

in. But Tony the foreman did take exception to rats.

"The day I see a rat in d'hole," Tony shook his head. "I quit, man."

"Five years, he not seen even a mouse," his Jamaican friend laughed. "Last year, downtown, I workin' when a rat goes zip right up over me back, mon, runnin' on down the pipe to Rat City."

The story—of which he'd doubtless had to suffer countless renditions—practically made rat-o-phobe Tony swoon. But now it was my turn. I had to go down and measure the thickness of the gunite, make sure the City was getting what it paid for. I donned the chest waders and went down for a look. Sure enough, claustrophobia, at the very notion of crawling into that pipe, twisted my vision. I asked Tony what his wife thought of his job.

He shrugged. "Didn't think nothin' of it. Until I brought home a video, coupla weeks back. She says, 'You don't actually go *in* there, do you?'" Tony looked skyward, shaking his head. "She doesn't wanna hear about it."

Tony's wife aside, the average citizen takes a keen interest in sewers, especially the open trench work where workers dig up, break out and replace a sewer pipe. During the work, raw sewage runs through the trench for all passersby to ogle. Countless rubber-neckers sidle up and ask: "Hey, that's not what I think it is, is it?" knowing full well that it was.

"It's a water main," I'd say.

They'd look at my deadpan expression, sniff and say "No, that's a sewer...isn't it?"

I'd smirk and nod.

"But, it's not like the stuff from toilets, right?"

"Of course not," I'd fib. "Just from showers and sinks. Toilets flush into a whole other system. Hey, you think we'd leave a trench open like this if there were doo-doo in it?" This they believed, probably because by the time they're standing over the trench on their way to work, shower, shave and shit time is long gone. Now, we're into laundry hours, the rippling brown water frosted in foam.

Despite all its many subtle charms and points of interest, I wouldn't recommend the sewer as a viable alternative to walking tours or museums for visiting relatives. Especially if you can't find any open trench work to admire. For one thing, many manholes don't have steps and require a rope ladder or spelunking gear. Uncle Bob may throw out his back helping you pop the manhole cover. I mean, they might never visit you again. Hmmm....

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Every year Americans discard enough unrecycled writing paper to build a wall 12 feet high stretching from New York to Los Angeles.

(Environmental Defense Fund)