

The Art of the Squatty Potty

By Susan Drago

“I think someone killed a chicken in there.”

This would not be outside the realm of possibility. I had just stuck my head into the women’s side of a water closet (“W.C.”) in Xiaguan, Yunnan Province, China, to make sure it is unoccupied. My husband wants to go in and take a photo. He has been recording images of restrooms from one end of China to the other during our two-week journey, and our older son, who lives here, tells us this W.C. is reported to be among the worst in town.

This is only one of many categories of curiosity here in China. My comment about the appearance of the toilet resembling the evidence of a chicken’s demise is no exaggeration. We are, after all, right around the corner from a restaurant specializing in dog. Yes, dog. We spent a few hellish moments in front of it the other day while the men succumbed to morbid curiosity and watched (even photographed) the killing and cleaning of a dog retrieved from a cage. I don’t condemn these people for eating dog but it’s not my cup of tea, so to speak. And neither do I need to stand there and witness the slaughter. I hid behind a parked mini-van and tried not to listen to the dog’s final yelps. I remember them anyway.

But I digress. What I really want to do is talk about squatty potties. If I haven’t already offended your sensibilities, you might make it through the rest of this without feeling queasy, but I doubt it. Steel yourself. This is just everyday life in China.

I had seen “squatty potties” before, when we were traveling Italy’s countryside. I knew they had squatty potties in China, but didn’t think it would be a big deal. I don’t really mind having “to go” behind a tree when we’re out camping or hiking, and I’ve used many an outhouse and

portapotty. I am not particularly squeamish or delicate about such things.

But after two weeks in China, I am just sick to death of squatty potties. They are 1) almost always nasty and 2) hard to use. All the hotels where we stayed had what we call “western toilets.” But everywhere else we went in China, in every public restroom and in the communal toilets of guest houses, there were squatty potties.

I should define the term “squatty potty.” When you go to the toilet in the U.S., there is a porcelain fixture with a seat on it that is elevated 15 inches or so from the floor. You sit down on the seat in a comfortable position and take care of your business.

If you walk into a public restroom in China you will find no elevated porcelain throne. You will find one of two other forms of accomplishing the same thing. One is a porcelain-lined hole in the floor, over which you must squat to do your business. The other is basically a ditch, usually tile-covered, which requires the same body position.

Several issues must be considered if you want to use this form of toilet effectively. All of these assume that you are in good health and are able to squat at all. If not, don’t bother going to China. I’m serious.

Here they are, “Squatty Potty Survival Tips:”

1. You must carry your own toilet paper so get a grip on that right away. You will start carrying off the extra napkins from restaurants which come in small packets and actually appear to be intended for such dual-purpose use. Wear pants with pockets to make it as convenient as possible to get to your toilet paper. You will find your purse difficult to access while you are squatting and, besides that, there will probably be no surface in the entire W.C. where you would set your purse without having to burn it

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after you leave. Hooks to hang your purse on? Where do you think you are?

2. About your pants. You really have to watch it when you drop ‘em. You have to keep the whole garment both off the nasty floor and out of harm’s way while you’re taking care of business. Getting both done successfully can be a challenge.

3. Proper positioning is critical. What I would like are footprints painted on either side of the porcelain-lined hole so that I would know exactly where the best foot placement is. This is important because improper foot placement can lead to improper placement of your back end, and that can lead to a big mess. Yes, I know you haven’t had to worry about this before, but now you are in China.

4. When I said “squat,” I meant “*squat*.” As deeply as possible, because that’s the way this whole deal works best. Keep in mind these folks are trained to this position from birth. Kids who aren’t yet potty-trained wear “split pants.” These britches are literally split open at the crotch, all the way back. Mothers hold their children in their arms, split pants agape and butt exposed, over whatever receptacle is available (or not), when the child needs to go. Sometimes this is on the bus. On the floor of the bus. Oh yes, riding the bus in China. That’s another story.

But again, squatting is the natural position here. You can look around and see that people who aren’t walking, riding a bicycle or scooter, working in the rice paddies or trying to sell you something will be seated on their haunches, staring at you. Yes, these people like to stare. But again, that’s another story. Back to squatting. For us westerners, our bodies have not been trained to this position. Our muscles and tendons don’t want to let us squat this deeply. That of course is why we take yoga classes. And it’s definitely a challenge if you

have to remain like that for any period of time. Sometimes there are handles to hold onto, to help stabilize you. But who on God’s green earth wants to touch that? Which leads to . . .

5. Always carry hand sanitizer. You absolutely cannot believe the filth. There are usually places to wash your hands in the W.C. but the water is cold (oh and by the way you can’t drink tap water here . . . it’s contaminated throughout the country with . . . you guessed it . . . fecal matter) and the soap is often nonexistent. Paper towels? Nah. Air dryer, sometimes. Remember that toilet paper in your pocket? That’s about it.

6. Oh, did I mention you usually have to pay MONEY to visit one of these outposts of hell? From 2 miao to 1 yuan – be sure you’ve got some change. They actually have registered toilet attendants in many places with their photos and license numbers posted on the wall as you enter. Yes, registered toilet attendants. Sometimes you even see them dabbing at the filth with the vestiges of a mop, but not often. Mostly they’re squatting and staring at you and waiting to collect your money.

7. Don’t wear open shoes. Keep your feet covered up unless you are really a deep-squatting expert with a great aim. There is significant potential for splashing and spattering and I won’t say more except a good bath at the end of the day is essential.

8. Oh, remember those toilet stalls you’re used to in the U.S.? And your privacy? Remember that? Well, I hope you can get over that, because they don’t usually have stalls in the W.C.’s. And when they do have stalls, they usually don’t have doors. So, like I said, just get over it. You don’t know these people anyway.

We actually got so used to this that we were delighted with the squatty potty at our guest house on the hike of Tiger Leaping Gorge. It was open-air, had a lovely mountain view, and

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was the (often cleaner) ditch-type, with a handy bucket of water and dipper for flushing. I was thinking of this as pristine until my son pointed out that he was careful not to touch the dipper handle when using it, choosing instead to find a possibly less contaminated edge for a grip.

Did I already say, “hand sanitizer?”

As we were leaving China, which was a two-day process, I became increasingly impatient with this form of toileting. When you’re in the midst of something for awhile, it’s just what you do. But the squatty-potty experience was about to be over, and my tolerance was disintegrating. When we arrived in San Francisco, and there were no squatty-potties, not even a few optional ones, I could have jumped for joy. But of course my bladder was too full.

In any case, I urge you to be thankful, because “western toilets” are among the many overlooked blessings of living in the U.S.A. And, if you’re planning a trip to China, I suggest you consult a yoga master about limbering up those squatting muscles!