

BISHA IS NO ORDINARY BOUTIQUE HOTEL



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Toronto's sexy new Bisha Hotel reflects the midnight mood and downtown edge of the city's electric entertainment district.

That's to be expected. Bisha is the vision of Charles Khabouth, a leading nightclub impresario and restaurateur to the stars in Toronto, Miami and Dubai, who serves up a flashy, upscale lifestyle experience at his first hotel.

Bisha (which was Khabouth's childhood nickname) operates on eight floors of a 44-storey condo tower, within stiletto steps of prominent showbiz venues and the Rogers Centre.

It's the flagship of a new brand that has partnered with Loews Hotels & Resorts; music wizard Lenny Kravitz, who decorated several guest rooms; and Akira Back, the Michelin-starred, globe-trotting chef behind Bisha's exquisite Japanese-Korean restaurant, which bears his name.

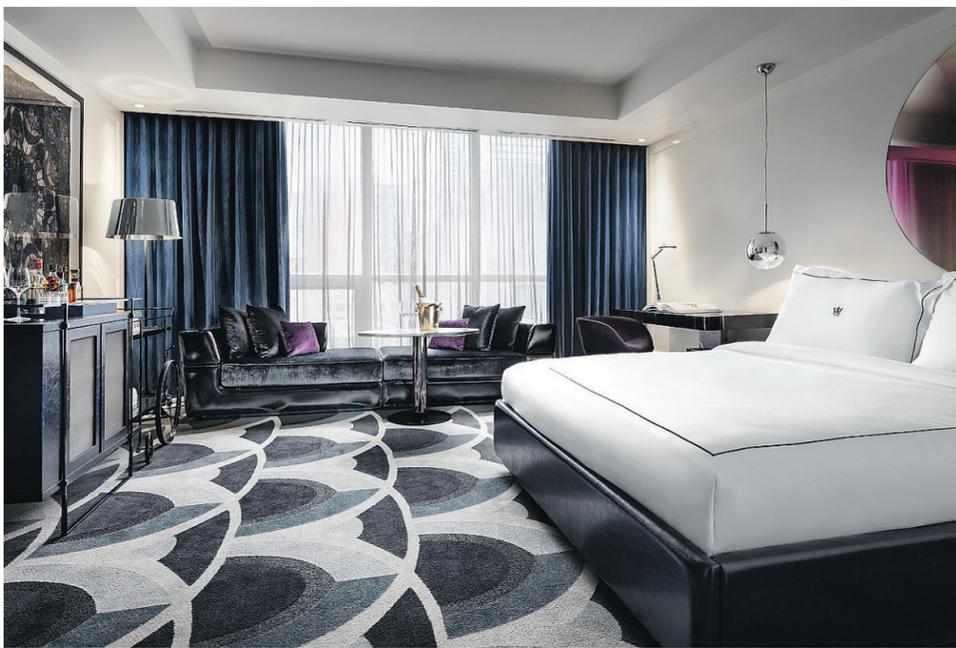
The scene: Bisha looks like a boutique hotel and feels like a boutique hotel. But it has big-time hospitality attractions, including sophisticated dining and drinking hot spots and a striking meeting room with a summertime terrace. **Köst**, a dazzling 44th-floor eatery, has sweeping views of Lake Ontario and the CN Tower, and will open onto a rooftop pool in warm weather.

Bisha has an aura of swanky decadence and celebrity luxe. Already, megastars Lady Gaga, Jake Gyllenhaal, Jennifer Lawrence, Halle Berry and George Clooney have made the scene. But don't expect to hang out and snap selfies: the intimate lobby has no seating for guests or outsiders.

Montreal talent shines here, too. Bisha's general manager is Jacques Lapierre, formerly of Opus and Hôtel Place d'Armes; Akira Back restaurant's general manager is Jorge da Silva, who has been with Helena and Les 400 Coups; and the front desk women rock leather biker jackets by fashion house Mackage.

But mostly, Bisha is about Khabouth, who has sprinkled his signature stardust on this glamorous next-generation playground.

