

Chapter 10

Plotting the Place for Your First Date

In This Chapter

- ▶ Using the basic rules in deciding where to go
 - ▶ Finding out which places and activities to avoid
 - ▶ Making plans with great first date ideas
 - ▶ Figuring out who pays
-

First date magic . . . flowers and chocolates, pin-striped suits and off-the-shoulder dresses, cologne, waxed legs, champagne, linen tablecloths, romantic music, candlelight, violins, laughter over lobster . . .

AAARGH!

If this is how you envision a first date, add “disappointment,” “ulcers,” and “financial ruin” to your list, because you’re setting yourself up for disaster. The ideal first date should let you get to know the other person and let the other person get to know you, without doing irreparable damage to your nervous system — or bank account or stomach lining — in the process.

First Things First

A first date may never be a relaxing experience (after all, no matter how down-to-earth you are, you’ll still worry about the broccoli in your teeth), but it doesn’t have to be ulcer material either. This section outlines the basic rules. In fact, these rules are so basic, they sound silly, but you’d be surprised how often they’re disregarded, with dire consequences. So a word to the wise: To make your first date as comfortable as possible, follow the ten rules outlined in the following sections. Doing so will increase the probability that you’ll have fun — not teeth-clenching, knuckle-biting, stomach-hurting agony that may (or may not) get you to either date two or heavy sedation.

Rule 1: Pick an activity that you enjoy

A first date should be something that you like to do. *Do not* pick something you hate just because you think your partner will enjoy it. Although this may be a good strategy later on, the goal during the first date is to set the tone. If you choose something you like, at least you have that in common with your date (presuming, of course, that your date accepted the invitation because he or she likes the activity, too). If your date hates the idea, hopefully he or she will say something like “I really would like to spend time with you, but I hate jazz” or “I’m allergic to Chinese food” or “I get claustrophobic (car sick or whatever) in submarines.”

Picking something you enjoy has a few advantages: First, it ensures that at least one person will be having a good time. Second, it offers an insight into who you are — you know, that *honesty* thing. Third, it means that you’ve set the stage for something you can afford — since only a phony or a masochist or a nincompoop would break his or her own bank on a first date.

Rule 2: Pick an activity that you can easily afford

Don’t try and snow somebody on the first date by spending gobs of money. First of all, how do you keep that type of spending up? The dangers of throwing money around are that it makes you look cheap later, when you scale back your spending to accommodate your budget, and you never know whether your date likes *you* or your wallet. Also consider your date’s finances before suggesting an exclusive new restaurant, any formal event, dinner and dancing, or a weekend for two in the Bahamas. Even if you are footing the bill, you don’t want your date to feel like she’s out of your league.



I have a friend who likes to rent a limo and take first dates to the opera and then out for a fancy dinner. All this works out to a \$500 first date. Then he wonders why women are always using him. Puh-leeze. It’s much better to start small and build so that your date assumes you’re more invested in both of you together instead of showing off.

Rule 3: Do something that doesn’t require new clothes

New clothes are often uncomfortable, and can unexpectedly bunch, rip, or gap. Besides, why add the worry about spilling red wine on your new outfit to the other stress of a first date? Why worry about clothes when there are

more important things to worry about, like the broccoli between your front teeth or whether your date really likes you or is just being polite. Wear your happy, easy-to-wear, good luck, appropriate-to-wear clothes.



If I ran the world, I'd make sure that on first dates, everyone would wear his or her oldest, most comfy clothes; women would not shave their legs; men would not buy new after-shave; and all men and women would be who they really are, right from the get-go. Obviously, I'm not in charge. Shoes should always be shined, cuffs unfrayed, and everything neat and clean — not rigid, new, starched, and impressive.

Rule 4: Go where you can talk without getting thrown out

I know America's favorite date is a movie, but if you talk in a movie, I will personally come and haunt you. Not only is it rude to the other customers, but it puts your date in the awkward position of either siding with the people who are trying to shush you, or talking with you and getting the usher to evict you both. See the section "Good places for a first date," later in this chapter, for a list of places that are cheap and fun and where you two can chat happily away. When in doubt, take a walk.

