

As disillusion with dating apps grows, a new way to search for romance has blossomed. Welcome to the exclusive world of the £10,000 matchmakers and their clients. Rohan Banerjee joins the party

The price of *love*

Illustrations by KATHERINE LAM



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ithin a private room upstairs at The Phene pub in Chelsea, two opposing camps of men and women hug the walls. There's a distinctly Year 7 disco vibe to the evening – if the Year 7s could afford Cartier watches and Bottega Veneta handbags. Everyone here is clearly a high achiever, with the baubles to show for it, but there's a nervousness in the air, too – finding a partner is not easy.

Welcome to the £10,000 dating scene. For, while the use of dating apps has plummeted in the past year, people are still looking for love, and they're prepared to pay to find it.

It takes an hour, a few potent citrus cocktails, and some encouragement from professional matchmakers positioned strategically around the space, before any skirmishing starts. But at length, the conversations become more fluid as a playlist of '90s and noughties bangers warms up the group of about 20 Generations X and Y singletons from the worlds of finance, property development and marketing.

This particular evening has been organised by Bond the Agency, a matchmaking service based in London, which charges the eye-watering sum for a year's membership. Attendance is usually higher, claims co-founder Charlotte Ball, but it's only two weeks before Christmas. Despite the relatively modest numbers – Bond has about 300 active members – the mood is good. The canapés, including Devonshire crab blinis and honey-glazed pigs in blankets, are certainly above average, and the guests seem to be making sincere attempts to get to know each other.

This sort of quarterly event is secondary to Bond's main product: bespoke romantic 'headhunting'. After an initial 30-minute phone conversation, there's an in-person interview lasting an hour. Ball says this is for 'really getting to know the client more and talking through match preferences and what to expect on the journey. If we feel we can work together, we will send over a contract.' That entitles you to an introduction to five potential partners.

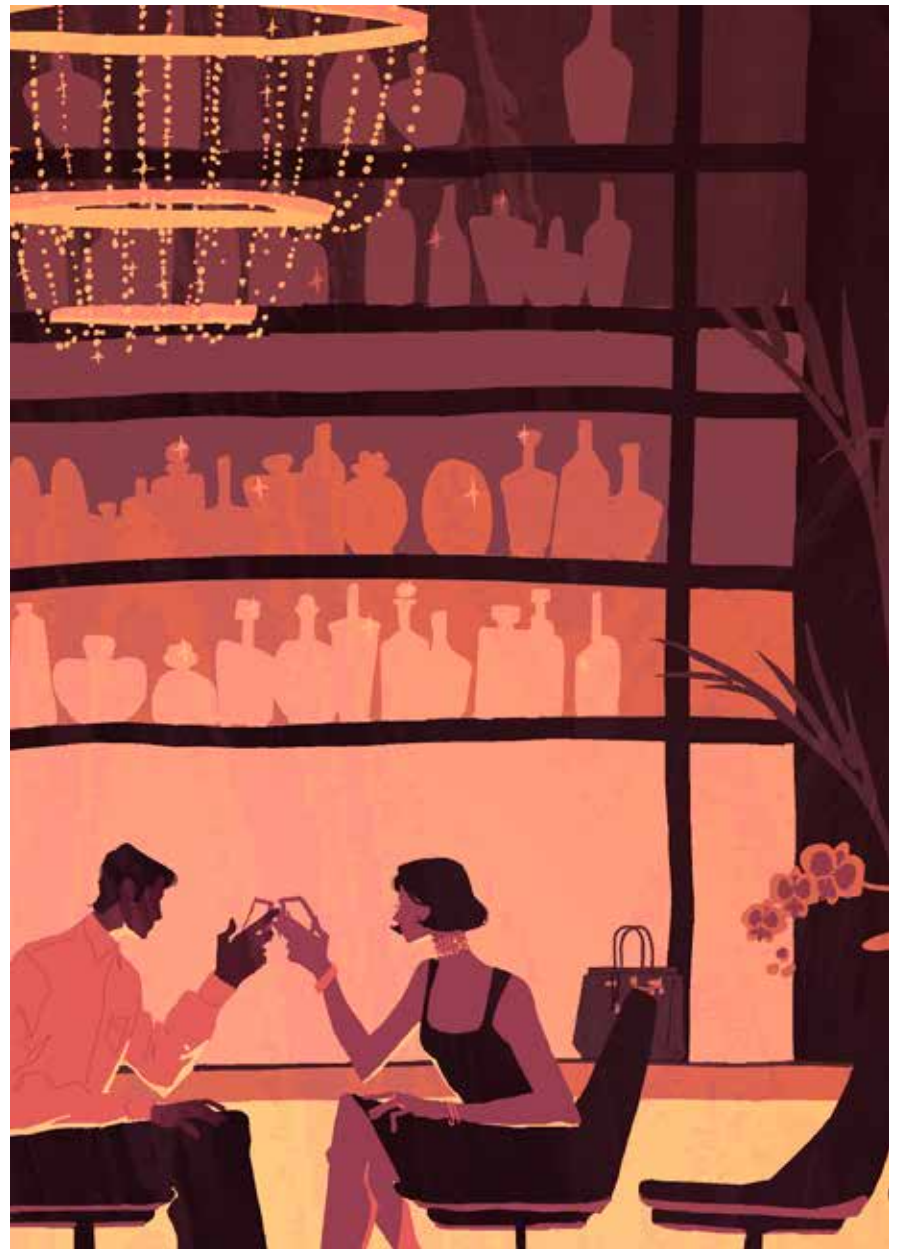
Criteria for a prospective partner can be specific 'without being unreasonable or needlessly petty', Ball clarifies. It's fine to ask for introductions to people of the same faith or with the same stance on children, but not to veto someone based on eye colour. Physical attraction is important, but Ball's clients 'usually prioritise other things'.

