

Paradise by the downtown lights

SHANGRI-LA IS a five-star oasis of luxury and serenity in Toronto



ROCHELLE LASH
CHECKING IN

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Shangri-La as “an imaginary and remote paradise ... a retreat from the pressures of modern civilization.”

I discovered such a celestial getaway in busy-buzzy Toronto, the fourth-largest metropolis in North America after Mexico City, New York and Los Angeles, edging out Chicago as of 2013.

The Shangri-La Hotel is a crystal-line tower of luxury and serenity in the heart of Toronto’s business and entertainment districts. It is one of Toronto’s five-star hotels, highly regarded for dramatic views from its floor-to-ceiling windows, sleek Asian-inspired decor and gastro-nomic cuisine in Bosk restaurant.

This is the big time. Standards are high. Service is discreet and anticipatory. And you’re in elite company. Gary Cohn, president and chief operating officer of Goldman Sachs Group Inc., checked out shortly before I arrived. And actress Jessica Chastain liked her experience so much, she posted pix to Instagram.

The Shangri-La also is a hotel of great beauty. The lobby is graced with towering contemporary artworks of Peking Opera figures outlined in brush strokes, so delicate yet evocative that I thought of them as visual haikus. Museum-like vitrines of Asian objets d’art add a precious quality to the corridors on each floor. The centrepiece is a dramatic Zen-style fireplace that flickers in the lobby. Orchids, fragile and extravagant, flourish everywhere.

Still, this is no monastic retreat. The Shangri-La presents live entertainment daily from approximately 3 to 8 p.m., and le tout Toronto converges. I peeked at the Lobby Lounge in the afternoon, and my sense of serenity was gently rocked. Pianist Thompson Egbo-Egbo was into jazz classics, and an elegant tea service was in full swing.

Fashion designer Sunny Fong created the blue and white cheongsams worn by the beautiful female servers, who offered a choice of nearly 70 exotic teas and such delicacies as lobster-filled brioches and passion-fruit pastries.

I lingered until cocktail hour, when a torchy guitarist took the floor and Bay St. executives arrived for martinis, single malts and a signature drink, Hong Kong lemonade made with yuzu and ginger juices.



PHOTOS: SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

The Bosk dining room continues with artful presentations and Asian-influenced fusions, like Nova Scotia scallops sautéed with hon-shimiji mushrooms, crunchy rice and sesame ginger dressing; seared tuna spiced with Japanese daikon (radish), ponzu (citrus) and shiso (mint); and Malaysian curry laksa soup, a rich, piquant ragout of shrimp and chicken. The lunch menu offers casual fare, such as spicy porchetta on ciabatta or lobster gnocchi; dinner takes it up a big notch with gourmet Canadiana, like a duo of Ontario lamb, roasted and braised; prime beef with truffles; and northern sablefish with charred eggplant and tomato fondue.

Civilization has encroached on Shangri-La, but in a good way. Upstairs, guests are once again removed from the fray, cocooned in privacy and soothed by the simplicity of fine things. The 202 rooms and suites are cosseted in subtle earth tones and rich materials, with velvet and leather sofas playing off the warmth of mahogany woodwork. Plush carpeting ensures silence.

One sure path to peacefulness is the generous size of the Shangri-La’s guest rooms. Each includes a work area within a king-size bedroom, a sitting area and space to move around. The suites are downright palatial for two, and big enough for entertaining in the living room or putting children to sleep on the pullout sofas.

Striking latticework doors open on a white-marble bathroom, with double vanities in jade marble, a soaking tub, a glass shower and a



A serene suite, above, with Asian accents at the Shangri-La Hotel, in Toronto’s business and entertainment districts. The white marble bathrooms have double vanities, soaking tubs and glass showers.

TV embedded in the mirror. Each room has a personalized iPad, so with the stroke of my index finger, I was master of my motorized drapes and a network of lights, thermostats and the electronic do-not-disturb sign.

With the iPad, concierge services also are a click away. Scrolling up and down, guests can request the hotel’s Mercedes limo, update airline schedules or secure dinner reservations. Corporate travellers can pre-order express breakfast to save time or charter a private jet to get a

jump on that next meeting. Leisure visitors can thumb through service menus of spa massages, babysitting, dog-walking, customized shopping, show tickets and heli-tours of Niagara Falls.

My Shangri-La sojourn included wellness, and I opted for leisurely laps in the glass-ceilinged pool. Tranquility was the goal, so I checked for the adults-only swim time and floated aimlessly, gazing up at the sky.

Plan B, which I saved for my second day, was the signature ex-

IF YOU GO

Air Canada and Porter Airlines operate frequent flights daily from Montreal’s Trudeau airport to the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport.

VIA Rail (514-989-2626, 888-842-7245, viarail.ca) operates approximately seven trains daily each way between Montreal and Toronto. Economy costs \$39 to \$155 one way, or \$78 to \$310 round trip; business class costs \$89 to \$248 one way, or \$178 to \$496 round trip.

Shangri-La Hotel: 647-788-8888, shangri-la.com; 188 University Ave., Toronto. Hong Kong-based Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts operates more than 80 hotels worldwide, including establishments in Toronto and Vancouver.

Price: Rooms approx. \$460 and suites from \$560 per night, including in-room iPads, Wi-Fi, Gold Key concierge, indoor swimming pool, hot tub, sauna, fitness centre.

Extras: Pet fee \$125 per visit; \$15 for fitness classes. Children’s pool hours: Noon to 4 p.m. Monday to Friday; 9 a.m. to noon Saturday and Sunday.

Bosk Restaurant: 647-788-8294; breakfast, lunch, pre-theatre and dinner, Monday to Saturday; brunch Saturday and Sunday.

Lobby Lounge: 11 a.m. to 1 a.m.; high tea with entertainment, 2 to 5 p.m.

Miraj Hammam Spa by Caudalie Paris: 647-253-5770, mirajcaudaliespa.com; hammam and treatment, \$125.

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

perience at Miraj Hammam Spa by Caudalie Paris, a serious sweat in a Turkish-style hammam followed by a gommage, or body scrub.

I felt very in tune with the Shangri-La. I adore James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon, the tale of a mystical Tibetan paradise with the same name.

The hotel places copies of the book in guests’ bedside tables, where there once would have been a Gideon Bible. It’s a welcome change. I could easily make Shangri-La my new religion.

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

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