

## Of the Essential Joys and Sorrows of Travel

When people talk about the joys of travel they usually mean the food, the scenery, the different cultures. We hear that one can't get good food in England or bad food in France; that The Netherlands is flat and there are alps in Switzerland; that Turkish men drink coffee while the women work but Yemeni women are locked in the house while the men go out to work.

Food, scenery and culture are important. But they are only part of what makes for a satisfactory trip. Sometimes one should look at a smaller, humble element that supports the larger system: food, production, perhaps, or public transport. I happen to like plumbing. We don't think much about the problem of waste, but it can make or break a trip or a culture. Carolyn watches with some amusement as I root around in Roman ruins looking for their ingenious water and sewer systems, with ceramic pipes and cast junctions, "flush" toilets, etc. The Romans lasted over 700 years. I think it was because of their plumbing. Can't have been their taste in art.

The particular waste problem I have in mind is human. Remember that human beings are like any other animal or any machine: fuel (coal, diesel fuels, or food and drink) goes in, and out comes two things: the energy that we use to walk around to see the fascinating scenery and culture, and wastes. As a child I used the wooden two-holer in the back yard, fully equipped with an old Sears catalog. One still finds something like that in the public toilets in Turkey: a "slit trench" in the ground to squat over, and an attendant outside who gives you one (count it: one!) piece of paper going in and perhaps a dash of "cologne" with (you hope) some alcohol in it on your way out, to rinse the hands. The only good thing is that the Turks have a fair number of these, well scattered, so you rarely need to hunt for a potty bush. Such experiences can quickly cause one to miss those fine American indoor bathrooms with a suitable "throne," lots of paper, a lever to flush the mess "away," and a sink to wash up. At one time it was held that only Americans had decent plumbing. That's not been true for some time, and I'd be prepared to argue the superiority of the modern Japanese toilet, the one with the heated seat, exhaust fan, and warm water spray before the air dry. But that would be a matter of shades of preferences. Far more basic concerns are cleanliness and sheer availability.

Clean and convenient public toilets are extremely welcome for anyone traveling. They can be hard to find. The average US city or town, for example, has few public toilets. Towns rarely have them, or at least don't advertise them. Huge malls with daily populations in the tens of thousands may have one or two small (and often not too clean) public toilets at the far end of a passage hidden behind a cell phone sales booth. Carolyn and I visit MacDonald's and Burger King frequently even though we rarely eat there -- they're not in the public toilet business, but when ya gotta go . . . Nor are many US public toilets (or Burger King semi-public ones) especially well maintained or very clean. I often pity foreign visitors, since even Americans have a hard time finding decent toilets.

Therefore let us sing the praises of New Zealand! The Kiwis have a system of public potties that is incomparably better than anyplace else we know of (although other nominations will be accepted with gratitude, for use in future travels). On a back county road you'll find a couple of houses, a "country store" and petrol station, and a public potty. In towns of even a few hundred people there will be a park or two, and a public potty in each. There will also be signs proudly pointing the way to the toilet (no weasel words about washroom or restroom). As the towns get bigger they usually have bigger and better public potties, and more of them. By the time you get to city size there will be a dozen public toilets (and "for customers only" as well in stores) within a short walk.

Almost all will be clean and well maintained. We have never, never found a toilet here that is as dirty as quite a few US (but not Kiwi) Burger Kings, and nothing like the health-threatening mess in many US gas stations, which can be as bad as Viet Nam. In several cities we've seen what is probably the acme of Kiwi toilets. One stands proudly on the sidewalk of Viaduct Harbor, the ritziest part of Auckland, about five blocks from our hotel. It's a true technological triumph, a stainless steel and tile icon of modern plumbing. Enter and find two buttons, one to close/lock and the other to unlock/open the powered door. There is a fine throne with an electric dispenser of paper, a sink with hot water, a soap dispenser, an electric hand drier and other appurtenances. Every so often, while the structure is empty, the toilet automatically locks the doors and conducts a spray/disinfectant wash down with ceiling- and wall-mounted jets. Amazing!

There are even works of art. In the town of Kawakawa, about 200 km. north of Auckland on Highway One, one may view and use the famed "Hundertwasser Toilet." Herr Friedrich Hundertwasser (d. 2000) was an Austrian architect and ecologist of some note who immigrated to a farm near Kawakawa in the 1970's. He was pleased to design for the town a public toilet with ceramic columns and insets, a garden roof (i.e., grass and flowers grow up there), and curving specially cast walls and facilities. It's right in the middle of Main Street (several nearby stores have taken up the ceramic column theme) and the town invites visitors to stop and admire this working art. We did.

Art galleries are important and symphonies, alps, lakes, people, and good toilets.

The Migrating Salmon  
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