

THE ZEIT GIST

Bowled over by toilet technology

Toto and competitors give the world a royal flush

By TIFFANY TSE

Special to The Japan Times

Imagine casually going about your business in the bathroom when your toilet — a trusty receptacle that ordinarily poses no danger — suddenly catches fire. Blazing hot flames graze your posterior. You leap from the seat in surprise. Gray smoke smolders from the innocent-looking bowl. The smell of scorched plastic lingers in the air.

Fortunately, not one owner of an electric bidet accessory manufactured by Japan's top toilet maker, Toto Ltd., was hurt when their lavatories caught fire on three separate occasions between March 2006 and March 2007. The bidet also sent up smoke in 26 other reported incidents. According to company spokeswoman Emi Tanaka, "nobody was using the toilets when the fire broke out and there were no injuries. The fire would have been just under your buttocks."



A Toto Co. employee shows off one of the company's Washlet bidet toilets at its Tokyo showroom in Shinjuku. This summer the company launched a marketing campaign in the United States with the catch phrase of "clean is happy." KYODO PHOTO

The porcelain infernos give new meaning to the expression "light a match."

While toilet seat heaters to warm rear ends are commonplace in Japan, a roasted derriere was hardly Toto's intention. The firm blames faulty wiring for the torched toilets and has offered free repairs for 180,000 bidets manufactured between May 1996 and December 2001.

The affected toilets belong to Toto's famous Z Series — high-tech, exclusive to Japan, and expensive, retailing for up to ¥310,500. These popular commodes can sell for such extravagant prices because of their extraordinary features, including the powerful "Tornado Wash" flush, a filter to subdue strong odors, and an automatic lid (which surely settles that long-standing conflict between so many husbands and wives).

The Z Series is just part of Toto's vast empire of amazing toilets in a country where johns merit their own unofficial Toilet Day — Nov. 11. A Toto darling is the advanced Apricot F5A featuring a fragrance dispenser, a light sensor so you know where to aim (an innovation for male users fumbling in dark bathrooms), a spotlight for reading (if you plan on a lengthy visit), and naturally, an embedded MP3 player.

Another of Toto's most celebrated toilets is the Neorest, the Rolls Royce of latrines. In "Heir to the Throne," an article by Andrew Tilin and Mariko Mikami for Business 2.0 Magazine, the indulgent Neorest is hailed as "the world's most expensive toilet." Infrared sensors detect "if your business involves sitting rather than standing" and jets "spring into action, using 1.2 gallons (4.5 liters) of water if the sensors identify the contents as No. 1, or 1.6 gallons (6 liters) otherwise." That's one talented contraption.

Toto isn't the only Japanese firm hawking fancy toilets. Manufacturers like Matsushita and Inax have joined the battle to provide the most beneficial, hygienic, and luxurious lavatories. Some toilets take your blood pressure or conduct urine tests, then send the information to your family doctor. Other repositories blast cool air in summer and heat in winter. And still other highly superior sandboxes allow you to set the pressure of jet sprays designed to massage the rear.

As if all these gadgets and doodads aren't enough to satisfy Japanese toilet shoppers, the current trend is environmentally friendly loos. "Japanese women are very embarrassed by the sounds they make in a toilet," Toto spokesperson Kumi Goto remarked, citing studies that showed that these women unnecessarily flushed their toilets several times to mask the noise of their telltale trickles, wasting millions of liters of water every year.

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Enter Toto's Otohime (or Sound Princess), a toilet which effectively hides tinkling through a sensor simulating the sound of running water or bird song. Already, the Otohime has reportedly saved water and reduced utility bills.

The craze for sci-fi toilets has spread, albeit slowly, to the U.S. American company Kohler's C3-200 model mimics Toto's Apricot, including the helpful blue light for nocturnal target practice. If these advances are any indication, Japanese toilets of the next generation might be the new status symbol, akin to owning the latest flat-screen TV or sophisticated computer.

Toilets made of pure gold? A solid 24-carat gold toilet worth ¥5 million was commissioned in 1994 and is now on display at the World Toilet Museum in Shikoku. Talking toilets? Toto has already tinkered with models that talk and recognize verbal commands. Medically minded latrines? Toilets as health centers may uncover early signs of disease for Japan's graying population.

And with so many up-to-the-minute toys on the market — rice cookers with artificial intelligence, robotic vacuum cleaners, slick cell phones — maybe super toilets are the Next Big Thing. Envision a future of toilets that cook and serve fiber-rich meals (all designed to assist bowel movements), recommend books, chat, entertain, even give a stimulating massage as you perform daily bathroom duties. Perhaps Toto will be first to dream up a kid-friendly toilet, one that encourages good aim and frequent use.

In Japan, a visit to the toilet is no longer a brief "get-in-and-get-out" concept. Masahiro Iguchi, the marketing chief for Inax, once said that in a Japanese house "the only place you can be alone and sit quietly is likely to be the toilet." Indeed, Japan's cities are notoriously overcrowded. Rents are high, apartments cramped, and privacy limited. Bathrooms are a sanctuary guaranteed to provide some measure of solitude — just you and your toilet.

But one piece of advice: Don't light a match near a defective model.

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The Japan Times: Tuesday, July 21, 2007
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