

# Hen parties and navy blues

Open door 28 in the mortuary of the coroner's office in one of England's southern counties and instead of a dead body you will find that it's where they keep the milk.

This was perhaps more information than was entirely necessary, especially over lunch.

Talk of dead bodies was hot. The ship's doctor, Hailey, reminisced about dissecting her first head.

Welcome to an English hen party, woman's answer to the stag night.

The bride-to-be gathered her various friends and female family at a spa/hotel in Basingstoke, an anonymous dormitory town about 40 minutes by train from London.

While the groom to be, a pilot, took his men rock-climbing and caving separately in Wales, the "girls" had facials, pedicures and combat training classes.

One of the interesting things about this weekend was that most of the group were from the military; most were Arabic-speakers; most had already served in Iraq; and some were on their way back. So the contrast between quite tough chicks and their inner girliness was fascinating.

I dreaded doing the prescribed "chicken dance". There are the 30 must-do things on a hen night, including getting a condom to fit over your head, kissing 30 men and drinking until you are comatose. The point of all this is to show the boys that you



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are having a better time than they and, supposedly, to show that you know how to enjoy yourself.

In one short but inevitable moment of minor tackiness, the future mother-in-law brought out the hen bag - with garter, mini-veil and "passport" for the number of drinks drunk.

Considering that she works in the coroner's office, we got off rather lightly after she mentioned that all the guts get thrown in a bucket during the autopsy and then get redistributed inside the body once the autopsy is complete.

Her perceptions of death did not change in the 13 years she'd worked there. She had worked as a police officer before. But she had realised how precious life was, and that you had to live every day as if it were your last.

Apart death, babies, weddings, boys, love ... and war ... were the main thrusts of these military babes' conversations.

Another officer, Emma, had to

work out how she and her partner would survive the next two-and-a-half years. The navy, in its wisdom had stationed them on different ships, she said.

That made sense, she explained, because if there is an emergency you have to be able to shut the hatch on your colleagues. The problem was that of those 30 months they could spend only one together.

Between the horrendously loud exploding poppers with their coloured ribbons and champagne toasts, Kim and Carolyn, the future bride, talked with mixed feelings about their deployment to Iraq.

Kim - blonde, petite and able to speak five languages - had supported the war there, but was pleased so many of her military buddies had the gumption to question the authorities about Britain's involvement - and get some answers.

The discussions zoomed through bullying in the navy (yes); how to deal with complaints about senior officials (very difficult); to the old boys' network (it still exists) and how vicious monkfish latch on with their teeth to industrial-strength rubber boots.

The bride had us all up at 8am for breakfast together before the arduous regimen of pampering, eating, chatting and the odd bit of serious exercise.

Same discipline as in the navy. Might join up. Not.