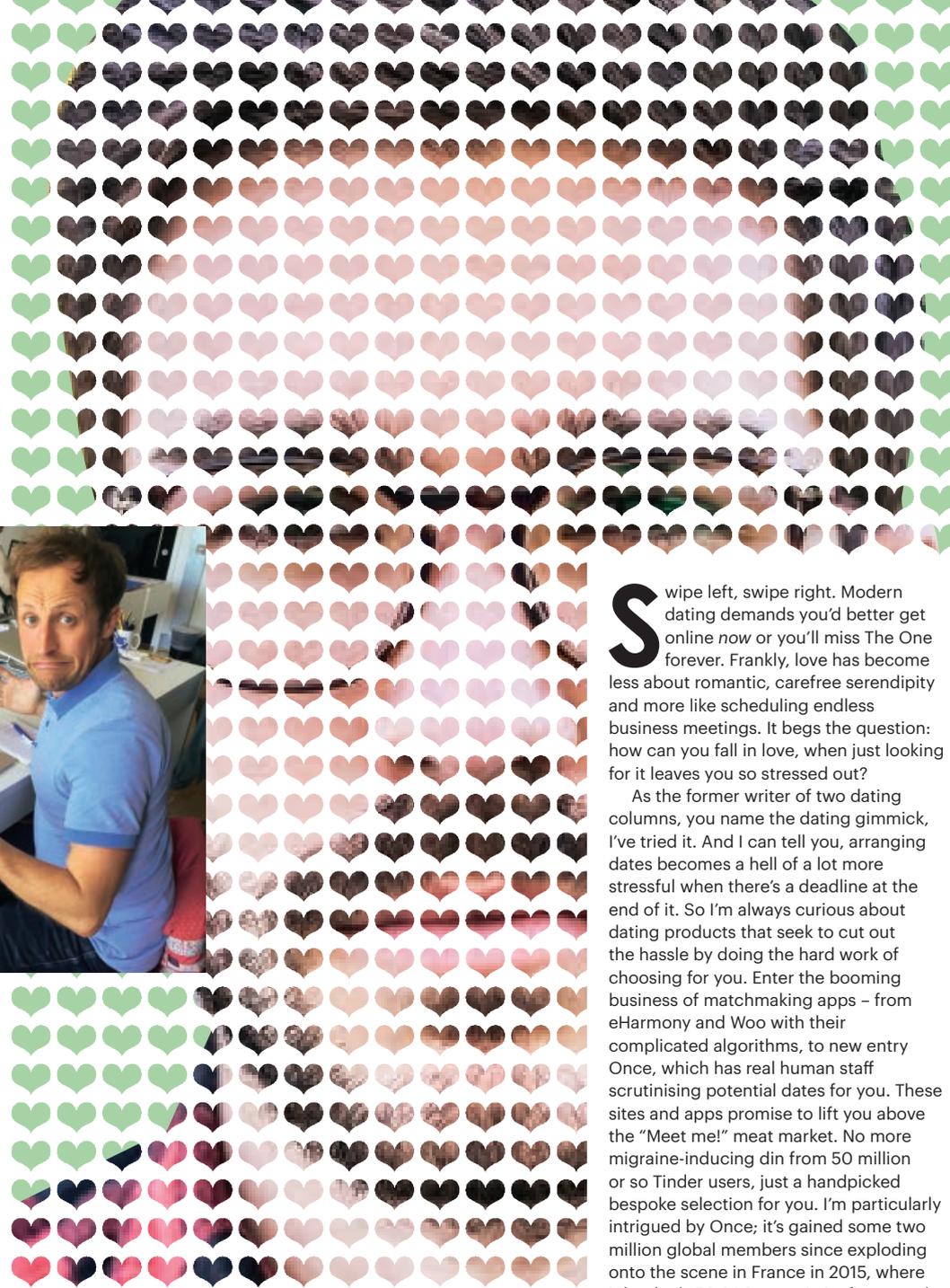


# My day as an

*SO, WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WITH OUR LOVE LIVES IN THEIR HANDS? ANDY JONES TAKES US INSIDE ONCE, THE NEW MASTER DATING APP, TO FIND OUT WHAT IT TAKES TO CREATE THE PERFECT MATCH*



# online matchmaker



Swipe left, swipe right. Modern dating demands you'd better get online now or you'll miss The One forever. Frankly, love has become less about romantic, carefree serendipity and more like scheduling endless business meetings. It begs the question: how can you fall in love, when just looking for it leaves you so stressed out?

As the former writer of two dating columns, you name the dating gimmick, I've tried it. And I can tell you, arranging dates becomes a hell of a lot more stressful when there's a deadline at the end of it. So I'm always curious about dating products that seek to cut out the hassle by doing the hard work of choosing for you. Enter the booming business of matchmaking apps – from eHarmony and Woo with their complicated algorithms, to new entry Once, which has real human staff scrutinising potential dates for you. These sites and apps promise to lift you above the "Meet me!" meat market. No more migraine-inducing din from 50 million or so Tinder users, just a handpicked bespoke selection for you. I'm particularly intrigued by Once; it's gained some two million global members since exploding onto the scene in France in 2015, where it hooked 150,000 users in its first month.

