

# Alone in a strange

What to do in the evenings is the solo business traveller's classic dilemma. Fortunately, make it easier than ever to network with like-minded executives, wherever your trip may

**W**hen you're on the road, the buzz about being somewhere new and different can be severely diminished by finding yourself alone in a foreign city, where there's lots going on but you've got no-one to enjoy it with. Indeed, sitting alone in a hotel restaurant with a half-bottle of wine while those around you engage in animated conversation can be one of the most soul-destroying experiences going.

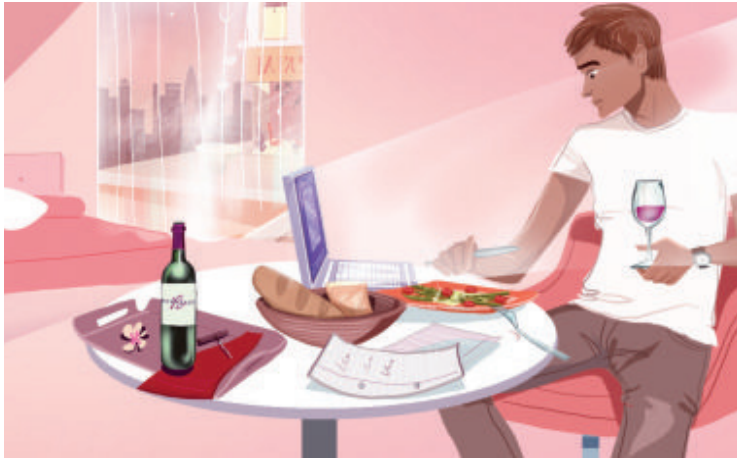
No wonder many travellers resort to eating in their room, or simply retire there for a dessert of multilingual cable TV. What makes it all the more poignant is that, in the room next door, there may well be another soul just like you, away from home, with the same room-service tray, with whom you could be hitting the town or even talking business.

It's not surprising, then, that over the years quite a few people have come up with the idea of networking for business travellers – either as a

social thing or a way to keep in touch with business contacts on the road. The advent of social networking websites has now turned this into an easily realisable concept. SkyLounge.com is one of the most popular sites operating today, with about 5,000 users around the world.

The site is the brainchild of Marcel van Gernerden, a Dutchman based in New York. He explains: 'I used to collect hundreds of business cards at trade shows and then leave them to gather dust. So originally this was a way to organise all these contacts I had made.' Now SkyLounge offers its members the opportunity to post their trips on the website so that others can find somebody who's going to be in the same city at the same time to link up with. 'You can also receive alerts from your contacts when they are taking a trip, so you can see where they're going to be,' he says.

Van Gernerden needs little convincing of how productive meeting



# city?

there are now a range of social websites that take you. ALEXANDER GARRETT logs on...

people during a business trip can be: some years ago he was at a property trade show in the south of France and called an old friend to arrange to meet for dinner; she brought along a friend, and they're now married. Nowadays, when he goes back to his home city of Rotterdam, all his old chums know he's coming and it's party time.

Design-wise, SkyLounge looks like Facebook or MySpace – pictures of Cristina in New York and Günter in Freiburg gaze out from a page that tells you when they're next going to be in St Louis, Missouri or Paris, France. You can join a 'lounge' specific to your industry or even your company, where you stay in touch with likeminded travellers. And you can share restaurant and hotel tips with your fellow Air Miles tycoons via an online forum.

