

[The Star Online](#) >

Monday August 25, 2003

Loo and behold

CLEANLINESS is a virtue and an indicator of the level of development of a country or civilisation. But clean toilets are fast becoming a tourism attraction in their own right nowadays, with Suwon in South Korea leading the way by providing free guided tours of their world-class loos in recent years.

These toilets are not only clean but also conducive enough for its visitors to read, listen to music or have a cup of coffee. Users can also press a button to get music playing if they wish to drown out any embarrassing sounds while easing themselves.

The toilet revolution for Suwon started during preparations for the 2002 World Cup as the city believed that toilets could mirror the nation's image besides being a tourist attraction.

The city, some 30km south-west of Seoul, also conducts on-going programmes like competitions among eateries for the cleanest restroom, to maintain the pace of the toilet revolution.

The public toilets in South Korea are generally clean but it is the toilet revolution in Suwon – which, by the way, is also spreading to other parts of the country – that upgrades the facility to be a reflection of the rich Korean culture.



In contrast, Malaysian public toilets are largely still an eyesore and filthy, like this one in the Taman Tun Dr. Ismail market, which is in a deplorable condition, bemoans Kuala Lumpur mayor Datuk Mohamad Shaid Mohd Taufek.

Singapore has also been at the forefront of keeping loos clean and in 1998, the Restroom Association Singapore (RAS) was set up. Founder of RAS, Jack Sim, prides himself on spearheading the establishment of the World Toilet Organisation three years later.

Similar associations from 17 countries, including Malaysia's Toilet Committee, are now World Trade Organisation members.

In June, RAS launched the Happy Toilet programme whereby the island's public toilets are given "star ratings" based on three aspects: provisions and conditions; maintenance and comfort; and special features-cum-user-friendliness.

The top grade of five stars is for exclusive toilets; four stars, for excellent toilets; while those with good and clean toilets will be accorded three stars. Those that make the mark are given a "happy toilet" logo for display at their premises.

As of last month, the three places in the republic whose toilets earned five stars are the Tampines Mall, Shangri-La Hotel and the Singapore

Zoo. Sim said that there were several other places which were accorded four stars or three stars. All ratings are valid for a year, and RAS has the right to withdraw such ratings within that period if complaints by the public on such toilets are proven valid.

Dubbed Singapore's Mr Toilet, Sim estimated that there are between 50,000 and 70,000 public toilets

in the republic and he aims to get all of them rated. Assessment fees range from S\$60 (RM132) to S\$80 (RM176) per toilet block.

In fact, after the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak three months ago, Singapore saw a plunge in tourist arrivals, prompting the government to embark on a “Singapore’s OK” drive whereby its National Environment Agency accorded a big yellow “Singapore’s OK” label to toilets which met certain criteria. These toilets must have sanitary fittings which are functioning properly, soap, toilet paper, hand dryers or paper towels, and a cleaner during peak hours.

China, famous for its infamous toilets, including those without doors, had started sprucing up the amenities. Beijing is on a fast-track programme to upgrade its toilets to international levels as it will be hosting the World Toilet Summit next year and the 2008 Olympic Games.

The focus on toilets does not come as a surprise as over 10% of complaints from tourists in the Chinese capital were about filthy toilets.

In Malaysia, the Housing and Local Government Ministry launched a nationwide campaign for clean toilets at the end of last month. Filthy public toilets have for some time drawn unwanted attention and criticism from many quarters, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. It is learnt that Dr Mahathir received a letter from a group of young Japanese tourists who had nothing but praise for Malaysia – with the exception of its public toilets.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi once described the conditions of some public amenities in Malaysia as a reflection of “first-class facilities and third-class mentality”.

To curb the abuse of public toilet facilities, Housing and Local Government Deputy Minister Datuk Peter Chin said recently that the government was toying with the idea of installing closed-circuit television cameras in public toilets to nab culprits who leave a mess behind.

Culture, Arts and Tourism officer Dr Junaidah Lee Abdullah said filthy toilets are a bane to the tourism industry.

She said that the lack of monitoring on the condition of public toilets and the unclear jurisdiction on who was responsible for the task had contributed to the poor condition of the amenities. – **By Foong Pek Yee**

Got something to say about public toilets? E-mail startwo@thestar.com.my.