Rule 5: Go to a place that's easy to get to

Long car, bus, train, and — God forbid — plane trips may be fun once you get to know one another, but for a first date, it's really risky. Although these trips have occasionally worked out as a way for two people to get to know one another (at least you can talk), you run the risk of using up your tolerance for one another before you arrive at your destination, and then, boy, are you both stuck. If you'd just gotten to know each other in smaller doses, however, you may have been okay.

Rule 6: Do something that isn't competitive

Avoid arm wrestling on the first date. Although some relationships thrive on tension, it's hard to put competitive feelings in a context when you don't know each other. Even if you're not competing with each other, how you deal with someone trying to beat you while the date you're trying to impress is watching gets pretty dicey. Beating someone on a first date means that one of you feels like a winner and one like a loser. Not a cool idea.



I walk fast. For years it was my primary form of exercise, and I still use it to keep in shape. When I say fast, I mean *fast*. Often, without realizing it, I've left my companions no choice but to carry on a conversation with the back of my head. Oops. The point is that different people are comfortable with different levels of activity. Bear this in mind before you suggest a Saturday hike, rollerblading, break dancing, or bungee jumping from a hovering helicopter.

Rule 7: Pick an activity that doesn't involve a lot of alcohol

Alcohol has been, is now, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future the major drug of abuse in this country (more Pilgrims drowned in the canals after getting drunk and falling overboard on Saturday nights than were killed by Native Americans). Both of you are going to feel a bit nervous anyway. Why add the temptations and problems of alcohol, especially if you have to drive home?

Rule 8: Leave time to get to know each other

A date that is chock-full of activity keeps you busy, but if the purpose is a chance to get to know one another, some quiet time is a great idea. Without a bunch of distracting noise, activity, or an audience, you can talk to and get a sense of one another.

Rule 9: Do something that doesn't involve high-ticket others

High-ticket others include friends, family, exes, kids, animals, or colleagues. Audiences are fine if you're an actor giving a performance. They are tricky if you're trying *not* to perform and just *be*, which is the point of a date. If your first date involves your parents, sibs, workmates, or people who know you and love you, the date is going to feel like an audition. You don't need other people's opinions at this point. (If you don't have enough confidence in your abilities and think you *do* need the opinions of a bunch of other people, you ought not to be dating yet.) Later on, when the two of you know each other and feel a bit more solid, showing each other off and getting feedback from your friends (always a bit dicey) may be cool, but for heaven's sake, not yet.

Rule 10: Find an activity that doesn't last more than a couple of hours

Brevity is not only the soul of wit, but it is also the essence of a good date. In *Chapter Two*, a Neil Simon play, the male lead (played by James Caan in the movie version) tells the female lead (played by Marsha Mason), after a ten-minute introduction, that he's really enjoyed their time together and thinks it's time to plan a second date. He leaves and knocks on the door. When she answers, the two begin their second date, much more relaxed.

The key is to leave 'em wanting more. If you both had a good time, you'll both eagerly anticipate date two. If one or the other of you didn't have a good time, keep in mind that one of the ways to limit the damage is to limit the time. If the date was only mildly troublesome and not prolonged agony, you may well recover and be willing to try a second date.

Exploring First Date Ideas

Some places and events lend themselves to successful first dates, and others practically scream, "What could I be thinking?!" To help you tell one from the other — would you believe that Valentine's Day is a first date no-no? — read the following sections.



If your first date is fun and relaxed, you're home free. Worst-case scenario, you may end up friends rather than potential lovers, but a casual approach decreases the probability that the two of you will be unhappy enough with each other to end up enemies.

Places and things to avoid

Following are occasions and places you want to avoid as a first date. As a rule, these events create unrealistic expectations and involve too many other people. If it's fireworks you want, get thee to a wienie roast in a gasoline jumpsuit.

- ✓ **Wedding:** Going to a wedding as a first date violates just about every single one of the ten basic rules listed earlier. If you want to quibble about Rule 6 (Do something that isn't competitive), are you really so naïve as to think your date isn't trying to figure out how to beat you out

the door when the ceremony's over? The stakes are just too high at weddings. Avoid them at all costs as a first date. In fact, because weddings are such a bad idea for a first date, I've made it the standard by which all other bad first date ideas are judged.

