

Love to run, dine or dance?

Meetup groups make it easy to find like-minded folks

BY AYIA RAMANATHAN

Washington is not, by any means, an easy place to find your social circle. The mix of newcomers, workaholics and far-out suburbanites makes it anyone, much less make plans for the weekend.

Last week late last month, I made

up mad. I logged a nearly in the shadow of the monument from veteran salsa subtle art of working it, shed and hit the hiking trails — I party bus — all with complete in my little experiment, I'd prove that I could fill my meetup after meetup, but altogether different result: ng, I grew more confident; I and have a great time doing

was launched 10 years ago in the wake of the Sept. 11 s. An open invitation to defy hide out in our homes, it s and rock climbers and to find one another outside and instead plan play dates, d happy hours. "Every Meet- Scott Heiferman wrote in ers last month, "starts with saying hello to neighbors." on, described so often as a that one wonders if it isn't plane tickets to Reagan

National Airport, the most frequented Meetup gatherings are social ones, revolving around networking, making friends or bringing together singles. With such a thriving Meetup community — the sixth most active in the nation — it's possible to scratch just about any itch, whether you're a geography buff (for whom there is the GeoNerds DC Meetup), a Francophile (try the very active DC French Meetup) or simply slay at board games (see: VA/DC Social Boardgame Meetup). Often, it's as easy as searching for an interest, clicking to RSVP and then showing up — and not only is it acceptable to arrive solo, it's the norm.

"Meetup lends itself to people coming out on their own, without having the need to drag someone along," says J.T. Yaung, a lead organizer in the area's most populous Meetup group, the 20s & 30s Going Out Group.

Yaung's group — one of the five I visited in my meetup-filled week — draws a mix of singles and classic transients, 20-somethings who have landed their first big job in a new city (or are looking). But others attract an incredibly diverse mix of people, ranging from longtime locals rethinking their social circles as their friends couple up to empty-nesters trying new hobbies.

What follows is the lowdown on how some of the area's most popular Meetups groups have managed to help people find their niche.

"The stories — people getting married, people finding great buddies — it's so uplifting," says Kellie Carlisle, who in 2007 founded the Mid-Atlantic Hiking Group and has since seen the group transform into a network of thousands of outdoors



DC Capital Striders, a Meetup running group, nears the end of a run that started and

enthusiasts. "That's the story of Meetup. We don't have little cliques to shut people out."

20s & 30s Going Out Group

The title gets the point across: The largest Meetup group in the Washington area caters to the young and the upwardly mobile. Oldsters need not apply.

There's a logic behind this, of course. The Meetup, founded in 2005, attracts people at a certain point in their lives: A large chunk of the active members are new to the area, on their own again after youthful long-term relationships, living out in the

'burbs or working with colleagues decades older.

I meet all of the above at the first meetup in my little experiment, a night of club-hopping on a party bus. The night's organizer, J.T. Yaung, came to Meetup in 2007, throwing himself into a Chinese language group, a supper club and the 20s and 30s group. An uber-organizer, he launched the popular local Meetup 20s & 30s Asian Going Out Group (and he runs the 30s & 40s group, too); for each, there are picnics and happy hours, volunteer outings and tub trips. The party-bussers on this night not only the giant white chariot to drive them to such clubs as Ultrabar and Mubut they also get VIP treatment and drive



KATHERINE FREY/THE WASHINGTON POST

ded at the Smithsonian Metro station. The group is not about training marathon runners; it has more of a laid-back vibe.

specials (which the group members, who paid \$35 each for the night, take full advantage of).

Meetup "has been a godsend," says Simone Carpenter of McLean, a first-timer with the group. "In Oregon," she tells me, "I had family. I had friends. I was that really shy, quiet person. Moving out here, I had to take the initiative." Like many Meetup members, she joined a half-dozen groups at once. "I had to get out there," she says. "Otherwise, I'd be sitting at home." It was at the Baking Bliss Meetup that she met Dana E. Popp, a firecracker from Philadelphia. At Muse, the pair dance up a storm with their newfound crew, their bracelets creating one green blur in the darkness.

"How else are you going to meet people?" Popp asks. "Meetup is so easy. There's no reason you shouldn't do it."

Sign up: www.20sand30sgroup.com

DC Capital Striders

Google "running group in D.C." and the fates will guide you to the DC Capital Striders, a loose caravan of a running club that regularly clocks five-mile runs around the region. The group launched in 2006 with a weekly run, not to transform members into marathon runners but to "take advantage of what Washington, D.C., had to offer," says founder Rick Amernick.

The Striders maintain that laid-back

attitude to this day. When I show up on the Mall for the weekly, post-work dash around the monuments, the group is warmly receiving new members and welcoming back old ones who all but vanished during the muggy summer.

We set off not far from Smithsonian Castle. I'm no longer much of a runner, but once I reach the 14th Street bridge, I realize I want to cross it. And then I want to cross the broad expanse of Memorial Bridge, too. I quickly find a group that runs at a similar pace and finish the 4.3-mile trek at dusk, with another runner by my side.

"People come to these runs, and they