The design: Toronto's Studio Munge created highly charged



The interiors at Bisha Hotel are dramatic and sophisticated, where dark plum velvet loveseats and smoked glass mirrors spell seduction, *STUDIO MUNGE*



Köst offers all-day Baja-inspired dining, with colourful cuisine popping with zesty, super-fresh accents. *MAXIME BOCKEN/STUDIO MUNGE*

interiors with dramatic blacks and whites, bold geometric floors and sensual textures. The lobby is a showstopper, with a snazzy floor of custom-cut marble, walls of iridescent jet-blue velvet and a brass panel for sheen.

Bisha has 96 rooms and suites, chic hideaways with glossy black furniture against chalk-white walls, and special effects such as slim TVs suspended from the ceiling and a retro mini-bar cart filled with truffle chips, Red Bull

and iStore essentials. Floor-to-ceiling windows yield views and light, and blackout drapes kick in so you can sleep till noon.

The dark plum velvet loveseats and smoked glass mirrors spell seduction, and soft-focus nude photos in many rooms are discreetly provocative. You'll feel Bisha's luxury with heated bathroom floors, Bal d'Afrique toiletries by Byredo and plush beds with Frette sheets.

GZ International curated the hotel's artworks, including cover portraits from Andy Warhol's Interview magazine featuring such icons as Madonna, Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe.

Asian artistry: Akira Back restaurant is a heightened culinary experience of Japanese-Korean fusion, with superlative artistry and ingredients. When I took my first bite, I felt as though this was the first time I had ever tasted food.

The servers will start you off with cocktails laced with lemon grass, chili, ginger, green tea or yuzu — all pretty and frothy, but packing a punch.

Then it's on to dinner. Akira Back serves some dishes you might have eaten before, such as miso soup, wakame salad and sushi rolls of crab, shrimp or pork belly, but everything here is at a higher level of flavour and quality.

Sumptuous specialties include a wafer-thin tuna-mushroom pizza with truffle oil; jeju domi (snapper) infused with orange essence; salmon tiradito with

IF YOU GO

Bisha Hotel Toronto: 416-551-2800 or Loews reservations, 844-275-1726; bishahoteltoronto.com; 80 Blue Jays Way.

Price: Rooms start at \$329 (suites cost more), including in-room Nespresso, evening turndown, bottled water, pool (in summer), Wi-Fi. **Packages:** Eat-Drink-Cheers-Repeat add-on costs \$60, including bubbly and \$100 credit at ICONINK restaurants (iconink.com); Beach House Breakfast add-on costs \$30 and includes a \$50 Kost credit. Loews loyalty program applies.

Dining: Akira Back: 416-551-2800, akiraback.com. Kost: 437-800-5938, kosttoronto.com.

Toronto tourism: 416-987-1739, seetorontonow.com. Ontario tourism: live chats at ontariotravel.net.

Ontario peaches; tacos filled with Korean-style wagyu beef; and 48-hour wagyu short ribs with quail egg and roasted garlic glaze.

Baja cool: **Köst** (pronounced "coast") is Bisha's rooftop sensation. A natural look of bleached wood and rattan seating gives a beachy Baja backdrop to colourful cuisine, popping with zesty, super-fresh accents of California and Mexico created by executive chef Ben Heaton.

Surrounded by sky and skyline, **Köst** is wholesome in the morning, perky at midday and buzzy at night when the young and fashionable dress up and step out.

But the food is exceptional all the time. For breakfast, try an açai-granola berry bowl, baked eggs with chorizo or avocado toast heaped with cherry tomatoes and goat cheese. Lunch might be a bowl of quinoa and chicken with cilantro or jalapeno. For dinner, spicy standouts include tuna ceviche, lamb with chimichurri, and vegetarian salads of charred corn and chickpeas or pumpkin and persimmon.

Bisha also has two 24-hour options: room service if you get the midnight munchies, and French Made, a rarefied café that offers pistachio croissants, roast beef baguettes and lattes swirled with cashew milk.

Where was I? I was chilling in the handsome lounge called Mister C Bar Room, with a Champagne cocktail and an eye out for Leonardo DiCaprio.

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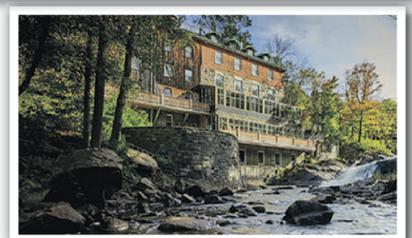
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