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Renting tips for students: everything you need to know

So you're desperate for a place close to 'varsity? You'll do anything to get your hands on an affordable flat? Crooked landlords can see you coming a mile away. Even out the playing fields with these tips on how to survive in Jozi's rental jungle.

Why is it students are expected to put up with appalling accommodation, living and studying in overcrowded, noisy and often unsafe hovels? A lot of it has got to do simply with the law of supply and demand – there's huge demand for student accommodation but not enough of it.

Record numbers of students entered South African universities in 2009. Estimates showed that in the Joburg area, while there were more than 7 000 students needing accommodation, there were just 700 available rooms on or near the city's university campuses.

The demand for good digs is increased by foreign and out-of-province students who flood into Jozi to study at Wits and UJ, two of the country's premier academic institutions.

And where there are desperate students, there are unscrupulous landlords and 'developers' who slap on a bit of paint and then charge exorbitant rentals for the 'privilege' of living close to 'varsity or college.

Don't be one of the exploited. Here are some tips on playing the renting game.

1. Get the proof

You'll need to show you'll be a good tenant. If your parents are signing the lease, they will usually need to show proof of income, employer's details, and bank statements, and the landlord will do a credit check. You could also apply for government or corporate-sponsored study aid, which would take out the lease for you as part of the study sponsorship or bursary. Most landlords prefer these leases, known as 'head leases', as they take the risk out of renting to you.

2. Put pen to paper

You don't, by law, need a contract, but you're nuts to rent without one. If things get ugly you'll be glad you've got everything in writing. If the landlord won't give you one, take it as a sign and find another place to stay.

The contract should have the following (at least):

- how much deposit is required?
- the monthly rent and when it is due
- how much the rent will increase by and how often?
- how long the lease is for?
- are water and electricity included or not?
- any house rules?

- existing defects
- maintenance responsibilities

3. Check it out

Before you sign the contract, check through the flat for anything you're not happy with, and ask if it can be remedied. Once you move in, make a list of everything that's faulty and give a copy to your landlord. When you move out, you'll be able to prove that the fist-sized hole in the back of the bedroom door was there before you moved in.

4. Finding gems in unexpected places

Before you settle for a tool-shed in someone's back yard just because it's available and it's cheap, be sure you've looked around in areas you may usually have considered. Try the Joburg CBD for example. It's not all slum lords and building hijackers out there. In fact, a number of inner-city developers are bringing stylish and safe city living back into vogue.

Take inner-city developer Aengus Lifestyle Properties, which works its refurbishing magic on old office blocks in Braamies, Johannesburg, turning them into upmarket one-bedroom and studio apartments for students.

Each unit is fully furnished with beds, desks and fitted cupboards, has its own bathroom, a granite-topped kitchen complete with fridge, as well as 12-channel satellite, a plasma TV and Wi-Fi. Add to this building access control with 24-hour security, onsite maintenance teams, and free daily transport for students studying at campuses further than 1km away, and you can kiss goodbye the dingy student pits of the past. And they're affordable too – from between R1 500 and R2 300 per student month, which isn't much more than current university residence costs.

5. Hard cash

So you've chosen the flat, you've passed the landlord's checks, and the contract is ready to sign. Now you'll need to put some cash on the table. Usually you must pay the first month's rent upfront, possibly a minor admin fee, and a month's worth of rent as a deposit to cover unpaid rent and damages.

Remember that your deposit is not for routine maintenance, only for repairs required because of your 'unreasonable' use of the property. (Your mates re-assigning the breakfast nook to the other side of the lounge after a wild night of boozing would constitute 'unreasonable'). Your landlord has to secure your deposit in an interest-bearing account – ask for proof of the balance if you suspect it's being whittled away.

6. Maintaining your lifestyle

Inside the flat, maintenance is usually DIY – don't expect your landlord to come and change your light bulbs. And don't pull a *Dress My Nest* stunt without written permission: that includes things like painting walls or putting up shelves.

As for the landlord, he is responsible for the exterior and the structure itself, as well as for sanitary ware and geysers. If the roof is leaking, the geyser bursts, or the gate motor packs up, contact the landlord or managing agent.

7. Know your rights

Finally, if it all goes to hell in a handbag, know your rights. You can't be thrown out or locked out of your flat without an eviction order from the courts. Your landlord is also not allowed to cut off your water and lights to try to force you out. He can however, get a court order to attach your belongings to settle your unpaid debts. He can also withhold your deposit if you decide to leave before the term of your lease is up.

So, now that you've got Renting 101 taped, you can concentrate on the important stuff – getting started on the best years of your life. And if you are planning on hitting the books in 2010, the time is drawing closer to secure your accommodation as demand is expected to be higher than this year.