

A day in the life of a flat hunter

Erika Weiss had corresponded with Peter Jarvis for nearly three years, but they only met for the first time last month at London airport. Erika had come from Germany to work for a year in her firm's London office. When she first arrived, she went to stay at a hostel, but she wasn't happy there. She decided to look for a flat of her own, but as she didn't know her way around London, and couldn't understand the advertisements for flats in the newspapers, she went to see Peter and to ask his advice.

Erika: I must find a flat of my own. I don't like living in the hostel, Peter. There's no privacy, the food is horrible and I have to be in by eleven o'clock.

Peter: How can I help?

Erika: I can't understand the advertisements.

Peter: Well, let's have a look at one.

Erika: This one, for example. Whatever does it mean?

Peter: Let me see. "Charm s/c furn gdnflt, dbl bedim, lge Inge, kit, bath, cent htg, £20 pw."

Erika: Now please translate it for me.

Peter: That's no good for you.

Erika: It may not be, but I want to know what it means.

Peter: It means, "A charming self-contained furnished garden flat with a double bedroom, large lounge, kitchen and bathroom, with central heating, at twenty pounds a week."

Erika: Yes. I see. That's too big and too expensive for me. How am I going to find what I want?

Peter: Tomorrow's Saturday and we've both got the day off. I suggest we spend the whole day looking for a flat. If we're lucky, we might find something for you to move into next week. All right?

Erika: That sounds lovely. I hope I can find a flat as nice as yours.

Peter: That won't be easy.

Erika: You mean this wasn't the first flat you looked at?

Peter: You must be joking! I've only been here for two months. You should have seen the terrible flat I had before. And it was hard enough to get that. Finding a flat in London is very difficult. To start with you've got to buy the first edition of one of the London newspapers, and after you've read the accommodation advertisements you've got to run to the nearest telephone so that you are the first person to ring up.

Erika: But what if it says, "ring after six."?

Peter: Oh, you mustn't take any notice of that. I've missed lots of flats by taking that too seriously. You must ring up at once and keep your fingers crossed that there's someone at home to answer the phone. If the owner answers, you mustn't sound too eager.

Erika: What do you mean?

Peter: You've got to give him, or her, the impression that you don't really mind if you get the flat or not. You must sound as if you've got dozens of other flats to consider.

Erika: But there aren't dozens of other flats.

Peter: Of course not. But if you sound too eager the owner will think you're having difficulty in finding a flat, and then he'll think there's something wrong with you.

Erika: I suppose you're right.

Peter: Of course I am. It's like a game. You pretend you don't really want a flat at all, and the owner pretends he doesn't really want to let his flat. He says, "It's ten pounds a week you know," as if he doesn't think you have enough money, so you say you didn't realize there was no private bath and you're not interested after all. When you've collected a list of addresses to visit, you set off. You get to the street where the first flat is and pass the most beautiful houses you've ever seen. This is perfect, you think. A flat in a house like this for only ten pounds a week! And then, as you get nearer to the number you're looking for, you notice that the character of the street is changing. The houses are dirty, the doors are unpainted, windows are broken. And of course the house you're looking for is the worst of all. You want to turn round and go home, but the owner is already at the door. He takes you up to see the flat, and although you can see what's there for yourself he points to everything in the room. "There's the bed," he says, "and there's the table." In the end you tell him that you've got another flat to look at and that you'll let him know. After seeing a lot of places like this you begin to think you'll never find a reasonable flat. I even thought about going to a hostel like yours.

Erika: Oh, no! If other hostels are like mine you wouldn't have liked it at all. This sounds terrible, Peter. Are you sure you still want to help me tomorrow?

Peter: Yes, of course I do. I just want you to know what it's going to be like.

Erika: I'm getting a pretty good ideal Tell me how you got the terrible flat you had before this one.

Peter: I got it through an agency. I paid a small fee to the agency and they gave me three addresses. I went to the first address and a charming grey-haired lady opened the door. She showed me a self-contained flat on the ground floor. It was nicely decorated, clean and cheap. I told her I'd take it and paid her a month's rent in advance.

Erika: But I thought you didn't like it. It sounds fine.

Peter: Wait a minute.

Erika: Sorry. Go on.

Peter: I moved in on a Sunday night. I was woken up the next morning at half past seven.

