

Paperless toilets rolled out in Britain

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This was the best toilet experience of my life. I went for an innocent loo break between sushi courses and ended up road-testing the lavatorial equivalent of Nasa's Space Shuttle. In place of the toilet roll, there was a control panel.

Instead of a sign requesting that ladies please use the bin provided, there was a set of laminated instructions.

'Welcome to the new experience of Aspen,' began the notice. 'Paperless Toilet Technology from Japan.' You would expect this sort of glitzy hightechery in Tokyo, but in grubby old [London](#)?

The first step was easy: sit down and use the loo as normal. The technology kicks in only when you are perched on the seat; which, incidentally, is gently heated to the temperature of a half-bled radiator.

And then I had a choice: press 'bidet' or 'wash'. Not knowing which was which, I threw caution to the wind and experimented.

The former was a more gentle affair, as a mellow jet of warm water shot up towards my rear. The latter involved an extended, shower-like spray head and was rather more. . . bracing.

Suitably cleansed, I was then to activate the dryer, which was pretty damn industrial - like having your backside blown about by a vicious yet strangely pleasant gust of warm air. It was brilliant - so futuristic!

The truth is that Britain has long had a rather shabby reputation in this department.

Whereas 90 per cent of Argentinians apparently own - and, crucially, use - a bidet, and Italians are so openly dedicated to washing their bums that if you spend a day at their house, you will be handed a special 'bidet towel' on the way in so that you do not use a bath towel by mistake, here on our repressed little islands we are very old-school in our toilet habits.

When I mentioned at work how much I enjoyed having a bidet, my colleagues were shocked into a mixture of horrified silence and nervous giggles - one had the temerity to suggest that I got some sort of thrill from it.

I, on the other hand, do not mind talking about toilet-related matters at all, and believe we all ought to talk about them more.

I think it is something I learned from my school trips to Germany. Aged 14, I was flabbergasted when no one laughed at my new friend Lars when he declared, in front of the whole class and without a hint of a blush, that he had 'Durchfall' (diarrhoea). I soon learned that in Germany, going to the toilet was a fact of life, and that I might as well have a nice time while I was at it.

SO IT has become a bit of a habit, born partly out of bladder-related necessity and partly from nosiness and obsession, always to check out the loos wherever I go - which is why my experience at Saki, a Japanese restaurant in Smithfield, London, was such a revelation.

Though Saki claims to be the first commercial establishment in these islands to install the paperless toilets so beloved of the Japanese (70 per cent of households in Tokyo have one), it will probably be a while before they will take the whole nation by storm.

But could the mere fact that such a whizzy loo has been pioneered anywhere public in the UK be indicative of a wider social change?

While investment in public conveniences has plummeted over the past decade - there are now only an estimated 6,000 public toilets in Britain, compared with double that ten years ago, and some places, even big cities such as Birmingham, have no free public loos - there are signs that a quiet revolution is under way among the nation's cisterns and urinals.

'It's just like when mobile phones came in,' says Iyako Watanabe, the Japanese-born managing director of Saki, of her futuristic loos. 'For a while there were lots of refuseniks, but once you get one, there's no going back.'

Colin Davies, managing director of Ascot Hygiene, the only UK distributor of Saki's Dutch-manufactured £400 toilet seat systems, agrees.

ONCE you've tried them, you can't live without them,' he says. 'Whenever we visit friends who don't have one, I can't wait to get home. It's such a joy.'

Davies says that demand for the product has doubled in the past year. He is very excited about a new model he is soon to stock: named Jasmine, it (you almost feel it is a 'she', so loving is Davies's description of the product) has an in-built deodoriser, which uses a charcoal filter to circulate the air in the toilet bowl.

It can only be a matter of time before Toto - the Japanese daddies of technologically advanced toilets, who brought out the MP3-playing lav last year - has a crack at the UK market.

The British Toilet Association (BTA) - self-appointed arbiter of the nation's WC habits - claims that things are genuinely on the up, pointing to a record number of models being entered into its prestigious Loo of the Year awards this year.

Armitage Shanks, one of the biggest manufacturers of 'sanitaryware' in the UK, says demand has gone through the roof for its Sensorflow systems, which use panel sensors to detect proximity of the user's hand, to avoid the customer having to touch the flush.

And Cannon Hygiene, which specialises in what is known in the trade as 'washroom furniture', reports that sales of automatic soap dispensers, no-touch taps and 'washroom monitors', which count down how long it is since the facilities were last cleaned, have doubled.

But as anyone who has ever

suffered the ignominy of forgetting to press the 'lock' button for the loos on a modern train will testify, toilet technology can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help.

I remember a self-cleaning toilet seat in France once catching me out, as it swivelled round towards the cistern before I'd had a chance to get up.

But Richard Chiswell, indefatigable sixtysomething director of the BTA, thinks technological advances can only be a good thing. He sings the praises of a trip he and other members of the BTA made to Beijing last year before London won the 2012 Olympic bid.