- ✔ **New Year's Eve party:** Oh, puh-leeeeeze, New Year's Eve is the scariest night of the year for a first date. New clothes, high expectations, lots of booze, high-ticket others — consider this a mini-wedding. Just about the only thing it lacks is a weeping mother-in-law and a crazy uncle who thinks the ladies' room is the coat check. On second thought, it just lacks the mother-in-law.
- ✔ **Valentine's Day:** Valentine's Day has all the anxiety-producing elements of a wedding, all the over-blown expectations of New Year's, *plus* the paper-Cupid-induced hope of true Romance. Valentine's Day is so potentially explosive that even couples who've been together for years approach it warily.
- ✔ **Thanksgiving dinner:** Think of how many traumas *you've* experienced at your family's Thanksgiving get-togethers: Uncle Harry getting plastered; Sister Susie crying into the crystallized yams; brother George coming out; Mom burning the turkey; and cousin Jim wanting to bring the TV to the table to watch football. Even if your family doesn't behave like this (what, you're from Pluto?), it still violates Rule 9 (Don't involve high-ticket others) big time. In short, Thanksgiving is truly a family holiday — all the more reason to avoid it as a first date.
- ✔ **Beach:** Although a great date for later on, the beach isn't first date stuff: too much skin, do you or don't you apply suntan lotion, and if you do, to what and to whom? A first date on the beach also violates Rule 5 (Go to a place that's easy to get to), Rule 10 (Find an activity that doesn't last more than a couple hours), and often Rule 3 (Do something that doesn't require new clothes).

So-so ideas

The ideas in this section, although very common, aren't necessarily your best choice for a first date. Of course, they aren't your worst choice either.

- ✔ **Movies or plays:** On the not-so-good-as-a-first-date side, going to the movies or a play doesn't give you much of an opportunity to talk, and if your tastes differ, you may have a hard time finding a show that pleases you both. On the other hand, having seen the same movie or play gives you something to talk about afterward, and, well, it *is* kinda fun sitting together in the dark worrying about whether or not to hold hands. It can also give you time to calm down a bit before you actually have to talk to or look at each other.



Make sure your date hasn't already seen the planned event or loathes the genre. If you plan to go risky — horror flick, avant garde performance piece, or nude review — check with your date or save the shock technique for date four or five.

- ✓ **Dinner:** A dinner out is a classic, but as the focus of a date, there is too much potential for an upset tummy: deciding what kind of food, the potential to spill, and that old broccoli-in-the-teeth thing, for starters. If you're not the one footing the bill, figuring out what to order that's not too expensive is also a challenge. If you're going to eat, make it a side activity rather than the date itself, or try a casual approach rather than the Ritz. Any place that has headwaiters is going to be too expensive, emotionally as well as financially. See the section "Doing the restaurant thing," later in this chapter, for more info.
- ✓ **Party:** How good a party is as a first date depends on who's hosting the party and where it is. If your date will be the only person who doesn't know everyone, and you don't know your date, it's a bit tricky. My advice is to make other plans for your first date. Of course, going to a party is a great date for later on.

Good places for a first date

Following are the cream of the first-date-ideas crop: All can feel wholesome and nonthreatening during the day and only slightly sexier after dark.

- ✓ **Museums:** At a museum, you get to meander through the halls, look at exhibits, and chat about anything that inspires you. It's a great place to get to know each other and to see each other's tastes in art — or whatever. Also, most museums are usually easy to get to and offer a place to eat (even if overpriced for what you're getting, they won't break the bank). A museum is relaxed, easy, and inexpensive and doesn't bump into any of the ten rules for first dates.
- ✓ **Amusement park:** Unless it's really hard to get to, going to an amusement park is usually fun and makes everybody feel young and carefree. The only real problems? Sticky fingers from cotton candy and rides that make you so queasy you'd give up your firstborn for an antacid tablet, but all-in-all, a good choice.
- ✓ **Walks:** You can take walks (almost) anywhere: parks, zoos, botanical gardens, and so on. It's cheap, fun, and pressure-free. Plus, you can often hold hands.
- ✓ **Street fair:** You're outside, nothing costs very much, you're around other people, and there are a lot of things to talk about. In the winter, you can substitute county fairs, car shows, boat shows, antiques shows,

and even zoos and botanical gardens, all places where you can move around, nothing is very expensive, you're outdoors, and you can talk without interrupting people.