Like any dating app, Once requires the usual loading up of a profile, ticking boxes and writing your interests. But what happens next is the interesting part. First off, an algorithm selects around 15-20

people who are broadly similar to you and in your area, before a person you've never met picks a 'suitable' match for you. Users get offered a new match every day at 12pm, before deciding whether they want to meet them IRL. Instead of trawling endless faces, a midday mystery man or woman simply pops into your inbox.

But, you may well ask, who the hell are these people with your love lives in their hands? What qualifications do they need to make the grade as a Once matchmaker? There's only one way to find out.

## Inside Once HQ

In the fashionable Exmouth Market offices of Once's London headquarters sits the hub for modern hook-ups. Lots of natural wood, gleaming Apple Macs and big Kilner jars of fizzy sweets. A balcony runs the length of the room, no doubt so Once matchmakers can stare wistfully into the distance and ponder our romantic issues. The staff are freakishly young. Precocious data junkies and designers sit side by side amid the online thrum of hooking up – no one here looks over 25. Least of all, my hostess for the day, UK matchmaking manager Amélie Guerard, 25, who perfectly fits the dating app's ethos of understated French cool.

Once is all about the pictures. After the algorithm has worked its magic – selected a pool of candidates using information such as interests, age and height – the process starts to get complicated, says Guerard. "The Once matchmaker puts people together based on details that they see in their images. They only get the users' pictures to go on – all other information has to remain private. Look at the image, make a judgement and select a match."

I'm not convinced. How is this so different from the image swiping of Tinder? And surely falling in love should amount to more than a stranger's snap decision on a photo? It sounds very superficial – but, as Once insists on having lots of photos of each user, apparently you can go full Cluedo on each person. "People select pictures which say a lot about themselves – a favourite holiday, a music festival, a pouty ▶

model pose," says Guerard. "You need to look at all the elements in the pictures to try and understand their character, and then the same again for potential matches. Are they partying, or an outdoor type? Do they look high maintenance, low maintenance? Everything matters."

Matchmaker training is hardcore, though the app learns your 'likes' and tries to throw up similar types. "There is no CV for this job," says Guerard. "Our matchmakers are interviewed and asked 'Who is this person's ideal match?' 'Tell me five things about the person in this photo?' and so on, and then when they get the gig, they are rigorously checked. You should be clocking around 30% success rate of your matches 'liking' each other."

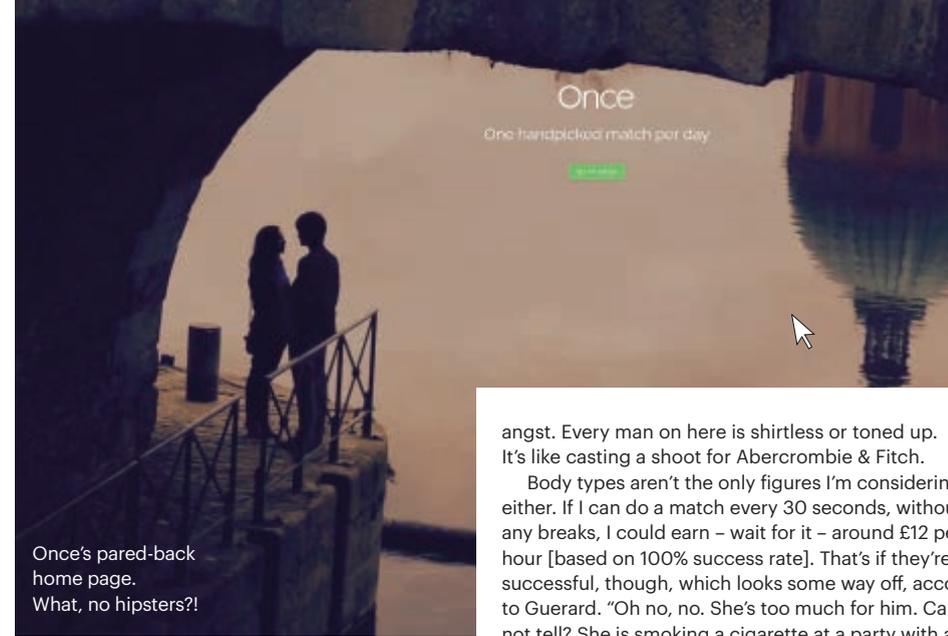
Then, very seriously, she adds, "This is our baby – don't waste your time by wasting mine. I can tell immediately if someone is just doing this job for the money or if they really give a shit. There is no 'They'll do'. If you drop below 15%, I may just give you a call. We do sack people if they are reckless or silly."

