

Checking In: Luxury in Toronto, whatever the time of year

New Four Seasons hotel offers only the best in travel accommodation

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 1, 2013



Café Boulud at the Four Seasons Hotel Toronto is airy and avant-garde with glass tables, high-tech chairs and pop-art prints of such icons as Madonna, Einstein and Picasso.

Sophisticated world travellers who count on near-perfection are devotees of the Four Seasons brand, which has more than 90 hotels in 38 countries from Canada to China.

It all started when Torontonians Isadore Sharp, an architect and builder, opened a motor lodge in his hometown in the 1960s. He went on to revolutionize the hotel scene with the Four Seasons in London, England, during the 1970s. Sharp swept away the heavy drapery and stuffy formality of the grandes dames and introduced a sleek, stylized glass tower with a contemporary look to luxury and a philosophy of attentive service for all, aristocrats or not.

The Four Seasons' goal was to cater to both modern leisure jet-setters and the new breed of globe-trotting executives. (Sharp is still chairman of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts and remains a shareholder, although 95 per cent of shares are held by Microsoft's Bill Gates and Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia.)

In the flagship city of Toronto, a new Four Seasons opened one year ago, built from scratch in posh

Yorkville and already named among the best of the best by such magazines as Condé Nast Traveler, Travel & Leisure and Robb Report.

If you are accustomed to luxury travel with Michelin-inspired gourmet cuisine and such conveniences as an extra telephone in the bathroom, you'll also appreciate the Four Seasons' intangibles, like privacy and serenity. If you are upgrading your lifestyle for a rare five-star getaway, you'll be ooh-ing and aah-ing at the elegant simplicity of the decor, the stunning views of Toronto and the indoor infinity-edge swimming pool shimmering under a skylight.

The interiors of the Four Seasons Toronto are by Yabu Pushelberg, arguably Canada's most renowned design company. The hotel is a subtle study in mellow earth tones of sand and stone, with walls and floors of lavish cream marble and dark granite. Minimalist flower arrangements, bamboo stalks and delicate artwork exude a whisper of the East. The 259 guest rooms — bright, superbly appointed and spacious — all have floor-to-ceiling windows, sitting areas, double vanities and soaking tubs.

If you're not a guest of the hotel, the spa, Café Boulud or dbar (that's the hotel's stylized spelling for the lounge), don't plan on hanging out to see how the other 99 per cent live. The Four Seasons Toronto has only the tiniest of lobby lounges, with nowhere to sink into a sofa to blend in and pretend you belong. The concierge desk, the front desk and the elevator bay are a series of small spaces, separated by towering, sculptural screens of latticework metal.

"It's meant to evoke a residential feeling," the front-desk manager told me. "No commercial hubbub, no passersby. It's about the privacy — and the feeling of privacy."

With this backdrop of understatement and subtlety, success is in the details: the Four Seasons supplies iPads in every room, televisions embedded in the bathroom mirrors and custom-made toiletries by the Italian fashion house Etro. The fitness centre lends T-shirts, shorts, socks and running shoes if you have forgotten your gear (and you keep it all except the shoes). And the staff is absolutely top-drawer. Spa manager Carlos Calvo-Rodriguez is a certified physiotherapist, a handy source in case you need a quick tip for a sore knee. Chief concierge Liloo Alim has been called the "most powerful woman in Toronto" when it comes to nabbing hard-to-get tickets for the film fest or theatre.

When I arrived, I explored the hotel and sketched out a best-case scenario for a 24-hour visit. Certainly, this sojourn would start with lunch at Café Boulud, where Sharp's designing wife, Rosalie, went airy and avant-garde with glass tables, high-tech chairs and pop-art prints of such icons as Madonna, Einstein and Picasso.

But the food is the real star at Café Boulud. House specialties include crispy duck eggs with mushrooms, chestnut velouté, lobster salad, porcini mushroom risotto, lamb burgers, black cod with curried lobster bisque and updated versions of venison, salmon and beef.

Chef de cuisine Tyler Shedden crafted the menu with Michelin-starred chef Daniel Boulud, so I didn't

hold back. My plan was to work off lunch at the fitness centre and then bliss out at the spa — Toronto's largest urban spa, with 17 treatment rooms, two steam rooms and a nail and hair salon. For rejuvenation and relaxation, I considered the Gold Plumping Facial and the Clay Body Wrap, but ultimately decided on the Asian Fusion Massage, a guaranteed pick-me-up for tired travellers.

I had dawdled at the spa. It was already 5 p.m. and the hotel's chic lounge, dbar, was busy with cocktail-hour revellers and a DJ mixing upbeat dance music. I joined in with a tulip of bubbly: the hotel's anniversary celebration drink is a mix of Cuvée Daniel Champagne infused with brandy, pear and vanilla. Perhaps just one?

Day 2 dawned. I wanted to maximize my Four Seasons morning, because the 12 p.m. checkout time was looming. I headed straight for the swimming pool, a stunning Zen-like installation with a whirlpool, an outdoor terrace and magazine-worthy living-room loungers. I swam until I worked up an appetite.

Boulud-style breakfast means divine and decadent choices. At home, it's an egg white and oat bran toast, so I went all out here, deciding between poached eggs meurette (with braised short ribs and red wine reduction), lemon ricotta hotcakes or duck confit hash, followed by cappuccino with milk foam sculpted in the shape of the Four Seasons' logo.

I was fulfilled, and I suspect Sharp is, too.

The writer was a guest of the hotel. The hotel did not review or approve the story.

IF YOU GO:

Porter Airlines operates up to 17 one-hour flights daily from Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau Airport to Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport.

Four Seasons Hotel Toronto: 800-268-6282, 416-964-0411, fourseasons.com/toronto; 60 Yorkville Ave., Toronto.

Price: rates fluctuate; rooms cost approximately \$435 to \$685 for two; suites, \$750 to \$15,000 for the three-bedroom Royal Suite, all including swimming pool, hot tub, fitness room, business centre. Children have special menus, bathrobes, kids' pool, welcome gift. No charge for pets. Extras: spa treatments, yoga and Pilates classes, babysitting, cellphones.

Café Boulud: breakfast, lunch, dinner daily and Sunday brunch; dbar lounge menu from 11 a.m. daily.

Tourism Toronto: 800-499-2514, seetorontonow.com.

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Sophisticated simplicity at the Four Seasons Hotel Toronto.

