



Mecca Bingo Hall won best loo in Scotland for Bingo Halls/Casinos. More than 1,400 venues—including restaurants, shopping malls, hotels and government buildings—compete for having the best throne.

Please spare us the bathroom humor

British accolades for Loo of the Year leave winners flush with success; for inspectors, 'it's the wow factor we want'

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THE Nobel Prizes identify top advances in medicine, peace and economics, among other things. The Academy Awards tout the ability of movies to illuminate a complex world. In this English village last week, organizers of Britain's Loo of the Year Awards were just as eager to detail their contributions to society.

"This is our opportunity to celebrate the very best in away-from-home toilets," Mike Bone, director of the British Toilet Association, said in his opening address. "The toilets you will see today, the winning toilets, show the power of really wanting something good in this world and striving to achieve it."

At the annual event more than 1,400 venues—including restaurants, shopping malls, hotels and government buildings—compete to snatch the crown for having the nation's best throne. The prize: recognition from colleagues and a trophy bearing a mounted golden toilet seat.

David Magill, the general foreman at the Larne Borough Council, traveled from Northern Ireland to reach a Tudor-style hotel here, where he joined scores of champagne-quaffing colleagues charged with naming the nation's bathrooms.

Mr. Magill, who has managed

Larne's toilet unit for seven years, entered 10 bathrooms in this year's contest. His dream: to receive the grand prize for best in-house cleaning staff. "If we win the big award, I'll probably jump through the roof," Mr. Magill said before the ceremony. "You'll probably need a helicopter to pick me off."

To contestants, the Loo of Year awards are deadly serious. Doreen Hutton, environmental services manager for 2007 overall grand prize winner Trafford Centre, a mall in Manchester, says she constantly ponders how to win again.

"We feel that pressure, that we need to stay up there and stay forward thinking when it comes to new toilet technology," she says.

It costs £99.75, or \$157.31, per bathroom to enter the competition, al-

though there is a volume discount. Entrants get detailed feedback from expert inspectors.

During the summer, nine inspectors fan out to grade entrants on more than 100 criteria, such as cleanliness, disabled access and availability of paper towels. Judges pride themselves on their incorruptibility.

Inspector Richard Ward declines offers of free food, and even cups of tea or coffee, when making his rounds. "I won't compromise my neutrality," he says. Mr. Ward admits to thinking not "about an awful lot" other than toilets in the summer and strug-

gles to step into a bathroom without mentally grading it.

Judges need an eye for detail. Bob Davies, a retired computer project manager from Reading, England, became an inspector for Loo of the Year seven years ago when a friend involved with the contest approached him. "He knew me and knew it was the kind of job I had some aptitude for," says Mr. Davies, 71, who was wearing a necktie emblazoned with multicolored symbols for male and female restrooms. (Judges, regardless of their gender, can inspect both men's and women's bathrooms).

This year, Mr. Davies scrutinized more than 150 toilets across England, always arriving unannounced. Contestants sometimes stall him so someone can tidy up before he enters. "There are distraction techniques which buy time for people," he says. "But you can always see the long-term dirt."

What makes an award-winning restroom? "It's the wow factor we want," says Richard Chisnell, founder and chairman of the Loo of the Year Awards, who inspected about 150 loos with his wife Maureen in Wales this summer. The couple storms out of restaurants without clean bathrooms. Mr. Chisnell says "bits and pieces" are important. "For instance, is there a choice of hand drying?" he asks, noting he prefers to dry his hands "properly, with some physical movement," rather than under an electric hand dryer.

Judge Iain Wilson looks for

modern urinals, stalls and an attendant who "takes ownership and pride" in his or her charge. Good bathrooms are often those that attendants personalize with flowers, pictures and decorations around events like Halloween, he says. His fellow judge, Mr. Davies, recalls a top-notch public toilet in Portsmouth that mixed its own trademark mouthwash on a daily basis. Christmas trees, Mr. Davies says, are a big plus.

Britain's interest in commodes stretches through the ages. Sir John Harrington, an English writer under Queen Elizabeth I, is sometimes credited with inventing the flush toilet in 1596. Thomas Crapper, who built ornate toilets for British royals, helped popularize and perfect indoor plumbing in the late 1800s.

But some believe Britain's public toilets are in peril. From 1999 to 2007, the number of public toilets in the U.K. fell by 40%, according to the British Toilet Association. It predicts another 1,000-plus public toilets will close in the next 12 months as the U.K. makes budget cuts.

And many feel the quality is fading, too. "We lost the plot somewhere along the line," Mr. Davies lamented. "Anyone going to the continent 30 years ago, for example, would criticize the loos in France, whereas now they've outpaced us and their loos are of a better standard than ours."

He added: "Like being a pioneer in anything, I suppose, you get complacent...We're waking up to the fact that we are lagging behind."

That makes the Loo of the Year Awards all the more important. As Mr. Bone called the winners onto the stage Friday, purple and blue spotlights circled the room while the pop band Kings of Leon blasted from speakers. When he awarded the grand prize to the British pub chain JD Wetherspoon PLC, senior manager Mark Fletcher hoisted the golden toilet seat.

"You have to make sure you don't lift it by the seat because it'll crack," Mr. Chisnell told Mr. Fletcher as he handed over the hardware.

Mr. Fletcher says JD Wetherspoon, which runs 790 pubs across the U.K., has a board that places a premium on restroom standards; employees check to make sure bathrooms are clean every half an hour.

Meanwhile, Mr. Magill captured the quarry he came for: best in-house cleaning team. "I've worked for Larne Borough Council for 13 years, and this is my proudest moment," he said.

One venue, however, failed the test: the Chesford Grange Hotel, where the awards were held.

"These toilets are currently OUT OF ORDER," a sign on one of the men's restrooms read at Friday's ceremony. "We do apologise for the inconvenience caused."

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ONLINE TODAY: See photos and a video from the ceremony and some of this year's winners at WSJ.com/World