

Better by degrees

Student digs have gone swanky, as undergraduates swap beer-stained carpets for granite worktops and all mod cons. **By Tom Ough**



For most of us, student digs are synonymous with broken showers, stained carpets and living rooms littered with beer cans and overflowing ashtrays. Yet for an increasing number of Oxford University undergraduates, living out for the first time doesn't mean a year spent in abject squalor — quite the opposite.

While all students live in their colleges for the first year, the majority have to rent private accommodation later in their degrees. In the past few days, the city's biggest letting agencies have released the list of all the student houses on the market for 2014. Tents blocked the pavement outside their offices as students waited through the night in the freezing cold to secure the best deal possible.

While most made a beeline for the cheapest accommodation — as you might expect, given those £9,000-a-year tuition fees — many were prepared to go upmarket. "Over the past five years, the requirement for students to live somewhere that is 'just like home' has increased exponentially," says David Gilson, of College and County, a local lettings agency that charges £200-£600 per person, per month, for its top-end properties.

Increasingly, landlords who have installed power showers, granite worktops in the kitchen, wall-mounted TVs and an open-plan living/dining area can command rents up to 40% above the norm. Students fresh out of fee-paying schools can persuade their parents to pay



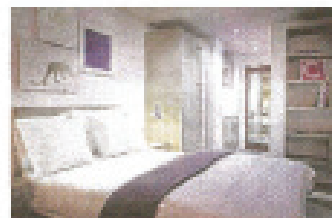
This Oxford house costs £3,300 a month with College and County. Right, the Chapel, in Liverpool. Below, students in Oxford queue overnight to secure the best digs

more, as it is still considerably less than school fees."

A handful of students live in Oxford Castle, a new development in the city centre, where renting a one-bedroom flat will set you back £883 a week for a term — that's a lot of baked beans. Elsewhere, certain houses are renowned to have hot tubs, while some have ice dispensers and king-size beds. Forget Fresh Meat — this accommodation is more like a swanky hotel.

Polina Ivanova, 20, who is in her third year studying history and politics, lives in north Oxford's trendy Jericho region. "Our seven-person house is above and beyond what you could expect from a student property," she says. "When we saw the kitchen island, the faux-marble surfaces, the outdoor pavilion at the end of the garden... it was impossible to resist." Even for £200 a month each, in addition to bills, it seems like a snip.

While overseas students have long been willing to pay a hefty premium for luxurious accommodation with all mod cons and high levels of security, the



Vita is building plush flats in fully managed developments in several cities. The Chapel, a collection of 68 studio apartments in Liverpool, is already open to students, who pay up to £199 a week for the privilege of having ensuite shower rooms with "boutique styling", free 100Mb broadband access and a wall-mounted flat-screen smart television.

Vita is planning two more openings in Liverpool, and others in Bristol, Southampton and Exeter, all due to open next September. Its biggest development of 279 studio flats, however, will be in Manchester — students will enjoy stylish kitchens with integrated appliances (no more conked-out, korma-stained microwaves) and bespoke artwork (not tacky posters torn out of FHM).

Undergraduates will have communal lounges with pool tables, gaming zones and state-of-the-art gyms. There will also be an app for communicating with other residents and with the building's management team, as well as a live feed to the laundry, so students know when their washing is ready. Rents are expected to start at about £150 a week.

"The Chapel is 100% let in its first year of being open, which demonstrates the level of demand," says Gavin Duncan, managing director of Vita Student Management. "Though there are students from China and Malaysia, half of them are from Britain. We are already being inundated with phone calls about next year."

trend is spreading to British students, explains Simon Tyrrell, director at Finders Keepers lettings agency in Oxford. "Students these days — who are faced with sizeable tuition fees — feel they are no different to a professional shopper, so they want the nicest properties to buy into a lifestyle. We now see 10 times the demand for the most expensive houses than we did five years ago." The priciest student property on his books costs a staggering £3,500 a month.

More than £1.5bn has been invested in student accommodation in Britain this year according to figures released last week by the property consultancy CBRE, and the trend for luxe university digs extends far beyond the dreaming spires of Oxford. The developer Student