



The Colibri Terrace at the new Westbury Hilton is a popular outdoor event space with a retractable pergola. PHOTOS: HILTON WESTBURY MONTRÉAL

HOTEL INTEL

TWO HILTONS THE NEW HUB OF DÉCARIE STRIP



ROCHELLE LASH

COVID-19 protocol: This establishment follows the international Hilton CleanStay program. For contactless check-in, the Hilton Honors app can activate a digital key to your room.

The new dual-Hilton complex on Decarie Boulevard near Plamondon Ave. is so much more than a hotel.

It's the hospitality cornerstone of a growing condo-and-commerce village called Westbury Montréal, which in turn is part of an urban district evolving under the name Mid-Town.

Halfway between Trudeau International Airport and Place Ville-Marie, the two Hiltons (Hilton Garden Inn and Homewood Suites by Hilton Westbury Montréal) will serve visitors to Snowdon, Hampstead, Town of Mount Royal, N.D.G. and Côte-des-Neiges, as well as travellers who want to avoid the frustrations of downtown.

The getaway was booked



Designed by the avant-garde modernists BlazysGerard, the lobby at the new Westbury Hilton boasts a clean, contemporary look.

throughout summer by Ontarians and Quebecers on regional staycations, and September's gradual back-to-work calendar is slowly bringing business travellers. Families and friends are returning to the old hood for gala celebrations in the Westbury Ballroom or at Colibri, a party space with an outdoor garden. The Hiltons' kosher kitchen and Shabbat rooms have already been busy with baby showers and bar mitzvahs.

The scene: Joe and Sam Scalia, principals of Devmont, the company behind both Westbury Montréal and the Hiltons, have gone all out to make their first hotel classy, creative and convenient.

The cocktail scene is about to

take off, so it also is kind of cool.

The Scalia brothers have thought of everything: loads of guest room amenities, an indoor pool, a gym, adaptive features throughout, business services and children's gear.

Plus, you'll never be hungry. There are two dynamic eateries, one Italian (now open) and one Mexican (opening soon). The Shop is a 24-hour lobby mini-market selling frozen meals, juices and snacks.

Just outside the hotel doors is Westbury Montréal's commercial block, which has a new PA grocery, a Starbucks and, opening soon, a Forno West bakery.

Two Hiltons: The Hiltons' shared lobby is a luxe, airy space

designed by the avant-garde modernists BlazysGerard. The look is clean and contemporary, with large expanses of cream marble floors and wood wall panelling, highlighted by swanky bronze accents and polished off with high-fashion seating in fine leather and tweed.

Outdoors, there is one artistic element that makes this hotel stand out — if you look up as you drive to the door. One facade of the building is blooming with a floral mural on glass by artist Carmelo Blandino.

The two Hiltons offer different accommodations. Hilton Garden Inn has 157 rooms, nicely equipped with expansive windows, large flat-screen TVs and — for light bites away from home — coffee machines, microwaves and mini-fridges.

Homewood Suites by Hilton Westbury Montréal has 133 compact apartments for longer stays and family getaways, with living areas, sofa beds and full kitchens. The front desk offers a free stock-the-fridge service (you have to pay for the groceries) and guests are treated to breakfast (no charge) in a lobby lounge. (The buffet is protected by glass, servers dish out omelettes and other fare.)

Food & drink: The upbeat Italian Blandino Brasserie was designed

with the warmth of wood, a flash of brass and the richness of marble by the prestigious Atelier Zébulon Perron (which also created Marcus in the Four Seasons Hotel and Henri Brasserie at Hôtel Birks.)

I opted for a seat at the open kitchen, ordered Chianti and gazed on as Montreal chef Brittany Constable led a brigade of young associates, whipping up what she calls Italo-Canadian cuisine. It's intense and inventive, with generous portions and moderate prices.

Dishes include battuto (flank steak tartare spiked with unusual, tantalizing flavours); seared octopus with tomatoes confit; cornmeal-dusted calamari; meatballs with fresh basil and Parmesan; cavatelli with mushrooms, truffle oil and pecorino; and braised short ribs. The Italian-style Burger Blandino is a double patty with capicollo, sautéed peppers, mozzarella and bomba aioli. A pizza oven just arrived and the chef has plans to launch something special soon.

