

# Experience: I was homeless in London

'I did pretty seedy things to survive. But I don't regret any of the choices I made at the time.'

I was 22 when I arrived in London 5 years ago, in the middle of July, escaping boredom and disastrous results in my Mathematics and Computer Science degree exams. In my mind, London was only a stop-over on a way to Dublin, in order to find a job.

I met up some of my friends who were in the capital for the summer holidays. I was staying in a hostel in Queensway. In a month, all my money was gone in partying.

I had no choice but to find a job quickly. I took the first one I found, in a Subway near Chancery Lane. I was working 10 to 12 hours a day, five days a week, paid next to nothing... when I was lucky enough to get paid.

After two weeks, I was skint. The owners of the hostel kicked me out. I was just asking for one more night, hoping to manage getting paid soon, but they would not listen to me. They even refused to give me back all my stuff.

I left with a small backpack, my papers, a toothbrush and my work uniform. Kadher, a friend staying at the same hostel, threw a blanket out of the window for me. I didn't care about my clothes and bag stayed there. At least they were kept in a safe place.

I looked out for greens on a London map and went for Hampstead Heath. It was the first time I slept outside sober. And actually, it was quite nice. The sunrise over the city at dawn was beautiful.

I crashed at the same spot for about three or four nights, still going to work every day. I was lucky: my Oyster card was topped up for a month. One morning, I got woken up by a granny's dog. She was sorry for me. She offered me a breakfast in a cafe and drove me back into town.

During this period, I became a very good thief. I was stealing soap, toothpaste and food in off licences, socks and pants in Primark... And I got to realise that I was not the only one. The Tesco Express near Queensway was a proper colander. My friend Kadher regularly got out of it with a full unpaid basket!

To stay clean, I was doing all I could at work. I was locking myself in the toilets and washing my staff clothes quickly. And the night, 2 or 3 times a week, I was taking the bus N9 to Heathrow airport to have a proper shower for free.

The all homeless period lasted about three weeks. Weeks during which I didn't sleep much. By night, I was often hanging about in the centre. Several times I

took long line buses to crash in. I met quite a few people who were doing the same.

One day, I was really exhausted and had nothing to eat. I asked a policeman where I could find a place to sleep. He said: "Buy a coffee at Starbucks and they will leave you alone for a two hours nap." Seriously?

There are disadvantages in sleeping outside. I got a nasty flu and lost my job. Luckily, they paid me a bit before firing me.

I started to hang about in Soho by night. I noticed young men, looking like they were waiting for something near the public toilets. One night, a guy came to me: "You have nice eyes..." He invited me for a drink in a bar and later told me that his boyfriend was working there and he wanted to make him jealous.

I took advantage of the situation. Several nights, I came back to the same spot, hoping someone would offer me a beer or, even better, a meal...

Eventually, I got out of this situation. I was still looking for a new job in free newspapers and Internet cafes when I could afford it. I found myself a position of kitchen porter in the five star Berkeley Hotel in Knightsbridge. I managed to get all my stuff back from the first hostel and I got a bed in another one.

I did pretty seedy things to survive. But I don't regret any of the choices I made at the time. It was actually a very enriching experience. And exciting. I was outcast all the time. I discovered another way of life with its good and bad sides.

This period really inspired me. I wrote quite a lot. I was in a phase "French poètes maudits" and I always had my book of Arthur Rimbaud's poems with me. This life of freedom out of the system was like being in my hero's footsteps.

