



Looking for pure love? Try the Laundromat

The steamy settings bear such names as the Scrub Club, Launder-Bar, and April Showers. Here, men and women can get to know each other between the first quarter deposited and the last pillowcase folded.

"Groups of men and women come in separately," says a Gainesville, Florida, manager. "Next thing you know, a girl and a guy have broken off from their groups and are coming in together." The first year the Clean Bean was operating in New York City, at least six couples started dating after meeting in the Laundromat-café. At Duds 'n Suds Laundromat in Albuquerque, New Mexico, one particularly successful match was made on New Year's Eve.

There's a knack to Laundro-mating. A sock on the floor, for example, is today's version of the dropped hankie. It's always in order to ask for help unjamming a quarter (no matter how much effort you expended to jam it in the first place). And anyone can get an impromptu dance going by asking for help folding a sheet.

Some people compare today's Laundromats to the village streams where, in earlier times, women gathered to wash and gossip. You'd never catch unmarried men streamside, pounding their loincloths on a rock. But these days you do find them puzzling over how much detergent to use and whether to set the dial on Delicate for their Levi's.

Far from feeling threatened, most men welcome a woman's offer of help with their laundry. Many realize that a question like "Would you say my machine is too full?" is an excellent icebreaker. Some go further and blatantly mix light clothes with dark in hopes that a woman will stop them. One

usually does. "They rush over and tell me not to," reports one practitioner of this ploy. "That makes them feel real good."

Helpfulness pays off. One night last winter, Dina Wilson* watched Brad Goldfinger pulling his clothes out of a dryer and stuffing them into a plastic bag at a Laundromat in New York City. She offered to give him a hand folding them. Two days later, after cruising around the neighborhood until he spotted her car, Goldfinger asked Wilson out. Soon the two were doing their laundry together. In June, with purple and white crepe paper decorating the washers, colorful cloths on the folding tables, and a potted tree on the extractor, they were married at the Laundromat.

Such marriages may have a better-than-average chance of succeeding, some experts believe. A sociologist once suggested that couples who get together over laundry

have far better prospects than those who meet over drinks. Her reasoning: Laundromats are a more down-to-earth setting than most others in which singles gather. This could help explain why Dolly Parton has stayed married to Carl Dean for the twenty-one years since they met at the Wisby Washy Laundromat, in Nashville. Countless other couples have made similar good connections. Eleven years after a single date in college, Barbra Harris and Ira Phillips met again in Chicago, where she was perched on a washing machine with her clothes tumbling below. The college professor and social worker have been married for eight years now and have two children.

Here's a cutie tussling with king-size sheets.... There's a bunk washing black socks with white Jockeys! Take heed: These hot bangouts are loaded with vulnerable single men.

BY RALPH KEYES

There's a lot to be said for courtship at the Laundromat. The price is right: All you need for admission is some dirty laundry and a fistful of quarters. The demographics are good. Depending on the neighborhood, the other patrons will probably be similar to you in age and stage of life. Many will be single males. All will have time on their hands.

"Laundromats offer a wonderful opportunity to get past the seven seconds in which people usually judge each other," points out psychologist Judith Sills, author of *A Fine Romance*. Unlike the atmosphere at bars or parties, at a Laundromat "you're not anxious," she explains. "You're not trying. It's more like an evening class, except that new people come in all the time. And they're not domesticated—people in Laundromats are likely to be in a less settled time of their life. Otherwise they'd be home doing the laundry."

The Laundromat also provides a rare nonsexual opportunity to get beneath the surface, to inspect the "inner man," as it were. Does he wear boxer shorts or

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briefs? Colored or white? Grubby or new? Where else outside the bedroom can you get such a telling preview of a possible partner?

Gold-toe socks are a good sign, according to some women. So are matched towels, in ample numbers. Two or more athletic supporters signal Serious Jock. Too many monograms warn Possible Narcissist. Men who bring their clothes stuffed into Safeway bags merit caution. So do those picking sodden pieces of tissue from their shirt pockets. Or the ones cursing ink stains left by the ballpoint pen forgotten in a pocket.

In assessing the possibilities, consider: How good is he at matching socks? Does he hang wash-and-wear items neatly on hangers? What's his approach to folding shirts? Does he fold them at all? Is this a man whose washer and dryer you'd want to share for a lifetime?

With such great numbers of singles mingling on their premises, many Laundromat owners have become active matchmakers. You may get more help than you *expect*. At Sun-

land Coin Laundry, in Sunland, California, former owner Fred Grossman liked to introduce unmarried customers to each other with such comments as "Why don't you guys fold together and maybe you'll live happily ever after" and "Ellen, have you met John here?" (no matter what their names may be).

"I try to create a 'commotion level,'" says another manager. "We laugh, we joke. I want to have a friendly atmosphere here, where people can get to know one another. I watch people staring at each other, wishing they could say something but not wanting to risk making the first move. That's why I encourage an environment where it's okay to approach someone."

To further this cause, some Laundromat owners sponsor singles' nights, when they turn down the lights, serve snacks, and encourage dancing in the aisles.

The dean of Laundromat matchmakers, though, is Christine Bardakjy. In the two decades since she and her husband took over Mary's Coin Wash, in Miami, Bardakjy says she's helped arrange nine marriages among customers. At first this was a casual process, consisting merely of

introducing likely-looking clothes washers to each other. Her first success was with a guitar-playing secretary and a truck driver about to start his own business.

As word of Bardakjy's matchmaking prowess spread, unmarried customers began to leave their résumés with her. Before she knew it, she'd collected four hundred. Bardakjy also sponsored parties for single customers at a nearby Ramada Inn, insisting that men wear jackets and ties because "it's more romantic that way." She never accepted money for this service, and eventually had to end it for lack of time. But Christine Bardakjy stays alert for customers who might like to meet each other. University of Miami graduate student Tim Hendershot, for example, has been dating fellow student Amy Starr for two years—since Bardakjy saw them together in her Laundromat and encouraged Tim to ask Amy out. "Christine egged me on," says Hendershot. "She just thought we'd be good together."

Has such matchmaking been good for business?

"No," Bardakjy says, laughing. "All the ones who got married have bought washing machines and left."

SIX GOOD PLACES TO MEET A LAUNDRO-MATE

1. **Duds 'n Suds.** Seventy franchises nationwide. Designed by a twenty-one-year-old college student in 1985, amenities include snack bar, pool table, video games, big-screen TV. More emphasis on Laundro than mating, but lively singles scene nonetheless.
2. **Mary's Coin Wash, Miami.** Don't come here unless you're ready to meet someone the owner has picked out for you. Down-home decor includes sayings on the walls, house rules (no bare feet, etc.). Like doing your laundry at a friendly aunt's.
3. **Launder-Bar and Café, Chicago.** Worth bringing laundry here for the restaurant alone. Two big-screen TVs, rock piped in on stereo. Lively crowd, funky decor built around vintage soap ads. Lives up to its slogan: Loads of Fun.
4. **The Scrub Club, Marietta, Georgia.** Could be America's most elegant Laundromat. Lots of oak, hanging plants, easy chairs, pub tables.
5. **The Laundry Bar, Mesa, Arizona.** Despite the name, no liquor, but a decent deli, TV, and video games.
6. **Clean & Lean of Vista, Vista, California.** Health club on premises. Three supervised workouts can be completed by final spin of the dryer. 

* In the interest of privacy, some names have been changed.