- ✓ **An auction:** An auction is a fun date as well as long as you don't get carried away and resist the temptation to bid. I actually had a great time at both a livestock auction and a farm machinery sell-off although I did buy a cow at the former once for a guy I was seeing — but that's another story.
- ✓ **Outdoor activities in general:** Sporting events, concerts, county fairs, zoos, and picnics are great ideas for first dates. You can talk, and because you're outside, everything feels less claustrophobic. It's easy and relaxed, and figuring out what to wear usually isn't a problem.
- ✓ **Miscellaneous indoor events:** When the weather turns ugly, consider car shows, boat shows, art shows, antiques shows, planetariums, and aquariums. You can talk to each other with no worries about being shushed!



It may seem that in a big city there are more options, but an awful lot of people that live in big cities don't know how to act like tourists. Don't assume that if you are living in a small town that there is nothing to do. Even if you live in a small town, my guess is that there is an obscure museum or park that you haven't been to, a historic monument, a fun and unusual event, a local sporting tournament. You can certainly look into special exhibits at museums or art fairs, traveling carnivals or dances work too, because what you want a first date to be is a little unusual, a little fun, but not to make either one of you feel uncomfortable. If you know everyone in town, what you may want to do is go to the next town over so you don't feel like your first date will appear in the local gazette. There is no such thing as an area that doesn't have special events, and what you need to do is become a little bit like a detective and look in the Friday or Saturday paper and see if there is an art festival going on, or if you live in a college town find out if there is something going on at the school. Don't assume that you've done everything that there is to do; I guarantee that with a little bit of energy and ingenuity you'll find something remarkable.

Proust, present, and future: A film moment

On a first date from hell, a guy took me to *Remembrance of Things Past*, a film, based on the Proust novel, that had full frontal nudity (both male and female) and was nearly unintelligible other than body parts. My date and I both

just sat there blushing, with our eyes glued to the screen, afraid to even acknowledge the presence of the other. Tough stuff for a first date if you can't make eye contact after the movie due to the subject matter. *Sigh*.

Doing the restaurant thing

Going out to eat is one of the most common first date activities. But it doesn't have to be routine. To make your date a notch above ordinary, put a spin on the restaurant theme:

- ✔ **Go to a coffeehouse.** Unless you're meeting at a Starbucks and ordering two grande skim lattes and roasted pepper and goat cheese sandwiches (which is about the same price as the national debt), compared to a traditional restaurant, this is a pretty cheap date. It's the '90s version of a singles bar: relaxed, casual, and no time pressure.
- ✔ **Go to an interesting restaurant.** Food is good. Good food is even better. Good, unusual food is the best and often less pricey than the usual, boring steak or fried chicken. It doesn't have to be the culinary experience of your life, but fun and interesting food (maybe ethnic, but easy on the spices) on a first date is a cool idea. I'm partial to weekend lunch and brunch dates, myself. It's relaxed, liquor's not required, there's plenty of time to get to know each other, and it's in the daytime.

Food can be incredibly sexy and fun, as Hollywood readily attests: Rent the videos *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Babette's Feast*, *Big Night*, or even *9½ Weeks*.

There are some way cool ways to enhance the enjoyment of a restaurant date. First, for any restaurant you consider, think about the following:

- ✔ **Noise level:** You got together so that you can get to know each other. It makes sense to be able to hear what your date has to say and talk without seriously harming your vocal chords.
- ✔ **Price:** Go to a place you can afford. You can't enjoy yourself if you worry about your date ordering an appetizer *and* a dessert.
- ✔ **Service:** You want the service to be attentive, without hovering. And who wants to be rushed out the door?
- ✔ **Spaciousness:** Adequate space is an animal need (see the related sidebar, "You're invading my space" in this chapter). That's why we all feel a little uneasy in a packed elevator or an overcrowded restaurant.
- ✔ **Lighting:** You don't want it too dark or too light. Too dark and he can't see the great job you did on your makeup, or she won't notice that your tie matches your eyes; too light, and no matter what you did, you'll still end up looking like a delivery to the morgue.

