

## EUROPE AT YOUR CONVENIENCE

By Duncan J.D. Smith, with photographs from his 'Only In' Guides, which celebrate the unique locations and hidden corners of Europe's great cities.

In 2015 I wrote and published "Only in London", the 10th volume in my series of 'Only In' Guides. It seemed a good time to reflect on the books and the many intriguing journeys their creation had entailed. Eccentric museums, secret gardens, abandoned graveyards and idiosyncratic shops are all recurring themes. This is because they not only offer quirky history but also their off-the-beaten track location usually guarantees a sense of discovery. But there is another recurrent theme that has only recently been pointed out to me. "Most of your books contain toilets!" a friend told me – and he's absolutely right.



The safe removal and treatment of waste water from a city is undoubtedly a measure of civilization. It's been going on since the time of the Romans and the efforts of generations of hydraulic engineers have left some fascinating remains in the urban landscape. That few sing their praises is undoubtedly what attracts me; that and because my English countrymen have a longstanding reputation for building such things.

My interest was first piqued in 2003, whilst researching my book "Only in Vienna". Strolling along the Graben, an elegant street in the heart of the city, I saw a lampstand sporting the word 'Herren' (German for 'men'). With Mother Nature calling I descended a staircase and found a grand space worthy of the Habsburg capital: all marble tiles, bevelled glass and brass fittings. Centre-stage was an iron urinal and above it a patent document. Apparently back in the late 19th century this was ground-breaking technology: odourless, waterless and freeze proof! Its inventor, Wilhelm Beetz, repeated his efforts across Vienna and did very well for himself. The Graben urinal today might well be the world's oldest underground toilet facility still in use.

The Romans were the first to deal with the odorous problem of human waste. In the German city of Cologne I remember walking several hundred metres along a sewer that once drained the Praetorium (governor's seat) of Colonia Agrippinensis, as Roman Cologne was known. It is made of



beautifully cut stone but would only ever have been seen by those poor souls employed to clean it.

It was the Roman Emperor Vespasian who coined the phrase "Pecunia non olet" (Money doesn't stink) after realising he could profit from a tax on the collection of urine from public latrines, which at the time was used for tanning leather. The classic pavement urinals of Paris were much later dubbed *Vespasiennes* in his honour, although these days they've mostly been swept away in the name of modernity. I found the last sorry-looking example outside the prison on Boulevard Arago. Fortunately the full story of wastewater treatment in the French capital is preserved in the city's fascinating Musée des Égouts (Sewer Museum).

With the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe was plunged into a dark age and with it went all notion of sanitation. Not until well into the medieval period did sewers come anywhere close to those of the

Romans. In Zurich, for example, a city renowned today for its cleanliness, I was surprised to find that 500 years ago waste was simply chucked into narrow alleys between houses, where it remained until the rains came. Only in the 1860s were these alleys culverted and swept manually, and behind a tatty wooden door I found one perfectly preserved. These days, of course, Zurich's wastewater is efficiently processed at a spotless treatment plant in the suburb of Werdhölzli, tours of which are available on request.

The 19th century was undoubtedly the golden age of urban wastewater treatment in Europe. Using British expertise, and in a fight to combat disease in a burgeoning population, comprehensive sewer networks were installed in all the great cities. Miles and miles of brick-built tunnels were installed, with steam-powered pumping engines used to transfer effluent to treatment plants beyond the city limits. Those in Prague and Berlin are now museums having been made redundant in recent years and will appeal to anyone with an interest in architecture and engineering.



Undoubtedly the most eccentric relic of the age can be found back in Cologne. When a new wastewater system was inaugurated here in 1890 something extraordinary was included. In a vaulted brick chamber where several tunnels converge a chandelier can be found hanging from the ceiling! It was placed there when it was rumoured that the Prussian Kaiser Wilhelm II would attend the opening. In the event he failed to show but the chandelier has remained ever since and can be seen during monthly tours.

We finish where we began – with urinals. I should at this point apologise to female readers for the male bias to this post but the reasons for that I hope are obvious. Fortunately this final location can be enjoyed by both sexes.

The Attendant in London's Fitzrovia is a café with a difference. It is a former underground gents' toilet built in 1890 and abandoned half a century ago. Lovingly restored, its porcelain urinals now have tables inserted into them, with green stools to match the original Victorian tiles. The feel is completed by the water cistern suspended overhead!

**Find out more about the 'Only In' Guides at [www.onlyinguides.com](http://www.onlyinguides.com)**