery speed-dating evening, Love at First Bite, will be held tonight. She founded her corporate cookery company, Venturi's Table, in 2005 but after "the business types started canoodling in the corner" realised that she should latch onto the love factor. The advantages are endless, it seems: "With 22 people in the room, that's 11 potential partners, which isn't bad going for three hours," says Venturi.

Expect women kneading flour at their respective cooking areas and men moving stations every eight minutes depending on which recipe they like (or, more likely, whether or not they've hit it off with the blonde whipping up the tiramisu).

But if you're really looking for an ice breaker, it may be time to head to Naked Dating: Meetings

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Without Masks this Sunday, Valentine's Day, a bi-monthly event organised by relationship coach Jan Day who runs workshops on intimacy and sexuality. You're not expected to de-robe (thank goodness) but rather to practise being the real you without any pressure or falseness - looking into each other's eyes, touching hands and conversing. The antithesis of internet dating, this is definitely adrenaline-fuelled but it does mean having to ditch that British pride and start communicating.

And if the prospect of that sounds terrifying, Matt in cyberspace is still waiting for a Yes.

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Free, www.skyecandy.com

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14 February, £97/day including lunch and tea, www.janday.com

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Find your literary love match at the British Library. Mingle on 11 February, £5, www.bl.uk

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Love Tent at the Big Chill festival, 5-8 August, www.shootexperience.com

Italian cookery speed-dating

Tonight and tomorrow, £55/3.5 hours, www.venturis-table.com

Supermarket dating

9 February, Wembley branch of Asda, free, www.asda.co.uk

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