

Robert Crampton: I'm sitting on an £11,000 loo. What is it doing to me?



Robert Crampton testing out the Toto Ki Price for The Times

Robert Crampton

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The Toto Neorest AC Washlet will set you back — wait for it — £11,428. That's got to be some serious bog, right? It's my, ahem, job to find out how a humble latrine can cost more than a brand new Ford Fiesta with all the trimmings. There's really only one way for a middle-aged man to proceed, isn't there? Reach for the sports pages, drop the trousers gracefully to the ankle, make myself comfortable.

Toto Washlets, originating in Japan, have now, according to *The New York Times*, become the latest must-have brand for the wealthy and fashion-conscious. Hard to believe that the concept of the designer privy even exists — yet I can assure you it does. I should know, I'm sitting on it.

It's warm — that's the first thing to mention in its favour. You can't beat a warm loo seat, especially when that warmth is not merely the residual heat transferred from your dad's buttocks over the course of his recent half-hour stay, but instead specially generated for you. The Toto senses your arrival and turns up the temperature in anticipation. Very pleasant, especially at this time of year.

I'm testing out the Toto at CP Hart, the luxury bathroom retailer, in the company's showroom near Waterloo station in south London. I'm not in the open-plan body of the showroom, you understand — that would be uncouth — but in a more discreet set-up where I will not be disturbed, with a lock on the door and everything. The provision of such privacy for would-be customers is, I learn, a continuing problem in the lavatory showroom game, the seclusion frequently proving too tempting for over-amorous young couples high on the thrill of kitting out their first home.

When CP Hart launched the Toto range, this showroom's general manager, Bob Taylor, tells me: "We had people queueing up. The buzz was intense." He estimates they sell forty or fifty of the Washlets a year — some at £6,000, some at £9,600, some for the fabled £11,428 already mentioned. CP Hart has 14 showrooms. Plus a contracts division that sells to luxury hotels.

Many of the sales, says Taylor, are for multiple units, either to upmarket developers or wealthy individuals kitting out a large house. "We supplied one unbelievable property in Hampstead which has seven bathrooms. The client put one of these units in every one." Early customers included a lot of either Japanese expats or Brits with business connections to Japan and an acquired taste for the customs of that country. More recently, Taylor says, architects working at the top of the property market routinely specify the inclusion of a Toto Washlet. "They're like owning a Ferrari," he says. Simply the done thing for the mega-rich.

Even so, rich, poor and all points in between, the actual core business of a lavatory visit does not vary much, however expensively your bottom may find itself accommodated. I'll spare you the details of what happens next. Not even £11,000 can enhance the fundamentals of the main event. It damn sure enhances what follows, though.

Reaching for the adjacent remote-control panel, I discern three icons that I eventually decipher as representing the Toto's much-vaunted undercarriage cleansing function. I can choose between ascending order of violence. Given that I didn't get where I am today — road-testing an overpriced outhouse — by taking the easy option, I press the button for max power. And . . .

. . . Oo-er missus! Sometimes only the great Frankie Howerd will do. Pleasure or pain? Reader, I have to tell you I'm right on the boundary. The force of the water jet is as extreme as its accuracy is mystifying. Consider: people come in all shapes and sizes. They also adopt, I assume, varying positions relative to a bowl's front, back and sides. Yet within a split second of activation, this contraption has manoeuvred a nozzle with such precision as to deliver a high-pressure payload bang on target.

Does this thing have sensors? Some form of tracking device? GPS? I suppose it must. Yep, somewhere way up in space there must be a satellite capable of instantly crunching Crampton's relevant bum co-ordinates. I have to say I'm impressed. Not to mention a little alarmed. I guess this is the sort of bottom identification technology that eleven and a half grand will buy you. Those Japanese, eh? Everyone says they're not the cutting-edge force in hi-tech they once were but, hey, Silicon Valley hasn't come up with a personalised enema, has it?

Hard on the heels of the hose comes a delightfully prolonged blast of warm air. Sorted! Loo-roll manufacturers ought to be worried. Not yet, perhaps, not at these prices. But prices have a habit of coming down. Andrex, beware!

Lavatorial hygiene is very big in Japan. If the Germans are known for their raised-shelf toilet pans, the better to make an inspection, the Japanese are the opposite: they'll go to great lengths to remove any and all evidence of bodily function. The Toto Washlet is not about style or elegance or design beauty — it is actually a rather ugly fixture. It is about ultra-efficient waste removal. Hence the fearsome bidet function. Hence the highly polished ceramic bowl, the better to reduce friction. Hence — occupant having departed — the lengthy debugging process. The global wealth elite, the evidence suggests, have embraced this Asian approach.

And as for the British? I'm old enough to remember when bidets started appearing in the Seventies. They had a bit of a moment, but never quite caught on. Fact is, we couldn't quite take them seriously, could we? These days, if even a high-end hotel bathroom does not feature a

bidet (and many do not), most British guests could not care less.

Yet the British — not just the more-money-than-sense British but the middle classes too — have finally embraced the pleasures of the bathroom. "The bathroom isn't the poor relation of a house any more," says Bob Taylor. He's right. In new housing developments, not just swanky ones, bigger and more numerous bathrooms are now part of the standard spec. En suites and wet rooms are no longer exotic add-ons. The Brits are proving willing to invest time and money on keeping clean — an indication, surely, of the increasing and wholly welcome feminisation of society.

A word of warning to women, however. Baths and showers and pampering are one thing — lavatories are quite another. Most wives, I imagine, already reckon their husbands loiter too long in the loo. "What on earth are you DOING in there?" And so forth. As and when amenities such as I sampled become the affordable norm, we chaps will struggle to leave the smallest room at all.

How the smartest bathrooms scrub up

You may think that as long as your bathroom isn't avocado with shagpile carpet and gold taps it's pretty blameless and you're in the clear. You may even think smugly that your wet room is the last thing in chic. Bad news. You're wrong. So what do the best-dressed bathrooms look like?

"Wet rooms are out," according to Sophie Rogerson of RFR, an interior design and property search company. "They're what developers put in when they're trying to cram lots of bathrooms into a small space. Bathrooms today are a sanctuary and wet rooms aren't that — they're sodden and mucky. People are happy to spend good money on bathrooms now, much more than they used to. Budgets start at £15,000, but we've done one that cost £100,000.

"There's been a rebellion against super-modern styles, again because that's what developers started to give us. Things now have gone much more traditional and people want heritage fittings. Roll-top baths from Catchpole & Rye are still popular, but the top-end choice would be a Carrara marble bath. Most people opt for a classic built-in bath with a marble surround.

"People can get really obsessed with radiators and towel rails: how will their towels hang, will they be warm enough? Drummonds are the most fashionable — they make massive traditional ball-and-joint styles and cost well into four figures. We just put one in for a client that is more than a metre wide and 1.2m high.

"Tiles are where people like to get playful and inject a bit of personality. There's a real trend for little hexagonal tiles by Fired Earth, made of limestone or marble, on floors or walls. You have to re-grout them every few years but that's not a total disaster and the intricacy of small tiles is very 'now'. Another fashionable option is Andalusian hand-painted glazed tiles because they look great and create interest. Fashions in tiles change more quickly than, say, taps. Bathrooms are a sanctuary — no phone, no computer. It's the place in the home where people go to have time out."

Hilary Rose

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