Currently, 65% of the app's 'date doctors' are women. "They are more observant and intuitive," notes Guerard. But really, it's a numbers game. While matchmakers get to pick their own working hours and often work remotely, they only get paid per successful match. So, if your hook-ups don't fancy each other, you don't get a bean – and even then, you only get 10p per match. "Our best matchmaker is a thirtysomething farmer's wife in France who earns around £2,300 per month. It's an odd science – the more you match, the more keen your eye becomes for details," she says. "My own percentages are up at a 54% success rate – and I can get a successful match within 15-20 seconds of opening a profile."

No pressure then, I think to myself, as I am given my matchmaking debut.

### Playing Cupid

Twenty minutes in and I've fallen in love six times, dismissed a guy because he looks like a jerk from my old office and got serious eye strain. I start by taking



Once's pared-back home page. What, no hipsters?!

notes – a careful shopping list for each profile, such as what I assume they like, their style, etc – but that goes out the window as I try to keep up with the suggested 30-second match rate. Clacking away at the profiles manically, I am now part Cupid, part sweatshop, throwing love at the wall and seeing what sticks. It's all rapid fingers and brute animal instinct.

I'm fully down the rabbit hole musing over the personalities of each profile: 'Ooh, a floral theme in her bedroom. Does that mean she might like picnics on a summer's day?' and 'Hmmm, he's got his face painted at a festival – definitely will suit this girl in denim cut-offs and Hunter wellies'. I'm surprised by the pressure. Each smiling candidate feels like setting up my best pals and my hands regularly go to my face because I can't decide. Staring into the doe eyes of a profile named Charlotte, I'm bemused: other than a messy dressing table behind her, I protest I have zilch to go on. "Oh, come on, look at her nails and hair; this woman takes herself very seriously," says Guerard. "But she also looks fun – see the cheeky face she has."

It's like *CSI: Miami* for dating. I'm staring at the pictures, trying to spot the smoking gun which blows their personality wide open, Guerard's advice ringing in my ears: "If she doesn't wear make-up and doesn't fuss about her hair, what does that tell you? You have to be realistic – maybe you wouldn't match her with a guy posing with his shirt off or in a designer suit." Oh, and that's the other thing, I'm getting major body

Photographs: Getty Images

angst. Every man on here is shirtless or toned up. It's like casting a shoot for Abercrombie & Fitch.

Body types aren't the only figures I'm considering, either. If I can do a match every 30 seconds, without any breaks, I could earn – wait for it – around £12 per hour [based on 100% success rate]. That's if they're all successful, though, which looks some way off, according to Guerard. "Oh no, no. She's too much for him. Can you not tell? She is smoking a cigarette at a party with all her mates; his main picture is him out running." It's emotionally taxing. The crown of matchmaker starts to weigh heavily.

### Midday make or break

As the staff count down the seconds to the midday deadline – which is met with a round of applause and a cheer – I imagine the 200,000 users across Britain excitedly chattering about who they might get. Like Christmas, but with more potential for disappointment.

"In the beginning, you second-guess yourself, but then you get more instinctive. I don't even flinch now, and have a success rate of around 33%," says Ines, 27, who fits 15 hours of Once shifts around her finance degree. We're both in agreement about the hardest candidates to match. "Selfies with no background are a nightmare," she says. "You then need to go micro – how much make-up do they wear? If they're a guy, do they shave regularly? How long did they take over this picture? That can tell you a lot about their personality type – carefree or uptight and so on."

I am surprised by how hurt I feel when I miss the mark. What if I've given anyone a permanent complex with a duff match? But part of the appeal of Once is that there is always a new option at midday tomorrow. And I'm not downhearted for long: I discover my success rate is 56%. Not bad, right?

Playing matchmaker is addictive. It's like a fruit machine giving you that constant rush of an instant win – potentially making both a match and some cash. But I learn something about compatibility too. I learn to forensically study the character, but also follow my instincts. It's amazing what you can tell from someone's eyes – are they smiling, shy, bored, uncomfortable? – and the assorted things in the back of pictures. I'll never look at a selfie in the same way again. It's also taught me that when it comes to love, remember that you're not looking for approval from everybody, just that one somebody. And, if it all goes wrong, I'm here for you guys. I'm applying to be a permanent matchmaker on their database.



**So, how'd I do?**  
*Andy's matches give him very honest feedback*



### BECCA, 19

"I really liked the match you gave me. Definitely my type – tall, dark and handsome and quite cheeky. We've exchanged numbers and he's asked me on a date."

**Matchmaker mark: 3.5/5**

### CHELSEA, 23

"He was my type – quite sporty and well turned out – but when I looked at his profile it said, 'Currently looking for a friend with benefits.' I did worry you may have the wrong idea about me. I haven't been matched with anybody I like yet, so I must be very hard to get right. I'm picky; I don't blame Andy for struggling."

**Matchmaker mark: 3/5**

### CHARLOTTE, 19

"I prefer guys who are in good shape but aren't too tall. Dark hair, dark eyes, bit of a tan – I can't lie, your match was definitely that. He pretty much matched everything, I was very surprised. In terms of personality, he seems similar to me – easy-going, fun, friendly. He isn't too far away from me, so it would be silly not to meet up with him."

**Matchmaker mark: 4/5 ●**