



■ **GAME:** Left, Scarlet Rose comperes a Blind Date session with Tracey, far left, answering Jimmy's questions, while, above, Bronagh, from Strabane, Co Tyrone, seeks the crowds support in her Blind Date quest at the weekend's matchmaking festival in Ardara, Co Donegal

PICTURES: Michael O'Donnell

# Off to the matchmaker in the search for love

It started out as just a fundraising idea but singles of all ages and from all parts of Ireland and beyond converged in Co Donegal at the weekend in search of love, courtesy of a good old-fashioned matchmaking festival. **Kate Chambré reports**

**A** PIONEERING match-making festival held in Co Donegal at the weekend saw three Irish men compete for a date with a Rwandan lady.

In a quest to find love, hundreds of people from different corners of the globe flocked to the picturesque village of Ardara on the north-west coast, to participate in an event which has generated upwards of €300,000 to the town's economy.

The man who dreamed up the festival at an Ardara Business Association meeting, Pat McGill of The Beehive bar - christened The Matchmaker Bar for the weekend - revealed this was well over 10 times the usual revenue for the time of year.

From Friday to Sunday, hotels, pubs and B&Bs were packed to the rafters while people aged from 18 to 80 dived between a succession of live-music, speed dating and matchmaking events, which culminated, yesterday evening, with a mock wedding.

For those who wanted a psychic's opinion, Mystic Grace - partial to a pint or two of Guinness - could be found at Nancy's Bar adorned in Moroccan dress doing tarot card readings.

It seemed blind date contestants Michael Montague (25), from Belfast, and Melanie (19),

from Ardara, needed no such help during what looked like an extremely cosy meal at the Nesbitt Arms Hotel.

Meanwhile, Big Sam (65), a devout Christian from Philadelphia, dressed in black, wearing cowboy boots and hat "like Johnny Cash", believed it was "up to the guy upstairs" whether he found a wife or not.

"I'm just here to have a bit of craic and if I get hooked up with someone, it'll make me a very happy man," he said.

Con McGill (73), a farmer from Kilcar, Co Donegal, travelled by bus to the heritage town, determined to find a wife aged around

40 or younger.

"I would have liked to have got married, but I didn't want to leave my mother's side," he said.

Now that his mother has passed away, he was in full flight, dressed in his Sunday best in search of "a strong woman" who would bear him some children.

"I heard of a man who got

**"I heard of a man who got married at 78 and had two sons"**

Con McGill (73)

married at 78 and had two sons," he said.

Marie Salomey (34), from Rwanda, who sought asylum in Ireland six years ago, confessed she would love to meet a man but said it was difficult to, because Irish men could be slightly backwards at coming forwards.

"Where I come from women have to wait until a man

approaches her," she said.

"African men usually get to know you as a friend first, then ask you out, but here in Ireland, men tend to get drunk before they approach a woman."

Two other Marles, aged 35 and 28, both single mothers from Ballyshannon, Co Donegal, said they thought the matchmaking festival was a great idea but were pessimistic about their chances of meeting someone.

"A lot of men either get put off when they know you're a single mother, or think you're easy," the elder of the two confided, adding that her son had told her "to go and find him a daddy".

"It's hard to tell your nine-year-old son that it's not as easy as that," she sighed.

Darragh McGowan (35), from Ballybofeigh, Co Donegal, who travelled to the festival on her own, admitted to being "fed up with having to go to pubs and clubs to meet men".

It seemed the only disappointment of the weekend was the absence of special guest Lisdoonvarna's legendary matchmaker Willie Daley, who had unexpectedly been rushed to hospital suffering from an alleged aneurysm.

The Ardara Business Association's main purpose for the festival was to fundraise €7,000 to replace the town's Christmas lights by organising a mock wedding," committee secretary Marie Gallagher said.

"We have a tradition of annual festivals here in Ardara and thought this one would be a fun way of generating money at an otherwise quiet time of year," she said.

So, the concept was as simple as that really.

## An age-old tradition

Matchmaking used to be an age-old tradition in rural Ireland. In the past when a man wanted to marry a woman, he took a bottle of whiskey or poteen to her home and offered her father an animal or two.

"It didn't matter if the girl was willing or not, the father made the match and the daughter had to agree," recalled Hugh Gavigan (72), from Maghera in Co Donegal, who attended the matchmaking festival in Ardara at the weekend.

"The men would see the women at the fair and then go and make an offering to her father.

"Most of the time the girls didn't like who they'd married but they had to remain with them as the church wouldn't allow them to separate.

"The women had to work very hard to satisfy the man and were treated like slaves. There's a big difference nowadays, where if a woman doesn't like a man, she'll divorce him - too right!"

Kate Chambré

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