'The Chinese have spent £25 million installing 3,500 tourist toilets,' he says, 'and they are marvellous. I'd never seen anything like it in my life.' Which, coming from the UK's self-appointed toilet tsar, is quite something. 'There were settees, telephones and everything was automated. They were proper visitor comfort stations.'

Chiswell says the goal in Britain should be for everything, from flushing to door locks, to be automated, 'so you don't have to touch anything and spread bacteria'. It is the widespread fear of infections such as MRSA that has fuelled the interest in high-tech toilet solutions, says Cannon Hygiene's Marshall Beach: 'People have much more of a hygiene awareness than they used to.'

In America, some toilets already have no-touch doors, but they are pretty low-tech - you open and close them using your foot. All the experts I spoke to mentioned the death of the manual flush: 'It's coming, mark my words,' said one.

HAVING heard all this stuff about the improvements in British toilets, it was time to do some fieldwork. I have been doing my own ad hoc research for years, but it was time to go national.

I had been given a tip-off from Chiswell that to see the future of British toilets, I should head to Wychavon in Worcestershire.

Just under two hours on the train from London, this genteel Midlands tourist hotspot is famous for its ruined medieval abbeys and orchard-lined river banks. And, since 1999, its lovely, lovely loos. Five of its 12 public facilities have been awarded the BTA maximum of five stars, and in 2005 it was given a special Standards of Excellence Award, which was given to only three other authorities in England.

There is no obligation for local councils to spend anything on public loos if they do not want to, but Wychavon considers them to be of such importance it now spends more than £400,000 a year on maintaining the facilities.

I go to visit the district's pride and joy, the five-star facilities in the picture-perfect Cotswold village of Broadway.

Jim Burbridge won toilet attendant of the year at the 1999 Loo of the Year awards and, says Julian Yeo from Wychavon Council, he would have won again if they didn't have an unofficial rule not to honour the same individuals twice.

These loos are visited by around 1,000 tourists a day during high season, but they are immaculate. The area is popular with walkers so, as a nice touch, Burbridge has even installed boot scrapers by the entrance.

It is little personal touches like this that are part of a wider shift in attitude towards toilets: an increasing number of loos, far from being no-frills facilities, are almost turning boutique.

Canny proprietors are using their toilets as unique selling points.

The landlords of the Old Crown pub on New Oxford Street, London, for example, have added an educational twist to their toilet experience by playing language tapes in the loos - a trick also employed at Italian restaurant Centotre in George Street, Edinburgh. This is the kind of kookiness I have long loved abroad.

One of my favourite cafes in Berlin, Kauf Dich Gluecklich (Buy Yourself Happy), even has a bar in the toilet, though I am constantly disappointed that there is never anyone behind it to take my order.

Back to Britain, where we are heading up to Viaduct Meadow car park toilets in Evesham, another five-star beauty. Jeanette Pickering is the award-winning attendant at the toilets, which are open from 8am to 9pm.

She has been in the loo-cleaning business for decades, along with her husband, Christopher, her mum, dad, son and daughter. She takes great pride in the sparkle of the ten urinals, automated flushing mechanisms and taps, and points out the baby-changing mat in the gents'.

'It shouldn't be unusual - lots of men these days have kids on their own,' she says. There is also a little dog bowl outside for thirsty fourlegged friends.

Pickering shows me a selection of feedback forms she has received. Her favourite is from a Mrs J Newton of Portsmouth, who wrote: 'I have not seen toilets as immaculate as these since a recent visit to Harrods.'

As I am reading through the forms, a pair of older women leave the toilets. Upon hearing that the Press are in evidence, one of the duo, who introduces herself as Mrs Cressey from Thornbury, wants to add her tuppence worth.

'It's worth coming to Evesham just for the toilets,' she says. 'We say the same every time, don't we?' An enthusiastic nod from her companion. 'They're beautiful!'

WYCHAVON Council's Julian Yeo is very proud of the facilities, and says they are moving towards complete automation (so you won't have to touch anything in the loos except the loo paper, and perhaps, eventually, not even that).

I have one worry about all this automatic flushing, seat warming and constant disinfecting: it cannot be good for the environment, can it? Au contraire, say the manufacturers.

Armitage Shanks claims that if you press the small flush button in its dual-flushing loos, you will use only four litres of water - since 2001, water bylaws made it illegal for toilets to use more than six litres per flush.

A good example of toilet technology being environmentally friendly can be found at the rather fine toilets at Kynance Cove on the Lizard, Cornwall.

They are ecological loos - the waste runs into three tanks, one of which gets rid of bacteria using UV light. The material then runs into the sea completely clean. Colin Davies also says Ascot Hygiene's paperless loos are ecologically sound, despite the electricity used to power the unit and warm the seat.

But even if they were not green, I would want one. Bidet-toilets are the future - I've sat on one.