



The stylish Annex Lobby Bar operates from morning coffee to evening cocktails.

TORONTO'S COOL ANNEX NOT A TYPICAL HOTEL

Just like home — if you have a terrific loft, eclectic art and vintage vinyl on turntable



ROCHELLE LASH

Hipsters have a new home. The Annex is an intimate, indie experience in Toronto, now the fourth-largest city in North America and growing exponentially.

This just-opened boutique property has a cool, relaxed design and a do-it-yourself paradigm that's plugged in and progressive. The look reflects edgy elegance in an industrial blueprint, a backdrop to a post-millennium hospitality style.

The Annex opened last month with 24 light-filled, loft-inspired rooms and a lounge that's the perfect place to chill, from morning cappuccino to evening cocktails, with enlightened casual cuisine throughout.

The hotel represents vibrant new life in a funky Victorian-era neighbourhood also called The Annex. The entrance is in a laneway popping with hip-hop street art, so there's an air of urban

adventure as you arrive, but a surprisingly smooth scenario once you're inside.

The scene: "Big brands now are doing small hotels, too," said Justin Fong, one of The Annex's three owners. "But they're still doing bright lights and neon signs."

"We know our clients better. Young creatives are looking for real experiences, not mega-tourist attractions. "The Annex represents authenticity in an authentic neighbourhood. And our playbook is filled with local partners."

All good, but The Annex is unconventional, too. There are no elevators, no phones and no televisions. But, no worries.

You are meant to text your requests, and the staff will call an Uber or deliver a bottle of Pinot Noir. And each room has free Netflix streaming on a 13-inch iPad Pro (cleaned daily with a special solution). Plus, guests can help themselves to towels and tissues from self-serve closets.

The Annex is young in spirit and therefore tech. Typically guests book online, receive a keypad code by email and head to their rooms independently. There is no front desk, but

general manager Michael Shea, formerly of Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, head host Jessika Dufour, who is from Montreal, or another team member is always on site.

The hotel's creative director, Alexander Lynn, has orchestrated a gallery-like feeling throughout the hotel, with striking contemporary prints and photographs by Torontonians including Max Rosenstein and Melody Hansen, and Marwa Beloufa of Montreal.

Relaxed rooms: Studio AC of Toronto (Studio for Architecture & Collaboration) white-washed the 100-year-old brick walls and installed minimalist plywood shelving and cabinets. The bathrooms are totally today, with glass showers, high-quality fixtures and Malin + Goetz toiletries.

The rooms all are different but each has lots of space and large windows. They're just like home — if you have a terrific loft with daily housekeeping, eclectic art and a turntable spinning vintage vinyl.

The beds are masterworks. The thick, luxurious mattresses are from Stearns & Foster, which supplies many five-star hotels; the fine sheets are by Sferra of Italy; and the beautiful duvets and pillows come from Marie l'Oie of Montreal.

Even the mini-bars are cutting



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edge. The beverages include Thirsty Buddha coconut pineapple water, Forty Creek Whisky and craft beer from Collective Arts Brewing.

Food and drink: The Annex Lobby Bar has a sensual, 1930s look created by the Gauley Brothers of Montreal. The chairs are draped in champagne velvet and potted plants flourish around a curved white marble bar. This lounge is tiny, but Brooke De Nobile, food and beverage general manager, covers a lot of ground, changing mood and menus through the day.

Mornings are healthy, trendy and yummy, with baked goods like a pistachio-raspberry danish, an elk-cheddar-egg breakfast sandwich, or a turmeric-banana muffin, plus liquid nutrition like bone broth, super-food coconut cups or dark-roast coffee.

The midday menu includes mushroom toast, grilled cheese or smoked trout; and for evening there are steak tartare, niçoise salad, and charcuterie and cheese platters.

Signature cocktails include the Partners in Crime, with tequila; Cointreau and juices; and the Lock, Stock and Smoke, with Dillon's Rye, Laphroaig single malt and orange and chocolate bitters.

IF YOU GO

The Annex: 647-277-1179, theannex.com; 296 Brunswick Ave., Toronto. \$200-\$275 for two, including Wi-Fi, iPad Pro with Netflix. Extra: pets, cribs, late checkout.

The Annex Lobby Bar: 7 a.m.-midnight; The Commons: 5 p.m.-midnight. **Toronto info:** 800-499-2514, 416-203-2500, seetorontonow.com; Ontario Tourism, live chats at: ontariotravel.net.

The carefully chosen wines — sparkling, white, red and orange — are mostly organic and biodynamic and from such boutique producers as Pearl Morissette from Niagara.

The Annex's Commons, another culinary corner opening in January, will give fast food a good name.

Big Trouble Pizza is known for the unexpected like the Butter Jam Jam with raspberry jam, butter cream and cheese; or the Kung-Funghi with enoki and Portobello, spiced with truffle, chili and chives. And Seven Lives Tacos will do its own take on chicken, fish, shrimp and corn tacos, topped with salsa and cheese.

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