Finding some same-sex company is a particularly appealing idea for women business travellers, who risk being propositioned if they turn up







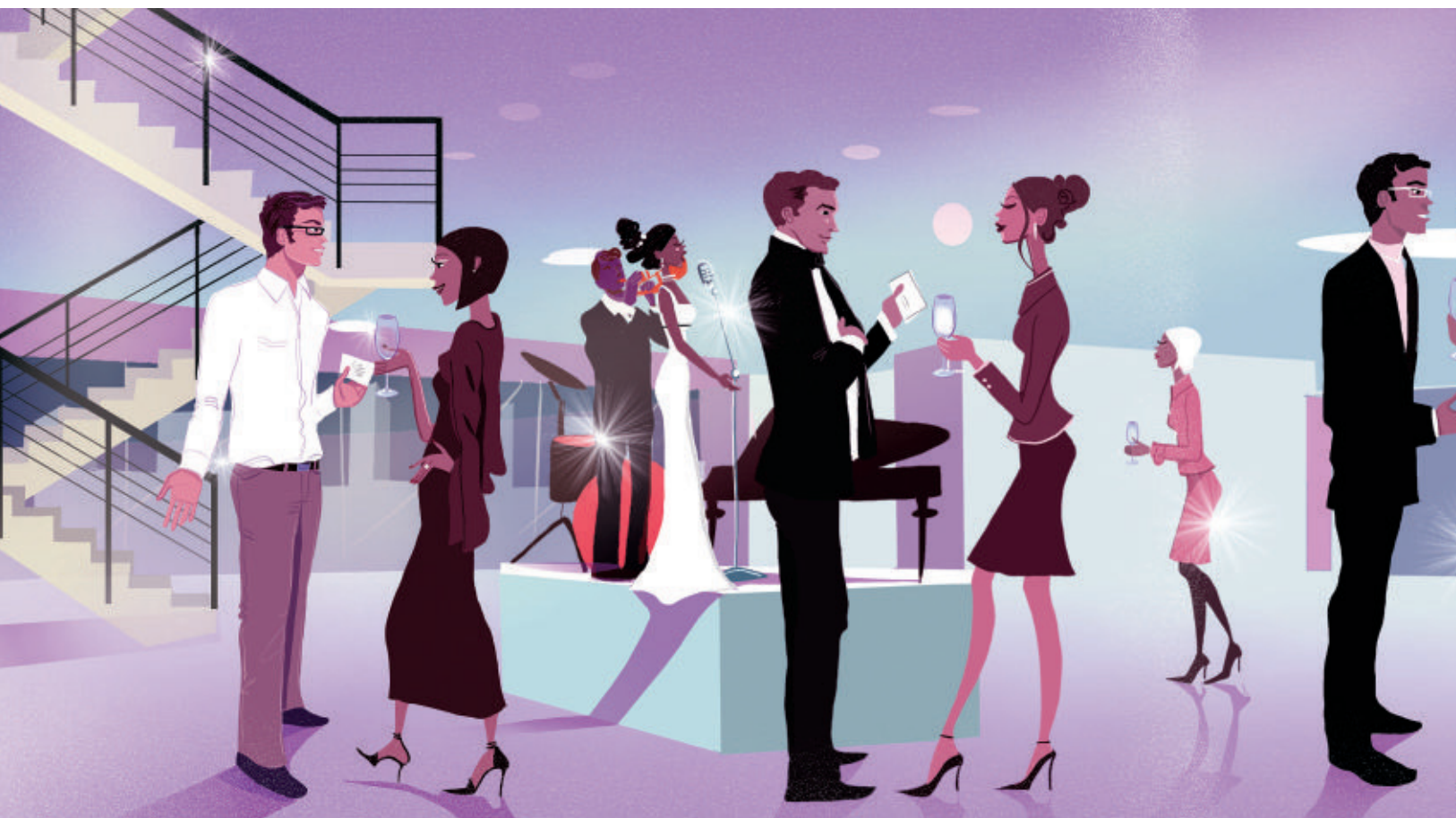
at a bar on their own. Kerstin Hoghielm, a director of the Swiss-Swedish chamber of commerce, has set up a lounge for women business travellers on SkyLounge. She says: 'Female executives are very isolated, American women in particular, because they are not invited out by their male bosses and colleagues for fear of being accused of sexual harassment.'

She encourages her 200-odd members from around the world to meet one another when they're in the same city, even if it's only for an after-work drink, to help each other out and enjoy each other's company.