The events, Ball explains, are designed as mixers where members can choose to mingle with singletons they've already been on dates with, catch up with their matchmaker, or simply meet new people. And there are other such companies also vying to pair up cash-rich, lovelorn clients.

Around 1.4 million people in the UK abandoned the mobile dating scene between May 2023 and December 2024, according to Ofcom's Online Nation report, with a dip of 16 per cent in the usership of the 10 most popular apps. Tinder experienced the largest exodus, with more than half a million people leaving the platform. Bumble and Hinge lost 368,000 and 131,000 users respectively in the same period. The invitation-only dating app Raya was knocked by revelations just before Christmas that Lily Allen had joined the network to spy on her husband of four years, actor David Harbour. The couple have since separated. They'd met on the very same site in 2019.

The technology once praised for its convenience has become viewed as 'scattergun', says Michelle Begy, the founder of Ignite Dating. Rather than the 'paralysis by choice' that she says swiping right leads to, how much better to home in on 'the one'. Her agency has offices in London and the Midlands and charges tens of thousands of pounds for some of its services.

But Begy is not totally anti-app. 'I think they can serve



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different purposes,' she says, a tactful nod to hook-up culture. 'However, I think if your aim is finding a life partner, then it can be very hard to cut through the noise. You can spend a lot of time swiping, a lot of time going on dates with people you're never going to see again, whose values, aspirations and intentions might not match up with your own.'

Where apps are a lottery, Begy suggests that matchmaking appeals in its offer of focus and a personal touch. 'I think the human element is important,' she says. 'People want to get back to basics. They like the idea of being introduced and the person having been vouched for by someone who really understands what they're after and cares about the outcome. Not everything needs to be an algorithm or AI.'

Mairead Molloy is the global managing director of Berkeley International, a matchmaking agency for high-net-worth individuals (we're talking £30 million in assets). But she prickles at the idea that organisations such as hers commodify relationships. 'It's not like you're buying people from a shop,' she says. 'The money is an investment in a journey of you really finding out what you want and need in a partner. You're also paying for a personal and dedicated guide.'

