



Electronic Bidet Toilet Seat Is the Luxury You Won't Want to Live Without

By FARHAD MANJOO APRIL 29, 2015

IT may sound as if I'm exaggerating when I say that a high-tech, heated, warm-water-spraying bidet toilet seat ruined me for regular toilets, but I'm not. I don't know how you guys do it. I look at your normal toilets, the ones with seats that are as cold as ice, the ones that don't spray and buff your nethers with a soothing shower of cleansing H₂O, and I shake my head. I look at your dry-wiping ways, and I wonder how your mom raised you. Don't you want to be clean? Don't you ever feel ... not so fresh?

"You don't try to clean the rest of your body with a dry towel, right?" said Jerry Bougher, the marketing manager for toilet seats at Kohler, the plumbing fixtures company. Say you're covered with mud, he said. "Will you clean yourself up with a bunch of paper? No, obviously, you'll take a shower. It comes down to the same thing with this. Here in the United States we've used dry toilet paper to clean ourselves, and it doesn't always do the job effectively. Cleaning with water is kind of like taking a shower. It's just, you know, cleaner."

This is the basic pitch for the electronic bidet toilet seat, a product that has been used widely around the world for decades, but has only lately been inching its way into the American market.

Better late than never, I say, because these things are glorious.

The seats, which range in price from about \$250 to more than \$1,700, are

attachments for your toilet with at least two basic functions, and, depending on the model, a wide array of more luxurious extras.

The basic features are warming your bottom, and then cleaning it with warmed water. The more luxurious appointments try to recreate something like an opulent spa. Some seats will dry your bottom with warmed air, sort of like being pushed through a carwash. Some use a fan and a catalytic converter to suck out the gases in the bowl, apparently removing any odors. Some sense when you're approaching the toilet and spray a fine mist in the bowl, prelubricating it to aid with flushing. Many of the seats, as you might expect, offer a remote control to operate the spraying and other functions

But a lot of these extras are unnecessary, because even the basic electronic bidet seat feels luxurious — and once you start using one, you'll never want a toilet without it.

I first fell for the heated bidet seat two years ago at a hotel in the Colorado mountains. It was a Washlet made by Toto, the Japanese plumbing company that introduced its own in the 1980s. After using it once — the pillowy warm seat, the personal shower, the sensation of feeling completely refreshed — I didn't want to leave the bathroom.

I wondered how anyone could live without one, and I immediately plunked down \$350 for a Washlet of my own. Since then, I've also purchased a \$250 bidet seat made by Brondell for my other bathroom. Both have been well worth the price. They were a breeze to install (if you have modern plumbing and a nearby electrical outlet, the only tool you'll need is a wrench), and, next to my smartphone, they've become my favorite can't-do-without technology.

Many people around the world have long been similarly enlightened. In Japan, the proliferation of electronic bidet seats is tracked by the government as one of the basic measures of national prosperity. About 76 percent of households have a washlet (Toto's brand is often used as the generic name). Manufacturers say the devices are used widely in other parts of Asia, too, as well as in the Middle East and, increasingly, in Europe, where they've disrupted the market for old-school, toilet-adjacent bidets.

Jason Fitzsimmons, the vice president for sales of Toto USA, said that the

bidet seat's introduction in Japan "was the perfect match of technology, culture, personal hygiene and bathing habits." The Japanese, like many people across Asia and the Middle East, were of the justifiable view that when you go, you ought to use water. After their rise in Japan, bidet seats spread across neighboring parts of Asia for a more basic reason, Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "Toilet paper was not easily available and seen as the ultimate in luxury — and even when you did have it, the quality of the toilet paper was low," he said.

But when Toto brought the Washlet to the United States in the early 1990s, the company hit a wall. "People weren't culturally prepared to discuss the features and the benefits of it from a hygiene perspective," Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "So, we struggled mightily."

Lately, though, manufacturers have managed to put the past behind them. Though the market in the United States is still tiny compared with the rest of the world, Mr. Fitzsimmons said that Toto's Washlet sales have grown by 20 percent annually in each of the last five years. Mr. Bougher, of Kohler, said that his company's sales had also been increasing. The company makes several models.

The companies attribute the increase to a growing cultural acceptance of discussing how we wipe — spurred, in part, by marketing from the toilet paper industry — and because bidet seats have some environmental benefits. (You'll use less toilet paper, and toilet paper takes a lot of trees to make.)

But perhaps the main reason that bidet seat sales are on the rise is that, after you try one, you can't turn back. "Yeah, there are people who think it's weird," said Kyle Bazylo, who runs the bidet sales site Bidet.org. But Mr. Bazylo is so confident that you'll change your mind after trying one that he recently introduced a money-back guarantee.

"If you send it back, I can't resell it. I've got to throw it in the garbage," he said. "But when people try it, they'll fall in love with it."

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