You'll barely have room for dessert, but try the lemon-ricotta pancakes or New York-inspired cheesecake with berries.

Pancho Taqueria, opening within a few weeks, will have Mexican fare, a raw bar and a vibrant cocktail scene, adding long-awaited nightlife to the Décarie strip.

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Mending bridges in Mostar

Persistent reminders of devastating war an emotional experience, *Rick Steves* says.

Until European travel becomes fully open to North Americans, here's a reminder of the fun that awaits us in Europe.

The Bosnian city of Mostar lies at a crossroads of cultures: just inland from the Adriatic coast, in the southern part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mostar's inhabitants are a mix of Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks who lived in seeming harmony before the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, then suffered horribly when warring neighbourhoods turned the city into a killing zone. The persistent reminders of the war make my visit emotionally draining, but I'm hopeful that connecting with the people here will also make it rewarding.

Before the war, Mostar was famous for its 400-year-old Turkish-style stone bridge. Its elegant, single-pointed arch was a symbol of Muslim society here and the town's status as the place where East met West in Europe. Then, during the 1990s, Mostar became a poster child for the war. First, the Croats and Bosniaks forced out the Serbs. Then they turned their guns on each other, staring each other down across a front line that ran through the middle of the city. Across the world, people wept when the pummelled Old Bridge — bombed by Croat paramilitary artillery shells from the hilltop above — finally collapsed into the river.

Today, I walk over the rebuilt bridge in a city that is thriving. It happens to be prom night. The kids are out, their Bosnian hormones bursting with excitement. Feeling young and sexy is a great equalizer. As long as you have beer, loud music, twinkling stars — and no war — your country's GDP doesn't really matter.

And yet, as I stroll through teeming streets, it's chilling to think that these people — who make me a sandwich, stop for me when I cross the street, show off their paintings and direct the church choir — were killing each other in a war not so long ago.

Walking past a small cemetery congested with a hundred white-marble Muslim tombstones, I notice the dates. Everyone died in 1993, 1994, or 1995. This was a park before 1993. When the war heated up, snipers were a constant concern — they'd pick off anyone they saw walking down the street. Mostar's cemeteries were too exposed, but this tree-filled park was relatively safe from snipers. People buried their loved ones here, under cover of darkness.

While pondering those tombstones, I meet Alen, a 30-something Muslim who emigrated to Florida during the war and is now back home in Mostar.

"In those years, night was the time when we lived," he explains. "We didn't walk ... we ran. And we dressed in black. There was no electricity. If the Croat fighters didn't kill us with



Mostar and its famous bridge, rebuilt after the war. The original 400-year-old structure — bombed by artillery shells — collapsed in the 1990s. CAMERON HEWITT/RICK STEVES' EUROPE

their bullets, they drove us mad with their hateful pop music. It was constantly blasting from the Croat side of town."

Alen points to a tree growing out of a ruined building and says, "It's a strange thing in nature: Sweet figs can grow with almost no soil." He seems to be speaking as much about the difficult lot of Mostar's people as its vegetation. There are blackened ruins everywhere. When I ask why, after 15 years, the ruins still stand, Alen explains, "Confusion about who owns what. Surviving companies have no money. The Bank of Yugoslavia, which held the mortgages, is now gone. No one will invest until it's clear who owns the buildings."

Mostar's skyline is tense with symbols of religious conflict. Ten minarets pierce the sky like proud exclamation points. And, across the river, twice as tall as the tallest minaret, stands the Croats' new Catholic church spire.

The next morning, before I leave Mostar, I stop at a tiny grocery store to order a sandwich from a woman I befriended the day before. She's a gorgeous person, sad to be living in a frustrating economy and unable to bend down because of a piece of shrapnel in her back that doctors decided was safer left in. As she slices the sandwich meat, I bend down to gather carrots and cherries to add to what will be a fine

picnic meal on wheels.

On my way out of town, I drive over patched bomb craters in the pavement. In the capital city of Sarajevo, the bomb craters have been filled with red resin — which looks like splattered blood — to commemorate those who died. Here, the craters are patched in black to match the street ... but because I know what they are, they appear red in my mind.

This article was adapted from Rick's new book, For the Love of Europe. Rick Steves (ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio, and organizes European tours. You can email Rick at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.