

The thrones of the Lion City

Having lived in Singapore for half a year now, several things remind me that I am no longer in the country when I head up north on my occasional trips back home.

For one thing, just about every car I see – I'd say seven in 10 – is Malaysian-made, the most ubiquitous being the Protons and Peroduas, the most affordable brands.

Another sign that I am on the Malaysian side of the Causeway is the lovely view of the distant mountains.

And as I go farther north on my five-hour express bus ride to Kuala Lumpur, there will be that annoying text message I get on my cell-phone reminding me that I am no longer on a Singapore network.

But the most vivid reality check comes at each highway rest area.

Yes, I'm talking about the filthy, smelly toilets there.

One look, or rather, one sniff is all it takes to tell me that I am back in Malaysia.

I know of travellers who avoid these rest stop loos altogether, no matter how many hours of the journey they have to endure.

I should add that such ghastly

public toilets are not restricted to Malaysian highways. You can find them just about anywhere across the Causeway and across the South China Sea in East Malaysia.

I know, because I have had to live through them.

I still remember a scary little building they called a toilet back in my primary school.

Without going too much into scatological detail, let's just say kids at a particular age can be quite creative with what little material they have to create toilet graffiti.

In secondary school, we played a game called "hunt for a door" when we needed some privacy in the toilet.

It was all thanks to our seniors, who decided to leave their mark after their final exams by ripping off all the cubicle doors from their hinges and stacking them against the toilet wall.



Cecil Fung

That was just in school. Elsewhere in the country, I have lost count of the number of times that I had gone into the cubicle of a public loo to find indescribable things stuck on the floor (and sometimes on the wall) and urine or footprints

all over the seat.

Some toilets do not even have to be dirty to put you off. They are just wet, so wet that they look like they had been hit by a typhoon.

And just when you thought you finally had that "eureka moment" – a clean, not a reeking, toilet – your luck runs out.

Either a cockroach will crawl by right in front of you (when you are already seated) or you will have finally come to the realisation that most toilets in Malaysia, even those in popular shopping malls, do not come with toilet paper.

Public toilets are such a nightmare back home that I have friends who would rather drive all the way home to use their own.

Despite countless campaigns, this national embarrassment refuses to be wiped away.

The government there has tried everything from funny advertise-

ments to automated toilets that cost RM400,000 (about S\$167,000) each. As far as I can tell, nothing has worked.

In Singapore, things are different, and I noticed this from the moment I set foot here last year.

I know there are Singaporeans who complain about the state of their public loos, but the way I see it, they have it good, really.

People here appear to take their toilets more seriously, and this is evident from the clean loos at Changi Airport as well as those at just about every mall and office building that I have been to so far, although I do realise it's been only six months.

All this writing about toilets reminds me of a piece of advice my boss gave me when I was working at a fast-food outlet in Kota Kinabalu when I was a teen.

"People judge your establishment by how well you maintain your toilets," he said.

Judging by the state of the toilets that I have seen here, Singapore is on the right track.

The writer is a sub-editor with The Straits Times.