You're invading my space

Reconnaissance is valuable: Scout out the locale to make sure that you're closer to your date than the dude at the next table. Turf counts. Like all other cultures, Americans have well-defined territorial areas:

- ✔ Intimate space is about 18 inches away from our heads. According to anthropologist Edward Hall, you'll only let close companions and pets into this private area for any stretch of time.
- ✔ Personal space is two to four feet all around us. Friends are allowed in this space, but that's it.
- ✔ Social space expands to about four to eight feet away. Co-workers or acquaintances at a party are invited in.
- ✔ Public space is all areas beyond.

After you narrow your list of potential restaurants down to those that meet your economic and ambiance requirements, narrow the list down even more by doing the following:

- ✔ **Pick a place you know.** Menu familiarity reeks of confidence. You'll sound like Cary Grant if you lean over and say, "Try the duck. It's out of this world." Also, knowing a restaurant well means that you're comfortable with the service, the all-important table spacing, the lighting, the wine list, the taste, the presentation, and payment procedures. It's the way to ensure you'll have a good time. And if you're happy, your date stands a better chance of being happy, too.

Avoid trendy new hot spots. Number one, they are often very difficult to get into, and number two, they can be very expensive — you don't want to put your MasterCard into meltdown. Number three, these days, they tend to be noisy! It isn't the type of place you want to be on a first date. Save the trendy, expensive hot spots until the two of you know each other better. Scout out some very nice quiet restaurants that will not keep you waiting. Getting drunk at the bar while waiting for your table will not make you look suave. Another added advantage of by-passing the bar wait is that you'll find yourself with money left over for your college education or braces on your eventual children's teeth. Most importantly, make it someplace quiet where you can talk.

- ✔ **Pick a place that knows you.** What could be cooler than a maitre d' smiling widely when you walk in or a waiter saying, "Nice to see you again!"? Better, though, is the fact that regulars usually get the best tables and most prompt service — both of which go a long way in creating a great first date.



- ✔ **Pick a place where your date can eat.** There's the obvious (don't take a vegetarian to a steak house) and the more subtle (if his cholesterol count is above 300, steer clear of the Wisconsin Cheese Fest). Chances are, unless you already know each other well, you won't know the intricacies of your date's dietary preferences. Simple solution: Ask ahead of time. Less simple: Keep everyone's options open by selecting neutral territory, such as a restaurant with a large menu or a coffeehouse with a small one.

Who Pays?

In deciding who pays for the date, follow this two-part rule:

- ✔ **The person who asks, pays.** This ensures that whoever does the inviting knows what things will cost and has budgeted accordingly. As the person extending the invitation, if you can't afford the activity, scale down and figure out something else to do.
- ✔ **The other person offers but doesn't insist on helping out.** No empty gestures please. Don't offer to pay unless you can and are willing to do so. No fights to the death. It's charming to offer, but don't push it, and be willing to treat next time.

My part of the bill is . . .

Used to be easy figuring out who paid, because men paid for everything (of course, they were the only ones doing the asking), and women kept their mad money tucked neatly in their little velvet purses and paid for nothing. Of course, after so many eons of men feeling that they *had* to pay and women feeling that men expected something for their money, women got a bit more aggressive about paying their share (rather than being fearful that the guy would "take it out in trade"). But it gets pretty tedious figuring out what your fair share is when you order the salad and your date orders the prime rib, and you still have to figure in the tip.

My solution was to play liar's poker, which is a game played with the serial number on dollar bills in which bluffing is allowed until you are called. Whoever lost had to pay for dinner. I got really good at offering and *really* good at liar's poker, which seemed to cover all bases.

These days, it's okay to offer to pay the tip, buy the popcorn, pay for the next date, bring the picnic, pay for the gas, and so on, not only on the first date but as an ongoing statement of equality, friendliness, and generosity unless it drives your date nuts.