Erika: What woke you up?

Peter: Road drills and bulldozers! There was one little thing the landlady hadn't told me: they were going to build a motorway right outside my window!

New words and expressions

flat hunter	someone looking for a flat (two or three rooms on the same floor)
there's no privacy	you cannot be alone
hostel	a building in which young people (usually students) can live cheaply
I have to be in	I must be back in the hostel
self-contained	with its own bath room and lavatory
lounge	sitting room, living room
the day off	the day free, i.e. you do not have to go to work
accommodation	houses, flats, rooms: somewhere to live
ring up	telephone
keep your fingers crossed	a superstition; this is meant to bring good luck
eager	keen, enthusiastic
you don't really mind	it's not important to you
dozens	many, a lot (twelve to a dozen)

let	offer for rent (you often see signs saying FLAT TO LET)
set off	start a journey
let him know	tell him later
reasonable	sensible, moderate
a pretty good idea	quite a good idea, a fairly good idea
agency	here means a firm that collects details of flats and passes them on to the flat hunters for a commission, usually the equivalent of a week's rent
fee	payment
rent	payment for use of a building usually paid by the week or the month
motorway	high-speed road with limited access
road drills	machines for breaking up the road surface
bulldozers	vehicles that move earth in large quantities

Questions and exercises

A. Comprehension questions

1. Where did Peter and Erika meet for the first time?
2. What is Erika's nationality?
3. Why didn't Erika like the hostel?
4. What is the meaning of "Charm s/c furn gdn fit"?
5. What does Peter mean when he says that on Saturday they both have "the day off"?
6. What's the first thing you do if you want to find a flat?
7. How did Peter get his first flat?
8. What did Peter pay the owner before moving in?
9. What woke Peter up at half past seven?
10. What were they going to build outside Peter's window?

B. Change the following sentences into the simple past:

1. She doesn't know her way around London.
2. I can't understand the advertisements.
3. Whatever does it mean?
4. That's too expensive for me.
5. You take things too seriously.
6. I pay her a month's rent in advance.
7. Is it nicely decorated?

C. Change the following into sentences beginning *I, you, etc.*
should have...:

Example:

You didn't see the flat I had before.
You should have seen the flat I had before.

1. He didn't meet her at London airport.
2. She didn't stay at a hostel.
3. She wasn't in by eleven o'clock.
4. I didn't have the day off yesterday.
5. We didn't look for a flat.
6. They didn't find a flat.
7. I didn't ring him up.
8. I didn't answer the phone.

D. Use the gerund (-ing form) instead of the infinitive (base form) in the following sentences:

Example:

It's difficult to find a flat in London.
Finding a flat in London is difficult.

1. It's bad for you to smoke.
2. It takes a long time to read all the accommodation advertisements.
3. It can be very pleasant to stay at a hostel.
4. The best way is to get a flat through an agency.
5. It costs a lot of money to build a motorway.
6. It's difficult to translate from English into German.
7. It's easy to get the day off.
8. It's better to pay in advance.

Keys to exercises

A.

1. At London airport.
2. She's German.
3. Because there was no privacy, the food was horrible, and she had to be in by eleven o'clock.
4. Charming self-contained furnished garden flat.
5. He meant that they don't have to go to work.
6. You buy a newspaper and read the accommodation advertisements.
7. Through an agency.
8. A month's rent in advance.
9. Road drills and bulldozers.
10. A motorway.

B.

1. She didn't know her way around London.
2. I couldn't understand the advertisements.
3. Whatever did it mean?
4. That was too expensive for me.
5. You took things too seriously.
6. I paid her a month's rent in advance.
7. I moved in on Sunday night.
8. Was it nicely decorated?

C.

1. You should have seen the flat I had before.
2. She should have stayed at a hostel.
3. She should have been in by eleven o'clock.
4. I should have had the day off yesterday.
5. We should have looked for a flat.
6. They should have found a flat.
7. I should have rung him up.
8. I should have answered the phone.

D.

1. Smoking is bad for you.
2. Reading all the accommodation advertisements takes a long time.
3. Staying at a hostel can be very pleasant.
4. Getting a flat through an agency is the best way.
5. Building a motorway costs a lot of money.
6. Translating from English into German is difficult.
7. Getting the day off is easy.
8. Paying in advance is better.