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'Bidet toilets, they're the future - I've sat on one'

When self-confessed lavatory enthusiast Helen Pidd tried out this paper-free, hi-tech contraption in a London restaurant, it was a complete revelation to her. Is Britain finally coming out of its toilet dark age, she asks - or are we forever doomed to giggle and blush at the very mention of someone having a bidet?

Helen Pidd
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A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

It 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 Discovery 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 step-by-step instructions. "Welcome to the new experience of Aspen," began the notice. "Paperless Toilet Technology from Japan." You would expect this sort of glitzy hi-techery in Tokyo, but in grubby old London? No one was going to stop me having a go.

The first step was easy: sit down and use the toilet as normal. The technology only kicks in 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 bottom. 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 warm gust of air. It was brilliant. So futuristic! I felt like Judith Hann on Tomorrow's World, getting a glimpse into the destiny of the WC.

The truth is that Britain has long had a rather shabby reputation in the toilet department. Whereas 90% 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 island we are very old-school in our toilet habits.

When I mentioned, while 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 a sexual thrill from it. (It is these sort of people, I always think, who wipe the rim of a beer bottle when passed a drink by a friend.)

I, on the other hand, do not mind talking about toilet-related matters at all, and believe

Though Saki claims to be the first commercial establishment in these islands to install the paperless toilets so beloved of the Japanese (70% of households in Tokyo have one), it is probably 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 generally plummeted over the past decade - there are an estimated 6,000 public toilets in Britain now, compared with double that 10 years ago, and some places, even big cities such as Birmingham, now 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, MD of Ascot Hygiene Ltd, the only UK distributor of Saki's Dutch-manufactured £400 toilet seats, 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 currently 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 toilets being entered into their prestigious Loo of the Year awards this year. Armitage Shanks, one of the biggest "sanitaryware" manufacturers in the UK, says that 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 have doubled of automatic soap dispensers, no-touch taps and "washroom monitors", which count down how long since the facilities were last cleaned.

As anyone who has ever suffered the ignominy of forgetting to press the "lock" button for the loos on the Virgin Pendolino 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 had had a chance to finish. But Richard Chiswell, the 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 £25m 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, everything was automated. They were proper visitor comfort stations."

Chiswell says that the goal in Britain should be for everything, from the flushing to the door locks, to be automated, "so that 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 hi-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 lo-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 toilet enthusiast.

Having heard all this stuff about the improvements in British toilets, it was time to do some field work. 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 if I wanted 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 west Midlands tourist hot spot 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 are awarded the BTA maximum of five stars, and in 2005 it was given an extra 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 toilets if they do not want to, but Wychavon considers them to be of such importance that it now gives more than £400,000 a year to maintaining the facilities. The area is also home to what must be Britain's oddest loos, at the Evesham hotel (see panel opposite).

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've 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 their USPs. The landlords of the Old Crown 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. It is the kind of kookiness that 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 there to take my order.

Back to Britain, where we are heading up to Viaduct Meadow carpark 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, mum and dad, son and daughter. She takes great pride in the sparkle of the 10 urinals, automated flushing mechanisms and taps, and points out the baby-changing mat in the men's. "It shouldn't be unusual - lots of men these days have kids on their own," she says. There is also a little doggie bowl outside for thirsty four-legged 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 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. "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!" Yeo is very proud of the facilities, and says they are moving towards complete automation (so that 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 only use 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. Davies also says that his paperless loos are ecologically sound, despite the electricity used to power the unit and warm the seat.

But then, the fact is, even if they were not green, I would want one. Bidet-toilets: they're the future - I've sat on one.

Five of the best loos in Britain
(As chosen by Helen Pidd)

1 Evesham hotel, Evesham

Oh my. Where to begin? Almost certainly the oddest loos in Britain, the toilets in this hotel bar are also so squeaky clean that owner John Jenkinson once ate his dinner off the floor as part of a local newspaper stunt. In the gents', the visitor is greeted by a sinister-looking scarecrow (an effigy of Jenkinson's sister, apparently) and a shower curtain decorated with a Psycho-type silhouette of a knifeman. There are radios and a stack of Beans for those customers planning a long stay, and a Bogometer, which can be set to warn other users what smell to expect when they enter after you. Look into the mirror above the sink in both the ladies' and gents' and an Austin Powers-esque voice says, "You look great! Have you lost weight?", and, "I love the size of your bum."

The Evesham Hotel, Coopers Lane, Off Waterside, Evesham, Worcestershire, WR11 1DA. eveshamhotel.com

2 Rothesay Pier, Isle of Bute

Prince Charles is a fan of these decorative urinals, having once visited the premises on an official visit. Often described as the most impressive surviving late-Victorian public conveniences in Scotland, if not Britain, the walls of these men's toilets are clad in decorative ceramic tiles, ornately patterned in rows. Fourteen urinals stand like watchmen along two walls, another six surround a central stand.

The Pier, Rothesay, Isle of Bute. isle-of-bute.com/victoriantoilets

3 Victoria Pier, Hull

A tourist attraction in their own right, these immaculate Edwardian public loos are home to so many species of plant that they almost resemble a Kew Gardens greenhouse. They have become so famous that coach parties make special stops, not to spend a penny, but to take pictures of the quaint, oddly tranquil interior. Lovely brass pipe work too, if you like that kind of thing.

Victoria Pier, Nelson Street, Hull, HU1 1EX

4 Sarastro restaurant, London

The tagline of this theatreland Turkish restaurant is "the show after the show", and that is certainly true where the loos are concerned. The walls are covered in pornographic hand-painted murals and look like the inside of an ancient brothel. Hours of fun - just don't bring your nan.

Sarastro, 126 Drury Lane, London, WC2B 5QG. sarastro-restaurant.com

5 Don't Miss A Sec, London

This arguably should not make the cut as it is no longer in service, but Monica Bonvicini's functional artwork, positioned outside the Chelsea School of Art in 2004, was so great that I couldn't leave it out. Both a sculpture and a working toilet, the walls of this loo were made of one-way mirrored glass. No one on the street could see in, but you could see out - if you were brave enough to have a go in the first place.

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