

# Much ado about loos

A colleague recently wrote a column in *The Straits Times* about toilets, in which she said that loos in different cultures tell us a lot more about ourselves than we think.

This flushes out the question: What do toilets here tell this Western expat about Singapore?

Firstly, I must stress my personal observations are confined to the island's toilets for women. I have had to rely on second-hand information for insights into men's business.

Secondly, my analysis is scatty logical – it is not comprehensive, being confined to female toilets at Orchard Road, Toa Payoh North, any suburban mall, Changi Airport and the washroom facilities of condo facilities that have tennis courts.

Toilet-culture purists will note the omission of hawker centres. I did go to a toilet in a hawker centre once, but suffice it to say that perhaps Singapore need not aim to have a paperless economy in all spheres.

My first Singapore toilet encounter was in the altogether more rarefied surrounds of Raffles Hotel, back in 1985 during a stopover while en route from Australia to England.

It was an excellent preparation for the deprivations of pommy privies, as although it was Raffles Hotel,

this was before its magnificent renovation. My room's toilet was a colonial-era porcelain throne, whose regality was compromised by its aged wooden seat, cracking under the strain of bearing numerous bottoms over many decades.

Worse was the plumbing. The ironware pipes shook dramatically, signalling to guests everywhere that one had yanked the toilet's clanking chain and pulled off a royal flush.

Clearly, it was a time of flux for Singapore, still shaking off the chains of British plumbing, but yet to fully switch on to the one-finger push-button control mechanisms available.

My arrival in 1993 to work in Singapore saw me encountering a new era in toilets.

At the vanguard of this significant infrastructural development were the toilets at the Ngee Ann City shopping mall. I shall never forget my first experience of them.

They were a comm-ode to perfection. The spacious cubicles, clean, marble-like modern tiles, the auto-



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matic flushing – forget having to press a button at all – the hygienic sensor taps at the wash basins, the helpful cleaning lady, the fact the cleaners even had time sheets to fill in, clearly displayed so you could see to the minute the time of the last mopping – it was truly clean and efficient, just as I found Singapore itself to be.

Over the years, there have been other lavatorial milestones,

hand-in-hand with Singapore's economic, cultural and societal progress. These include Great World City's automatic sliding doors.

Painted with distinctive murals, they introduced the concept of humour into the serious business of waste management. Many a desperate, need-to-spend-a-penny shopper would pause in puzzlement at the "wall" in front of them, until they moved closer, depressing the automatic sensor so the wall parted, and, ah-ha! the penny dropped.

VivoCity and The Cathay mall's no-flush urinals in the men's toilets are said to provide seat-of-your-pants excitement, with their cultured bacteria pee-feeders that, interestingly, show local toilets have evolved from not just clean, to green.

No study of Singapore's sanitation system is complete without examining the social anthropological aspects.

Western men have been known to find Singapore men's rooms a cultural shock. Whereas Western

men tend to unzip and point (so I am told), the local man prefers to lower his pants before pointing (so I am told). The sight of men with their trousers half-mast is disconcerting until you become culturally inured, apparently.

As for the women's rooms, there was one thing that struck me straightaway in 1993, and remains true to this day.

In toilets in New Zealand, Australia and Britain, you will find women gazing into the mirrors over the sinks, busy tending to make-up such as slathering on another coat of plaster, I mean, foundation.

But in Singapore, the predominant sight is of women cleaning their teeth.

Morning, noon or night, they whip out toothbrushes from scrupulously sterile containers, and furiously scrape their already white teeth even whiter. This is followed by a good flossing.

What does this toilet culture of men letting it all hang out and women having a squeaky clean approach to oral hygiene tell me about Singapore?

I have no idea. But I'm going off to wash my mouth out. And clean my teeth.

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