

Ratville

Most people don't know what sewage looks like. They imagine it's a turd parade, some kind of subterranean BM regatta, with little Charmin sails carrying them out to sea on a methane breeze. In reality, the only flushables you see are the paper products swirling ghost-like in murky water. And the stink? Not too bad—you'd be surprised. Then again, think about how you use water every day. More than half is probably dedicated to washing. Sewers are pretty sudsy and tooth-pasty, especially first thing in the morning when the shower and shave tide rolls in.

As an inspector for the City of New York, I've gotten a good, close look at sewage. In order to decide if a sewer needs replacing, workers drag a video camera through the sewers to get a look at the pipe's condition. On occasion, I monitor these video shoots from the relative comfort of a step van studio. The technician producing the show controls the camera and narrates at the same time, careful to note any deficiencies in the pipe structure. You have a rat's-eye view of the pipe and the sewage, as the camera trundles past house connections and drain pipes which poke into the main at all angles. You see a sudden gush from one of these pipes and try to figure out if it's one of those short-lived toilet surges or a rinse cycle deluge. Sometimes, of course, food shoots out. One time, while tooling along through a Fulton Street pipe, a house connection vomited a mudslide of spaghetti all over the lens. The technicians are wary of connections that look like they hitch up to a restaurant and might slime the camera. You can tell restaurants from ordinary services by the grease shelves that form on the pipe wall opposite the connection; they're waxy, white, and covered with things like Band-Aids, Q-tips and Optimo butts. The biggest lard coagulation I've witnessed was in a pipe outside one of Brooklyn's notable Polish sausage mills. The camera couldn't squeeze by the protrusion of tallow, so the operator backed up the probe, and rammed the monster head-on, causing it to collapse on top of the camera.

Of course sitting there watching all this, you feel as if a giant wall of putrefied fat has just smothered you. Whenever there's a sag in the pipe and the camera starts to dive under the sewage, you find yourself raising your chin as you watch, trying to keep your mouth above the effluent.

When it comes to sewers, rats are what most people want to hear about, that and alligator yarns. Fact is, reptiles are almost as scarce as trolls. And you might be surprised to know that sightings of our furry friends are not very common either, largely because the video set-up often has a cleaning bell scouring the walls with water under 2000 pounds of pressure leading the way down the pipe. That sends the rats a-runnin'. However, some pipes are cleaned a day or so in advance of tapping, and the camera is not pulled by a cable, but driven through on a

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Americans produce over 160 million tons of solid waste each year. That is about 13,000 pounds per person, 3.6 pounds per person per day. Eighty percent of U.S. solid waste ends up in landfills, 1/3 of which are expected to reach capacity in the next five years.

(Environmental Protection Agency)