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The 'wee' issue of trains without toilets

David Arminas/news editor, *FM World*

It may be a small thing to many commuters, but rather important to the tiny majority who just can't wait. In Britain, we continue to put up with overcrowded commuter trains, but at least there are facilities on board most of them – unlike Dutch trains. Now, the Dutch will get at least some relief, in an unexpected way.

Earlier this year, the Dutch transport minister said adding toilets to the 131 trains would be too costly.

So I take (only) my hat off to the Dutch Rail Service for coming up with the idea of providing plastic 'wee' bags for commuters specifically on trains with no toilets.

I assume that means there is also no compartment where the toilet normally resides. If so, where is one supposed to use the handy device?

That may not be a real issue, if the rail spokesman who commented to the BBC is to be believed, as the bags are for emergencies such as power failures.

Nevertheless, Dutch commuters must be praying that a power failure never happens – and especially never happens during daylight hours. At least at night there would be some cover of darkness to avoid the questionable sight of fellow passengers whipping out their plastic bags.

Perhaps I speak out of turn and don't give credit to the manufacturer, called Travel John – a 'john' being North American slang for loo. A quick perusal of the maker's website shows that great attention has gone into the design of the bag. They even give a demonstration, using a container of tap water poured into the bag.

Yup, it gets up real quick, so no spillage! It's blue, not yellow, which is an aesthetic bonus. And it zips shut. Okay, so you've done the business and presumably cleared out passengers from the few seats around you. What to do with the bag? Back in the purse or handbag?

But hang on. I'm getting bogged down in details. The bags are much appreciated by some users, according to Travel John's website. Testimonials are provided and, it has to be said, for some disabled people, such as those in wheelchairs, the product is very useful, if not essential in some circumstances.

But for the more able-bodied bunch, use of the bag is more a lifestyle choice. One happy user who travels often by plane says the bag is a godsend: "When I get to my car in the parking structure, the system starts to 'kick in', and to run all the way back inside the terminal would mean wet pants for me. And there I have it, Travel John. I get into the back seat of my dark-tinted car... and the rest is history."

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FIVE MINUTES WITH

NAME: Ben Dhesi

JOB TITLE: Head of energy management

COMPANY: Pulse Commercial Utilities

UK gas and power prices are at the mercy of the global market. This really hit home in the summer as we saw tensions in the Arab states and the Japanese tsunami cause massive price rises. Less well known is that the Norwegian gas pipeline and the France-UK interconnector have also been operating at reduced capacity this year.

In the medium-term there is cause to be optimistic. Shale gas is a liquid natural gas (LNG) present in tight shale rock formations and particularly abundant in the US.

Previously, shale gas was presumed to be commercially inextractable. However, new drilling techniques have released it in significant quantities. Recent figures predict that the US now has over 200 years of natural gas resources at its disposal. With around six mega LNG export terminals planned along the east coast, the US has the resources to out-muscle the Middle East as the dominant force in global LNG exports and will flood the market with its LNG, probably within five years.

This has upsides for the UK. In the short-term, LNG is no longer a scarce resource like oil and major LNG exporters like Qatar and Saudi Arabia can no longer operate in a sellers' market. The impact on LNG prices could be felt long before the US is operational as a major LNG exporter. To put it in perspective, since the shale gas discoveries US gas prices have fallen to an all time low.

With 40 per cent of our electricity generation currently produced from natural gas, both the medium and long-term prices of gas and power should stabilise. All this means we can afford to take a more positive outlook on the future.

Interview by Martin Read