



You don't need to be a gazillionaire to heat up that new romance. We found 10 ways to bond without blowing the rent money.

By **Ingela Ratledge**

Sure, impressing a date is easy when you have an unlimited budget. But what if you're feeling less than flush? Don't resort to dollar-beer night just yet: Summer offers tons of opportunities for affordable romance.

Cheapo Date 1#: Share puppy love

What better way to show off your warm and cuddly side than by hitting the park with a pooch? If you don't have a dog of your own, contact a pet shelter about walking one of their friendly strays. Bonus: "You can tell a lot about a person by how nurturing they are with animals," says relationship expert Carolyn Bushong, author of the *The Seven Dumbest Relationship Mistakes Smart People Make* (www.carolynsays.com). For a list of shelters near you, visit www.animalsheltering.org.

Minor-league baseball tickets run about \$5 a pop.

Cheapo Date #2: Root for the home team!

General admission tickets to minor-league baseball games are as low as \$5 a pop. (Check out www.milb.com for schedules.) And since the stakes are pretty low — seriously, is anyone *really* stressing about how the Carolina Mudcats are faring this season? — you can chitchat between beer and dogs. Don't assume that your date has to be a sports nut to appreciate a day at the ballpark, either: "I love a relaxed activity that's not just two people staring at each other over a dinner table," says attorney Katie Quitter of Nashville, TN.

Cheapo Date #3: Get tubular

Beat the heat by renting inner tubes; most cost just \$10 to \$15 per day. (Call a nearby campground or outdoor supplies store for locations.) You can opt for an easy route down the river or one with safe rapids for a shot of adventure. And hey, "It's always an advantage when you're together in bathing suits," says Mack Cole-Edelsack, a recent architecture grad from New York City.

Cheapo Date #4: Say, "Salud!"

Glasses of vino at a restaurant or bar can add up fast—so why not take your crush for stress-free sipping at a wine shop's tasting night? "It can be a very impressive evening without costing anything," says romance advisor Michelle McKinney Hammond, author of *How to Make Love Work*. The store usually throws in free appetizers, too—just make sure to call it a night before you get the hard-sell on that \$100-a-pop Pinot.

Cheapo Date #5: Climb the walls

Can't swing plane tickets to Mt. McKinley? For around \$25 each, athletic types can show off their skills on a climbing wall at a gym or camping supplies store. "I'd respect a date putting the thought into planning something like that for me," Says Dionne Cross, a personal trainer from Weehawken, NJ. Chill out in the free A/C, build trust and get a romance-boosting adrenaline rush—just make sure that your date is up for the challenge *before* the harnesses go on.

Wine tastings usually include free appetizers!

Cheapo Date #6: Stick a fork in it

Summertime is ideal for grilling out, and it sure beats picking up the tab at Chez Overrated. (Not a master chef? Food magazines are filled with great BBQ recipes this time of year, or visit www.epicurious.com for inspiration.) Says Hammond, "Cooking gives you an opportunity to interact as a team," says Hammond. "So what if you burn something? It's fun!"

Cheapo Date #7: Go on the world's shortest road trip

You may not have the perfect cherry-red convertible to take out for a spin, but the luxury dealership down the block sure does! "Test-driving a car together can be really exciting," says Bushong. "And how a person acts behind the wheel is very telling." To avoid getting the full-on sales press, let the salesperson know you're just shopping around at this point.

Cheapo Date #8: Park it!

During the summer, parks and communal spaces transform into grown-up playgrounds with concert series, theater performances and other outdoor events. "There are literally hundreds of ideas if you scour the newspapers," says Chicago-based operational analyst Brian Zambie. (Listings are also available on the publications' websites.) "I'll tailor the activity to my date's interest to show her that I care."

Cheapo Date #9: Take an urban hike

Lace up your sneaks, and pick a path in your city or town—compact areas with a high concentration of shops, food vendors and points of interest work best. Just steer clear of making ultra-personal stops down memory lane. (Visiting where you learned to hopscotch: Cute. Pointing out the spot where you first kissed your ex: Not so much.) If your downtown is one block long, visit the nearest big town. Or visit www.fodors.com for nearby itineraries.

Cheapo Date #10: Start with the soufflé

Let's be honest: The molten chocolate cake is the high point of dinner out anyway. So fast-forward through the wallet-crushing shrimp cocktail and steak and meet for the good part: dessert and cappuccino. For less than the price of one entrée, you can enjoy a high-end night out. And you'll both want to pick up the check!

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