A new women-only network has set up shop in the UK. It's called Maiden Voyage and the woman behind it is Leeds-based IT executive Carolyn Pearson. 'I was on a trip to LA a couple of years ago – a place I had been to backpacking years earlier – and I found myself wondering if it was safe to go to Venice Beach. It would have been nice to meet up with another woman for dinner, or do something for the weekend, and it set me thinking.'

After conducting a survey and consulting the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Pearson has designed Maiden Voyage to offer tips on female-friendly hotels and car-hire companies, as well as offering networking opportunities. 'Our members will be able to put their profile online, and say whether they like going to restaurants, or clubbing, so you can choose to link up with someone if you think you have interests in common,' she explains. 'But you don't have to give out personal details until you want to, so you can have an e-mail conversation first.'

Another new kid on the block with a different take on business travellers' networking is WhosInTown.net – a site founded by three seasoned male executives. Doing business is its main rationale. Whereas Pearson says she would look to filter out those who want to sell to her site's other



members – ‘they won’t want to be harassed’ – WhosInTown co-founder David Henderson sees the opportunity to make more efficient use of travelling time as the main benefit of networking.

Currently in beta testing, this website has only a few members so far, but is about to be officially launched.

Henderson tells the story of how he spent six months playing phone tag with a potentially valuable business contact from Microsoft in the US before discovering that they were at the same conference in Bonn. By the time he was able to say hello, the other guy had to rush back to the airport. ‘He’d been staying at the Marriott two doors away from me; we’d probably sat opposite each other at breakfast, but I didn’t know he was there,’ he says. ‘If we’d both been on WhosInTown, I’d have known he was going to be there and could have set up a meeting in advance.’

WhosInTown is aimed unashamedly at ‘road warriors’ – the buyers and sellers who spend their lives travelling the globe seeking to close deals. Its focus is on making crucial business meetings happen rather than the social nicety of finding someone to go to the opera with on a wet Wednesday in Berlin.

Henderson believes the website will work especially well within companies, where colleagues often don’t know that they’re in the same building. WhosInTown aims to set up bespoke networks for companies – at a cost, of course – to enable their people to organise and use their time more efficiently.

One user is Martin Johnson, an Oxford-based business development manager at Cisco, who has been a frequent traveller for 20 years. ‘I go to the [San Francisco] Bay Area quite a lot, and I recently used the site to set up lunch with a guy there who I’d worked with four or five years ago. I

discovered he was looking for a job with Cisco and, after our lunch, I managed to put him together with some people in San José.’

Johnson says Cisco has become very conscious of the environmental implications of business travel. ‘When people do have to travel, let’s make sure they travel more intelligently.’

The fly in the ointment with all networking systems that rely on the coincidence of two people being in the same place at the same time is that, if there isn’t a critical mass of people signed up, such encounters will be rare occurrences. Henderson is happy to acknowledge the fact and says that the advantage of WhosInTown is that it has struck alliances with a number of travel providers, from airlines to hotel chains and car-hire companies, that will each market the service, providing extra value to their own customers.

‘A lot of these services have been set up by geeks who haven’t figured out how to take it to market,’ he explains. ‘Anyone can build it, but not everyone can sell it.’

The architects of these networking sites envisage a world where you land in a foreign city and, as with a visiting dignitary, a scrum of online contacts is vying to greet you, discuss business plans, whisk you off to dinner or drag you away to an art gallery. Travellers who are ‘people’ people will love it, but, for some of us, that solitary plod around the city’s backstreets followed by a deep, hot bath while consuming the contents of the mini-bar will still hold a certain appeal. **mt**

For more information about these new business travellers’ social networking sites, visit [www.skylounge.com](http://www.skylounge.com), [www.maiden-voyage.com](http://www.maiden-voyage.com) or [www.whosintown.net](http://www.whosintown.net)

Lucy Truman

