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LETTER FROM THE UK

Plumbing the depths

Dear Aunt Ethel

The bastions of self-esteem are threatened when one is accused of lifelong antisocial behaviour. Along with using a butter-knife even when dining alone, and walking on the outside of the pavement when accompanying the fairer sex, I was taught that a gentleman always leaves the lavatory seat and its lid in the upright position. Decades later, sources close to me pronounce that this is wrong, uncivilised, user-unfriendly. Batten down the hatches; leave seat and lid horizontal.

I confessed immediately to male chauvinism, and now endeavour to leave the seat in unisex mode. As for the lid: I invoke science and political correctness — ventilation principles and transparency — to justify an open-door policy. Do books of etiquette address this delicate matter? What does the Royal Family do? I recall the only redeeming moment in an American comedy war movie: when the hapless private rigs up a pulley-system for the inspection of the latrines by a five-star General. As the GI snaps to attention and salutes, so do all the toilet seats, leaping simultaneously into erect posture.

To develop a theme: I am able to conjure up people out of nowhere in the back of beyond, be it a volcanic crater or a forest in New Zealand, a billabong in the Red Desert, behind a maroela in the Marico, or deep in a dingle in the Peak District. Obey a call of nature with not a soul in sight, and before one can say 'Zip it', a party of hikers will crest the brow, or the land-owner will screech to a halt in his Toyota bakkie. The population density in Hong Kong renders the ruse unnecessary. I must admit that in the Middle East I have been

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scared to try it: mindful of the harsh fact that in some regions hands get chopped off for the merest peccadillo.

The quaint South African custom of admiring the hydrangeas does not meet with universal approval. A visting Englishman was quite taken aback and asked 'Is this compulsory?' when we stepped into the garden after supper. My wife swears that large tracts of lawn and several valuable shrubs have shrivelled because of this practice: our dogs proudly shoulder some of the blame. Nor is the habit without its perils. My uncle had to spend the rest of the night up a tree to avoid the Big Five, when he strayed too far from the bushveld camp and got lost. During a black-tie dinner a night-blind companion descended a terrace very suddenly and vertically when he took a step too far. Juggling one's stream between courses is as ill-advised as changing horses in mid-stream.

Presumably private hospitals carry heavy public liability insurance. I wonder if a Maritzburg one has had to increase its premiums since introducing its 'cox on the rox' promotion? Every morning the gents' urinals are re-charged with a shovel-load of ice cubes: aesthetically pleasing but with the potential for frosty medico-legal retribution.

For the record, 'spending a penny' at London railway stations now costs 20P — about R2.70. UK tour-bus destinations have finally agreed to accept Euros from their EU clients rather than face the ire of popping passengers. Nevertheless, my co-consultant advises that men over the age of 55 should pop a catheter into their suitcases when they head for that exotic island — this could save them (or a friend) enormous discomfort and inconvenience. The prostate is an ancient adversary. In Victorian times, gentlemen carried flexible silver catheters in the brim of their collapsible top-hats when attending the opera.

Go with the flow, Aunt Ethel.

Yours affectionately,

Robert-Ian