



Lovin' the woods

BY JAMIE BECKMAN FOR USA TODAY



OUR CAVEMAN ANCESTORS MIGHT HAVE BEEN ON TO SOMETHING:

Biologists and psychologists alike say spending time in the outdoors can be a (literal) breath

of fresh air for your relationship.

If the modern grind has taken a toll on your nerves and your connection with your significant other, you're not alone—one recent study from Douglas Mental Health University Institute in Montreal found that city folks were more likely to exhibit anxiety and have mood disorders than people who lived in the country.

For most of us, relocating permanently to an off-the-grid cabin in the

woods isn't a practical option, but luckily it's a snap to take a mini nature vacation with the one we love.

MAKING A CONNECTION (or why the woods are better than dinner & the movies)

Taking your main squeeze on an outdoor adventure can increase bonding far beyond the connection you'd get from, say, a night at the movies.

"Activities in nature provide a purposeful joint activity, such as going on a hike and completing it, catching a fish, setting up the campsite, or arriving at the top of the mountain," says Adrian Blow, associate professor of human development and family studies at

Michigan State University. "These joint memories bond us together, in that we did them together, with our partner."

Plus, connecting in the wild feels like no other date on Earth—just ask Scott Peterson, marketing director of River Runners rafting outfitters in Buena Vista, Colo., which offers guided couples' trips. He met his wife at the rafting company and courted her on the river.

"We met at a party, and I had my own raft, so I instantly had a cool date," he says. "We got the opportunity to go on a five-day Yampa River rafting trip, and that is where we really fell in love. You're floating all day with just the two of you on the raft, so you have to talk to each other. This is a great way to learn about

each other in a beautiful place with no distractions."

And if you don't usually camp, fish, or hike with your partner, all the better. Science has shown that when couples engage in activities that are brand new and exciting, their feel-good dopaminergic neurons fire off, which makes merely being with your partner feel rewarding, says Bianca Acevedo, a researcher at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York.

"We come to associate that novelty and excitement with the relationship," she says. "We know from laboratory studies that couples who engaged in novel and exciting activities did report increases in their passionate love feelings."

There's one caveat to that, however: If the new activity is too stressful, it can actually be a detriment to the relationship. How can you avoid situations that might irritate your partner, such as getting lost or running out of food? Plan ahead.

"Have an idea of what to expect," Acevedo says. "If neither party has been engaged in anything very outdoorsy, maybe go with a guide or with friends that have done it before, so that evens some of the stress."

THE MATING DANCE *(or how sweat can be an aphrodisiac)*

Psychological (and sexual) bonding isn't the only benefit you get from being in the wild. When we're in the outdoors with a potential mate, biology has a design for mating all its own that goes back to our caveman days.

"When we're seeking mates ... people look at how adept people are physically in dealing with their environment," says Dana Krempels, a senior biology lecturer at the University of Miami. "Someone who moves gracefully and powerfully is demonstrating that they're genetically vigorous and stronger than someone who's kind of a dork."

If you want to attract your partner's inner early hominid on a subconscious level, there are a few rules that men and women should follow.

For guys, heed these two words: Man up. "Going [back to] caveman [days], a female wants a guy who's not going to be crying over every little mosquito bite," Krempels says. "Don't complain about discomfort. Just being the macho tough guy in terms of being able to handle the wilderness would be a good signal that he's not a weakling and of him being a

dominant male."

As for ladies in the outdoors, early men didn't measure physical attraction in terms of makeup and mini-dresses. "Evolutionary biologists have made the suggestion that males will look for signals of youth in a female, because that means she has more time to have babies," Krempels says. "So physical strength, being able to hike for a long time, and having stamina—all of those things would tell him that she's healthy and vigorous."

The takeaway for gals? Focus on being up for any outdoor challenge that your guy throws at you—without complaining.

Biology has also hidden something else in our bodies that's useful for mating in the wild: our sense of smell. After a few days of sweating outside (and possibly not showering), you may be able to tell whether he or she is "the one."

"If you don't like a person's scent, you will not be able to have a long-term relationship with them," says Krempels. "People have related this to genetics: People who are more distantly related are more likely to find each other's scents attractive, which prevents inbreeding."

PERSONALITY TEST *(or how to find out if that person is really cool or really nuts)*

When we're without our laptops and our microwaves to distract us, discovering your partner's character is sped up triple-time, says Darren McMullen, host of NBC's *Love in the Wild* reality dating show, in which male and female pairs must undertake outdoor adventures together. And that can be a good thing.

"In real-life scenarios, sometimes you date for three to six months, then you start to slowly see someone's true colors," he says. "But when you're out in the wilderness against the elements, and paddling down a croc-infested river, falling in, and your raft is falling apart, you quite quickly see the real person—and you either work well with that person and you find a connection, or you can't stand them and you never want to be in a room with them again as long as you live."

Let's hope for the former when you take your honey out on the water.

Even if the going gets tough, just remember that you're there to have fun. "Research shows that if couples can laugh—just laughing in general, but also using humor to ease tension—it has a positive effect on their relationship," Acevedo says. "So even if things don't go as expected, just laugh it off."



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