What qualifies matchmakers to do their jobs? It's hard to reach a definitive answer. They all claim expertise. Some, like Begy and her team, have accreditations (although vocational

rather than academic) in psychology, but the profession is not as regulated as some – how could it be? There are matchmaking trade bodies that offer certifications, but really, signing up for a matchmaker hinges on a level of good faith.

Begy points out, though, that clients handing over large amounts of money make their feelings very clear if they don't believe the service they are receiving is worth it. 'You can't just claim to be good at matchmaking if you're not. We're judged on our results more than anything else,' says Begy, who is qualified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation assessments.

For most matchmaking agencies, the fees cover consultations, introductions to potential partners, and 24-hour, round-the-clock coaching on wardrobe, conversation topics, navigating emotions, dating etiquette, active listening, ideas for dates, relationship dynamics and more. How many introductions are made varies from agency to agency, but between four and six a year appears standard, usually spread out every couple of months.

Ball is quick to defend the pricing for elite matchmaking, arguing that it is 'in step' with the budgets of the audience the industry is targeting. There is also a safety element, Begy notes, in how diligently and deeply clients are vetted before being taken on. This can involve an ID verification process and digital footprint check, including a historical social media review. The

spectre of *The Tinder Swindler* still looms large over ultra-high-net-worth dating circles; the 2022 documentary into the Gucci-clad, private-jetting con artist Simon Leviev, who seduced women with his smoke-and-mirrors luxury lifestyle. 'It's a lot harder to pretend to be someone you're not or to fake your intentions,' Begy says. 'We wouldn't just take someone because they paid the money. If someone had a bad experience with them, it would defeat the whole point.'

Discretion is also highly valued in elite matchmaking. Celebrities or top business executives may want to date, but it is 'not appropriate' for them to be on mainstream dating sites, says Begy, who counts five billionaires and a couple of FTSE 100 chief executives among her clients. But, she points out, Ignite doesn't necessarily 'wealth match, we lifestyle match... We match on values, aspirations and [compatible] future plans.'

When it comes to high-profile clients, Ignite takes action 'so that they are not discoverable, they have a private photoshoot so images are clean and not online. We use initials rather than names. Our clients really value that we go to such lengths to protect them.' The desire for discretion, says one of Ignite's clients, a 45-year-old man who works in the aviation industry, is not attached to any feeling of stigma. He isn't embarrassed by his romantic life, but likes being able to protect his 'professional reputation' from gossip or speculation.

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At Bond's event in Chelsea, one attendee, a well-known Instagram influencer in her 40s, reflects that she has struggled in relationships with men who earn less than she does. 'I don't care about it, personally, but they do,' she says. 'Often when things start to progress, and they find out I earn more, they get upset. At least here, I know that this is not going to be an issue.'

While, naturally, the end goal for clients is to find a long-term partner, many also appear to enjoy the process. One financial services professional in his 50s using Ignite has so far met four prospective partners. 'The dates have all gone well and they've been a better "fit" each time,' he says. 'The interesting bit is that the matchmakers have managed to understand what actually works for me as opposed to what I thought worked for me. They're disconcertingly good at working me out. All the matches have led to more than one date and the third [match] was what I'd genuinely describe as a relationship.'

Matchmaking is not a guarantee, says Begy, but it's a way of 'de-risking' the dating landscape. 'Everything is really carefully curated, including the client,' she explains. Ignite will address 'attachment styles, intimacy [whether physical or emotional]' or overcoming biases such as wanting to date only people with a certain characteristic. 'We guide and coach people to be the very best version of them, and then we headhunt the very best matches,' Begy adds.

Dates can and do go wrong from time to time, Begy admits, but the non-judgmental forum for discussion afterwards means that any mistakes 'never happen twice'. And, she says, the number of dates that do go well far outstrips the ones that don't.

According to Molloy, this is because of 'customisation and professionalisation... We don't go on hunches; we do huge amounts of research.' It may not be anyone's idea of a 'meet cute', but if you're cash-rich, time-poor and looking to meet someone like-minded, a professional matchmaker might make perfect sense. ●

