

SINGLE AND NEW IN TOWN AT OVER 50, KATRINA ALLEN TURNED TO THE INTERNET WHERE SHE SOON FOUND THAT "FRIENDSHIP FIRST" IS THE WAY TO GO...

Back in 2004, I met a Kiwi woman and fell in love at first sight... We went on holiday to New Zealand and somehow ended up living there. After 10 years, I came back to London, minus the Kiwi. It was then I realised that I had hardly any close friends left in London – some had moved away, others I'd lost contact with and a couple of them had died. I was by then in my 50s and besides recovering from a painful break-up, I didn't know where to start creating a new friendship group, let alone seeking out a new partner.

But a couple of new options had sprung up while I was overseas. One was the internet dating scene, which I simply wouldn't have considered 10 years previously. It was seen as a bit desperate in those days. Not now, it would seem. Someone suggested I try Guardian Soulmates, which was well-established (it celebrated its 10th anniversary this year) so was likely to have lots of subscribers. As a Guardian reader, it seemed perfect. My political stance is more or less left of centre, I consider myself to be well-educated and I work in the media. I was bound to meet someone suitable.

So, full of enthusiasm, I joined up. It wasn't cheap (I paid £96 for a six-month membership) but it was surely worth it. The "likes" and messages started coming in. A couple of women seemed interesting. I made contact with one and we arranged to meet up. At one point, she told me that she was highly critical of herself and others. No kidding. "Smoking is foul," she exclaimed when I owned up to having the odd fag. And she managed to nurse one glass of wine for the whole evening, while I confess to being a bit of a "glugger". But the main thing I couldn't deal with was the white handbag. We made no further contact.

The second one had an emu farm. Now that sounded wonderfully weird. When we met, I found her to be uptight, thin-lipped and she made virtually no eye contact, a bit like an emu really. There was no second date.

I met a few others. They were mostly highly intelligent and very interesting, but they were usually rather intense and I have a tendency to be somewhat flippant and un-PC. Perhaps I wasn't the average Guardian reader after all.

At the end of my six-month subscription, I decided not to renew. But one day, to my fury, while checking my bank account, I noticed they had removed £32 for a one-month renewal. It hadn't occurred to me that I had

to actively cancel. But I used that month to contact other lesbians of various ages to see what they thought of the site. By then I wasn't looking for dates but for opinions.

Jude, 25, volunteered that she'd found two lovers via Soulmates but neither worked out. "The first one became violent. I ran a mile. The second turned out to have mental health problems. These are not things you can glean from an internet profile."

Kate is in her 60s and lives in France. I was curious as to why she would subscribe to an internet site that is UK-based. "Really, I wanted to make new friends rather than seek out a partner and I have made a few, although the distance makes it hard. One of the best things about Soulmates is that I located a long-lost friend." I rather like Kate. Through Soulmates we've become Facebook buddies and I hope we will meet up (next time I happen to be passing through the Pyrenees...).

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I then met Annette who told me that before she joined she did a bit of research. "I looked at how many women there were on the site in my age group (55-65), with a profile photo and living in central London. There were precisely 37 and I knew about a third of them. Once you scratch the surface, it's actually all rather illusory. I didn't join up."

However, a friend told me she knows a couple in their 50s who met 10 years ago through Soulmates and are now in a civil partnership. So there are, of course, success stories.

And Jane (who is in her 40s) dated someone who told her about *Meetup.com*, "and I have Soulmates to thank for that".

Meetup.com launched in the US in 2002 and allows anyone to form a local group based on shared interest or join an existing group. There are now around 1,400 LGBT groups in 25 countries. It's a brilliant way to meet people and the best thing, of course, is that it doesn't involve that nerve-racking experience of a blind date.

To find a group, just go onto the website and search the activities/groups which interest you. Besides groups for gay women who

are into live music or pole-dancing, more niche interests are catered for by groups like Bitter Women (for gay women who like real ale), Queer Knitting and LGBT Geeks. And then there is the intriguing group called Augmented Reality. Meetups also cater well for bisexuals, with groups such as London Lesbian and Bisexual Cyclists and Bi Female Friends, as well as Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women Friendship group (35+).

June, herself bisexual, said she didn't get far with internet dating and felt rejected on the basis of her sexual identity. For bi women, an advantage of meetups is that you meet people as part of an inclusive group rather than being pre-judged because of the identity label on your profile.

I joined a couple of the London meetups, one of which was run by Gilly, who has become a good friend. Like me, she had returned to London after the break-up of a long relationship.

The first meeting I went to was run by LOL (Lesbians of London)," Gilly told me. "There were just 12 of us and we went round a London market. The women were really interesting, intelligent and diverse. Then I went to a dining group. When that closed down I thought, 'Why not start my own?' It costs me £90 per year subscription but that does cover up to three groups. I run the Dining Meetup, an over-40s group and the third is a discussion group. I also run a book club, which is sponsored by the holiday company Diva Destinations. Some people charge their members but I don't like to do that as I think that once money comes into the equation it changes the whole dynamic."

She adds, "One great thing is that Americans and Aussies who are just here on holiday have come to meetings and had a fantastic time. So if you're on holiday in, say, New York, it'd be a great way of meeting locals. You can just arrange it all online before you go".

I go to a lot of Gilly's over-40s meetups and they are great fun. We've been to a karaoke bar, a prison restaurant, gallery tours (guided by an art historian who is a member) and had some great Sunday lunches. And, yes, people have met their partners there. The big advantage over internet-dating is that one meets first as friends. I think I've finally found my niche. **D**

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