

LONDON? PARIS? OBS? WHERE SHOULD THE MODERN SA STUDENT REST HIS WEARY HEAD?

It's varsity time. You've enrolled, you've been accepted, you've bought the coloured pens and flip-files you'll never use. The only thing left is to decide where you're going to live. Home, res or digs? It's not so much about choosing the right one as it is about choosing the lesser of three evils. NICK DALL did all three and now shares his wisdom and lessons with you...

Home?

A knock on the hollow cardboard door reverberates through my bare room. I'm lounging on my bed mulling over the disappointment of not getting a mountain view. Not-yet-unpacked bags and boxes scatter the linoleum floor.

'Come in,' I say trying to make my voice sound gruff, commanding.

'I'm Leonard,' he says. Leonard is a ginger. A tall, diffident, freckly ginger. 'Where you from?'

'Cape Town,' I say, 'Kenilworth... five minutes away.'

'B-but...' Leonard's bottom lip actually trembles. 'Why don't you live at home?'

'With all of this...' I say, propping myself up on one elbow and waving my free hand like a king acknowledging his court. The shift in position has allowed me to feel every slat of my pine bed through the thin foam mattress. 'Why the hell would I want to be at home?'

Leonard follows my hand, taking in the contents of the room quizzically. Staple-gunned bedside cabinet. Bare Orwellian light bulb. Lonely metal bookends. Leonard doesn't know what to say to this. Leonard looks out of the window at the Tampon Towers below. Leonard has no sense of humour. 'What you studying?' he asks.

Res?

I've often heard res described as a hotel. But never by anyone who has actually lived in res. Or in a hotel, for that matter.

I will, grudgingly, admit that the convenience of not having to clean your room, cook your own food, or ever get out of bed was appealing at first. But once the effects of O-week wore off and the realisation set in that if I didn't scrape the vomit from my dustbin no one else would, the word P-R-I-S-O-N seemed more apt.

Very few hotels can boast communal showers which are home to naked evangelists and weekly algae blooms. And the Beacon Isle at Plett doesn't normally include this on its holiday programme: Grab your trunks and head for the corridor! Fire



...IF I DIDN'T SCRAPE THE VOMIT FROM MY DUSTBIN NO ONE ELSE WOULD

Extinguisher. Fight at 3am. Followed by Bingo! Prizes for best dressed!

But it's the food that really shatters the analogy once and for all. Let's just go through Monday's menu, taking care to remember that our attentive caterers provide us with three options. STANDARD: Beef burger and chips. HEALTH: Chicken burger and chips. VEGETARIAN: Veggie burger and chips. And, of course, the same fever green oil is used for all three meal options.

Good thing, then, that I seriously loathe hotels... I lived in res for the first two years of my degree - although if you'd given me the option of leaving after 18 months, I would've taken it. Res is a good compromise: it allows you to enjoy the positive aspects of freedom (sleep, cane and cream soda, and having no idea what your lecturers look like) while protecting you from the negative 'real world' side.

And maybe you'll even find the time to learn a few things while you're there. Lobbing water-filled condoms into the open windows of rooms in neighbouring blocks taught me all about vectors, for instance.

Being dredged from a very silty papsak hangover at 5am on a Sunday by clapping and chants of 'Jesus! Jesus! Come inside me!' and not murmuring a single word of complaint allowed me to fully understand the meaning of diplomacy.

Dunking paper napkins in mayo at the beginning of every meal, just in case a food fight broke out, showed me the value of preparedness.

Digs?

Having a house all to yourself (and a few other likeminded delinquents) is fan-flippin-tastic. You can grow your own dope; stay away from campus for weeks at a time; and fill the bath with punch, drink it before any guests arrive, and go and hit a bong when they do.

But - as the chaplain at my high school was always eager to point out - with privilege comes responsibility.

Those Monday night res-burgers will feel awfully

far away when you've just had to munch your way through yet another plate of gluey spag-bol. And they'll feel even further away when your electricity is cut off because someone forgot to pay the Eskom bill.

Being a South African student you'll also have to remember to lock the windows, set the alarm, and close the gate behind you when you leave. Similar rules apply for when you get home: close the gate behind you; manage to get the key into the hole; unset the alarm...


Imagine the flak you'd get at your 21st speech if you woke up one morning with seven missed calls from ADT, three more from your dad and a note in the letterbox (on the ADT letterhead which looks like a doctor's prescription) which reads: Gate open. Perimeter OK. And there is a drunk man sleeping in one of the beds.

I was 22 when that happened, but still nobody would believe that the over-protected only-child whose room was next to the control panel had somehow managed to silence the beep which is meant to chime when the door opens. No, no... that note was stuck to fridge for the rest of the year.

You'll be forced to play musical-cars at Dawn's Crack in the rain so that one of your delusional digsmates can make it to First. And your best friend from res might turn out to be a speed addict (light bulbs become scarce) before the end of April.

You might have an irrational, menopausal, loveless neighbour. Or you might - like we did - have two irrational, menopausal, loveless neighbours: one on either side. Fortunately only one of them took her anger out on us. The other one? Well she saved her energy to be ready every night at 2am when her cuckolding husband snuck home with his tail firmly between his legs. It may have been noisy, but it was educational.

Just before we moved out, I saw the Clerk of the Court delivering what must have been the divorce papers.

Res? Digs? Home? Whatever. But treasure those days. At least we don't have mortgages to attend to. Or disposable nappies to buy. Hopefully. 

DUNKING PAPER NAPKINS IN MAYO AT THE BEGINNING OF EVERY MEAL JUST IN CASE A FOOD FIGHT BROKE OUT...