

Going through the gates

The bus pulls up to the barrier. You're trying to see where you are by looking through an almost blanked-out oblong window not much bigger than a tissue box. It's tea time, 6.0'clock in the evening and it's mid-winter. The dark seems to engulf you. Your mouth is dry and your stomach knotted and you're not sure what to expect.

Then suddenly the barrier lifts and the bus pulls forward. The SCRUBS! - the most foreboding sight I had ever seen. Words cannot describe the feeling of despair and sheer terror at what stood before me. The whole structure looked like something from a horror movie. Surely, this can't be happening to me; I only sold some weed.

Going through reception

What happens when you arrive inside the prison walls? You're taken from the bus and asked to wait in the cells provided for your pleasure. Your waiting with all your new friends swapping all the 'stories', laughing and joking, but how do you feel inside. Your name is called and it's your turn to be booked in. It's just like the police station again (not very nice memories). By this time you would've smoked all your fags or had them taken from your possession, so it's time to approach your new mates while your sitting in the 'fish tank' (main area where prisoners are received) and just in passing, ask for a 'two's up' (share a cigarette).

When you're called you'll be subject to a strip search to ensure that you're not carrying anything, specifically drugs and this will involve a full body search.

Prison Myths

Some people believe that life inside is a breeze; here are some very misguided attitudes and questions I have encountered:

1. Your mates are there as well.
2. You can't wait to make new friends.
3. You're thinking of becoming a screw so you want first hand experience.
4. You've been told that prison food is great and really good for your complexion.
5. You think it's like a five-star hotel and you could do with a rest.
6. You would like your own room prefferably ensuite cause this is better than living on the steets.
7. If you are forced to share then would you insist of choosing your room-mates. (Note: 'room' as opposed to 'cell') - talk about choosing your cellmate.
8. How would I react to a single cell? Could I take the pressure, face the boredom, face the fear and sleep at night?
9. What would I expect if I fell ill? Can't I just open the door and pop to the doctors?
10. Maybe you like the idea of going inside to use their phones. You wait patiently for your turn and as the bloke finishes, you step forward for your turn and someone comes along and pushes in front of you. What can I do?

The Cell

I think the best way to describe your cell is to say that it's more like a 'safe' or as criminals may call it 'a Peter'.

What sort of things will you be able to do in your new 'accommodation'? A few examples:

1. Lie down.
2. Sit down.
3. Stand up.
4. Walk ten paces forward, ten paces back.
5. Spend time looking out the window. I should mention that to get the best possible view you need to be in the 'penthouse suite' on the fourth.
6. Talk to your cellmate/mates - about what?
7. Read a book - really? Be truthful, when did you last read a book via choice. This might be a good time to start.
8. Smoke. Just because you're sharing a cell doesn't that mean you're sharing 'burn' as well. You might decide to quit as you're fed up with two's up all the time (sharing a cigarette).
9. Exercise. Well, you may be into that in a big way or you may feel that have to be seen as being fit and well and capable of looking after yourself is of benefit.
10. Play games such as cards, monopoly, chess, backgammon, and the most crucial games of all for killing time: Blind Man's Bluff or Hide and Seek - clearly such 'games' can't be played in a cell!

And I suppose one final thought before you try and sleep would be:

How am I going to survive this?

What's next?

1. Pressure. How do you cope with a cell-mate that's always right. Furthermore maybe he snores, or worse, especially while you are eating and on the subject of eating, when will you start? Your guts are still churning from your unexpected incarceration.
2. The sleepless nights listening to other cons shouting at each other, threatening each other, playing their music until the early hours - how will you handle this?
3. While your locked up all day doing nothing would you ask the screw if there were any jobs going? You need something to do to take your mind off the pain - what's that: you want to work!
4. How quickly do you think it's going to take you to get used to your sentence and settle down and just get on with it?
5. Have you got enough clothes to wear while you're in there and are they 'designer' or are you going to wear prison issue.
6. Visits (VOs), letters to write, access to newspapers and magazines and finally money.
7. Having visitors is one of the most important things during your sentence. They keep you 'sane' and are a constant reminder to your suffering and what you're missing and how you took 'outside' privileges for granted. But what of their suffering? Do you take that into account as you've put yourself inside, but you still expect to be looked after. If you have a problem in there, get on the phone. Do you have money for the phone? Will your family and friends support you?
7. Violence and how easily it starts.
8. Loneliness.
9. Fear.

What's the difference between an open prison and a closed prison?

A short day

There are twenty four hours in a day, so doing bird in a closed prison makes time go much quicker. Because you are inside all day (except for exercise and movement to work) you get used to your surroundings, whether you have a job or not, but your day comes to an end at 5 o'clock. You go for your tea and come back to your cell hopefully to read your mail (if you received any); you eat your tea and 'slop out' just before six. If it's your wings turn for 'association' and there are enough screws, you will be allowed out of your cell to mix with other cons. You'll play your games as previously mentioned or you may use the time to try to 'ponce' some burn to smoke once your banged up again. If you do get association that finishes at 8 o'clock. If not your day ends at 6 o'clock.

A long day

Being in a closed prison is exactly that - closed off to the outside. There's no point in even thinking about escape, but an open prison is an entirely different matter. Going to an open prison gives you a lot more freedom. You're guaranteed work to take your mind off your sentence. There will be more to do in the evenings, e.g. Snooker, Pool, Darts, Table Tennis and a games room for quieter games such as Chess, Draughts or Backgammon. There is even the chance to use the gym on a regular basis and a swimming pool is also available in some prisons. The prison even has a football team made up of trusted cons who every other saturday were allowed to play away games in the community. If you are a good footballer and you are playing for the prison, what football talent scout will want to know you - rhetorically none. You will also have four TV rooms so there are no arguments about who wants to watch what. As a point of interest: who gets to sit on the soft chairs and are you prepared to fight for your seat? You can still move about the prison grounds up to nine 9 o'clock in the evening. You are then trusted to be back in your block for roll check and to lock the outer doors. In some open prisons around the country you are still allowed to mingle with inmates up to 11 o'clock in the evening.

In an open prison you do get that sense of freedom. A small rush of adrenalin and you're out of the closed prison into this 'holiday camp'. Fresh air and space to move and more to do. All this distraction though still can't help you to forget though...You are still in prison!

At this time and with so much freedom you might be tempted to try to run. You may have had a 'Dear John' from your partner and want to get home to sort it out or maybe you are just plain scared. Possibly you're being bullied and threatened with severe violence because you owe money for drugs or something else.

What you decide to do will have consequences and going on the run is no solution unless you miss your time in a closed prison.

Your choice