



Are dating apps over?

ELLA GAUCI GOES speed-dating to see if IRL events are really the answer to finding love

I dated 17 women in one evening. No, I'm not some sapphic lothario who's here to steal your girlfriend. After spending the last three years swiping on apps to no end, I was bored of digital dating. I wanted to meet someone in real life. So I took the logical next step and went lesbian speed-dating.

Since the 2010s, dating apps have become a way of life for singles looking for love. In fact, LGBTQIA people are actually more likely to use dating apps than their straight counterparts. But in our post-pandemic world, daters have steadily become more disillusioned with online love. Following the lockdown era of the pandemic – which created a surge in online

“Speed dating taught me that single queer people are out there”

dating app users – downloads of apps like Tinder, Hinge and Bumble have been steadily declining.

Why? Because we're sick of them. Exasperated singletons on apps such as TikTok have begun to express their disdain for boring small talk, ghosting and the rising trend of what has been dubbed NATO (not attached to the outcome) dating. Having experienced my fair share of online dating horror stories, I decided that enough was enough. It was time to have my own “meet-cute” in real life.

And that's how I found myself in a pub on a Sunday at my first ever speed-dating event. Organised by the team at Lesbian Island, each date was assigned just two minutes. While I had been on plenty of dates with strangers before, this felt doubly nerve-wracking. Was I really interesting, attractive or funny enough to make someone want to date me after



just two minutes? I'd had longer conversations with the guy at the corner shop who tops up my gas card.

But I didn't have much time for existential thinking as the bell rang, signalling the start of my first date. All my nerves melted away as my date picked up one of the icebreaker questions that were lying on the table. While physical attraction naturally plays a part in speed-dating, I was amazed at how quickly you could find a spark with someone. But just as quickly as the conversation had started, Lesbian Island's very own Cupid Anna rang the bell for the next date to begin.

When Anna began Lesbian Island, she mainly focused on creating exciting new club nights in South London. But she began to notice that there were lots of solo attendees who weren't that bothered about nightlife. They just wanted community. And thus, the inaugural Lesbian Speed Dating series was born. And not only was she going to play Cupid, she was going to make it affordable.

Having worked in the iconic

lesbian bar Vanilla in Manchester, when Anna first moved to London she was initially shocked by some of the queer events on offer. Not only did she find some of them expensive, but also lacking the warmth and connection she had experienced up north.

When we think of speed-dating we might imagine 50+ divorcees in a village hall, but Anna made sure that Gen Z were not only going to be included in her new series but given their own space. "There's definitely a thing about the word 'lesbian' which is more scary to Gen Z," Anna tells me. "They initially didn't know how to take that, and there were lots of questions about how inclusive or exclusive it was."

On Anna's magical Lesbian Island, everyone is welcome. As I moved around the room, I met people from all around the world, each with their own stories, anecdotes and jokes. Often the dating scene can feel incredibly small and insular. There's the classic joke that you'll inevitably date your friend's ex. But what speed-dating taught me is that single queer people

Photos from recent Lesbian Island events; far right, Anna Furnivall, founder of Lesbian Island. For more, follow [@lesbian_island](https://www.instagram.com/lesbian_island).

are out there. They don't all exist within the confines of a Tinder profile.

The topic of dating apps naturally came up on a number of the dates that evening. Some told me that they had never used them, and others told me that they'd permanently deleted them after getting sick of flakey dates and intense situationships.

While the obvious purpose of the evening was to find love, Anna said that she's been thrilled to see how many friendships and groups have formed after the events. From flirting to making friends, the evening provided a truly safe queer space to express ourselves however we wanted. It made me realise that my "type" wasn't necessarily as rigid as dating apps had led me to believe. Human connection and conversation could tell me much more about a person than just the way they looked.

The next day I received a text saying that I had secured four matches. So maybe I *am* a bit of a lothario. Anna's told me I have to invite her to the wedding if they go well... **D**