

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME FROM HOME



Shows all over the country mean that comedian Shazia Mirza's B&B experiences have gone from the sublime to the ridiculous

When someone said the phrase "bed and breakfast" to me, it used to make me nervous. I'd start thinking about awful things that might happen if I stayed in one: would the owners walk into my room in the middle of the night? Would they murder me and bury me under the patio for no one to question my whereabouts ever again?

Obviously not, as I found out when I started doing stand-up. The owners I encountered when I had to stay in B&Bs were wonderful people, and their homes became like home to me. I realised that when you stay in a B&B, you get so much care and attention, and after late nights out you get to come back to a warm, cosy house and feel safe in an area you don't know very well. In the Westbourne Lodge Guest House in Birmingham the lovely lady owner ironed my shirt for me as I got ready to leave for my gig, and she saved me a piece of carrot cake for my return.

It's good to meet these friendly types when you're on tour, especially when you're in a big city that you've never been to before. The couple at the Cornerbrook Guest House were especially helpful when I did a show in Hull a few months ago; I was greeted with a cup of tea upon arrival, and moments later was presented with a map showing me the best way to get to the theatre I was performing in, and a list of local taxi numbers, in case I wanted to get a cab back. It was so kind and thoughtful

of them. You can't feel lonely staying with people like this.

It's even better when you walk into a B&B when you're on tour, and it reminds you of your mum; her house is the best place to stay in the world, and if you can find somewhere that makes you feel like you do there, then you've done well. Barbara and Geoff's B&B in Devon made me feel like this. It was decorated just like the house I grew up in – thick red carpets, gold wallpaper, big green settees, lots of velvet cushions, little lamps in every corner of the room, and a big fluffy dog called Digby. It straddled the line between glamour and tack, but it was a real home.

Barbara and Geoff even adopted the role of surrogate parents while I was staying with them – they drove me to my show and Geoff stayed up late to make me some hot chocolate and snacks when I got home. They were so gutted when they found out they wouldn't be able to come that night that they knocked £10 off my bill in return for a 10-minute show before I left. So I stood in the middle of their lounge and performed a bit of my act for them. It felt a little strange, but they loved it – it was a bit like the youngest member of the family doing a routine from a school play in front of a herd of applauding relatives.

Incidentally, I got another 10 quid off my bill because I came out of the house in the morning, after a nice lazy breakfast, to find my car was covered in goats. One was on my bonnet, one was leaning on my back windscreen – I screamed. Barbara was



Good night: Shazia makes herself at home in B&Bs when on tour

NICK BALLON
FAR LEFT: PLAINPICTURE.COM

They were so gutted they couldn't come to my gig they knocked £10 off my bill for a 10-minute show in the lounge

horrified, even though it clearly wasn't her fault, but she gave me the money to cover the damage to my wipers.

Goats weren't the strangest thing I've encountered while staying in B&Bs on tour, though; my (nonexistent) reputation preceding me and causing the otherwise friendly Betty to turn into a battleaxe was one of my more interesting stays. I was treated like a villain from the start (I'm not sure what her views of comedians were, but they clearly had an effect on her). It was £25 for the night, but she made me leave a £50 pound deposit in case I "destroyed the room", as she put it. The TV and remote control in my room were even chained to the wall. I wouldn't have minded, but it was an old-school Grundig that no one would have wanted to steal.

Betty barked orders at me: "The TV is not to be used after midnight"; "The toilet is not to be flushed after midnight"; "Don't bother hanging up the 'do not disturb sign' as you'll need to be at breakfast between 7.30am and 9am". I felt like I was staying in concentration camp Gloucester.

In the morning it was quite apparent that I had not been the devil Betty had been expecting me to be and she transformed from a dragon into hostess of the year: "Have anything you want for breakfast"; "You want hot chocolate? We've not got any so I'll get someone to pop to the supermarket to get some for you."

By the end of it, I even felt quite at home and left with good, albeit interesting, memories of my stay.

Often I dream of staying in a five-star hotel after every gig, but in reality the pampering and treatment you get in a B&B is way beyond anything you get in a big, lonely hotel. It's not so glamorous, but it is like home.

Shazia Mirza is a comedian and a columnist for the New Statesman. She will be presenting Miss Real World on BBC3 in June. For live gigs go to shaziimirza.org