

TORONTO'S EDGY DRAKE ADDS MELLOW MODERN WING



ROCHELLE LASH
Hotel Intel

Toronto's Drake Hotel is the epitome of hipness. Edgy and playful, it dared to be different when it opened in the early 2000s as a rocking retreat for the creative class of funky Queen St. W.

Forget about Toronto the Good. The Drake represented Toronto the Badass. Quirky and unconventional, this unique west-side story was renowned for its epic dining and drinking, live music and celebrity-studded parties. And the mini-bar's Pleasure Menu stocked condoms and sex toys. Was this typical of the prim and proper Queen City? I think not.

Still, the Drake garnered a string of well-deserved superlatives such as coolest hotel, best rooftop bar and most stylish getaway from the likes of CNN, USA Today and the Guardian.

The revelry has resumed at the Drake Lounge, a buzzy dining room with a DJ, as well as the red-hot Sky Yard rooftop patio, the comfy Drake Café, and Drake Underground, which has presented Beck, Billie Eilish, Leon Bridges and Peaches, and is expecting intriguing performers such as Erika de Casier (March 16), Witch Prophet (March 26) and Tre Burt (April 7).

The Drake is a one-stop playground, but it's a serious boutique hotel, too, with attentive concierge, bellmen, business services and spotless daily housekeeping.

The vision: The Drake's exciting new Modern Wing of 32 retro yet contemporary rooms opened recently. Guests enter directly into the intimate Lobby Bar, a mellow living room with a fireplace, comfy seating on beautifully restored 1960s couches, avant-garde art and, of course, ultimate cocktails.

That is where I bumped into the Drake's founder, former Montrealer Jeff Stober — an alum of T.M.R. High School, the visionary maestro behind this pace-setting hospitality hub and a detail man par excellence.

"Hotels are an escape from the everyday," he said. "Everything counts in creating the experience and everything comes together in harmony — decor, food, drinks, service and art."

Stober has a penchant for nostalgia that's reflected in the grand revolving entrance doors (inspired by Ogilvy in Montreal), the terrazzo floors (recalling Miami Beach's Art Deco), red



The Drake's new rooftop terrace suite offers retro decorations and views of Toronto's skyline. **BRANDON BARRÉ**



The Drake Hotel on Toronto's Queen St. W. has added a new wing, seen on the right. **THE DRAKE HOTEL**

velvet half-curtains (fashioned after a Parisian salon) and the meticulous craftsmanship of fine woodwork, brass fittings and inlaid marble that reflect the Drake's 1890 origins.

His pride and joy is the hotel's selection of exquisite furniture, which he sourced at antique fairs near and far.

"Our look is timeless, both vintage and contemporary," he said. "Is it the 1950s or 2022?"

The news: The Modern Wing's guest rooms are lighter, brighter and more spacious than the Classic Wing. They're still retro-inspired and functional, but aren't traditionally luxurious.

"But what is luxury?" Stober posits. "The Drake has everything I expect in a good hotel room, but we want to stay approachable and unpretentious."

Guests enjoy Staycast TV

streaming, tablets for hotel info, effective lighting, deluxe Italian linens and cotton bathrobes by Frette, hand steamers and Malin + Goetz bath products.

There are new-age mini-bar treats — mostly local — such as vegan bonbons and rosé spritzers, as well as Ontario wine and craft beer, and high-dose vitamin C for the morning after a Drake party.

The Modern Wing's showpiece is an exceptional rooftop apartment for visiting VIPs, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and lots of space to entertain, including a vast terrace with a view of Toronto's downtown skyline.

The Drake's expansion is by Diamond Schmitt Architects (also handling makeovers of Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital site and New York's Lincoln Center), with interiors by DesignAgency and the in-house

creative team of Joyce Lo and Carlo Colacci, plus art curation by Ashley Mulvihill.

Food and drink: Executive chef Laura Maxwell oversees the Drake's wildly successful morning-to-night feasting, creating both comfort dishes and delicacies, ranging from wholesome to sinfully rich, at reasonable prices.

Evening hits its stride with superlative sushi and nigiri, and other starters (\$12-\$21) include steak tartare, shishito peppers, oysters and scallop ceviche tacos. Casual supper choices (\$22-\$26) include hearty roast chicken, pumpkin ravioli, lemon grass mussels and the robust Drake burger. There are more formal mains (\$38-\$42), such as steak-frites, glazed black cod or Ontario lamb.

Breakfast (\$12-\$19), served all day on weekdays, might fea-

IF YOU GO

The Drake Hotel: thedrake.ca, 866-DRAKE-TO (866-372-5386), 416-531-5042; 1150 Queen St. W., Toronto. One suite is pet-friendly. Accessible rooms available.

Price: Modern Wing from \$429; Classic Wing from \$309. All including concierge, Malin + Goetz toiletries, iPod library, preferred dining/event reservations.

Dining: children's menus, vegan, gluten- and dairy-free available.

Via Rail: viarail.ca, 888-VIA-RAIL (888-842-7245); business/economy available on Quebec City-Montreal-Toronto-Windsor corridor.

Tourism: Ontario, destinationontario.com; Toronto, destinationtoronto.com.

ture blueberry scones, avocado toast, eggs 'n' bacon or bagels with smoked salmon. Lunch (\$16-\$22) features French onion soup, a piri-chicken sandwich or a superfood salad. Highlights of brunch on Saturdays and Sundays (\$15-\$26) are challah French toast with apple-cardamom compote and whipped yogurt; sweet potato-chorizo-kale hash; and avocado toast with jalapeno.

Romantic Italy, enchanting isle

Amalfi Coast and Capri offer visual, tasty delights from the past, **Rick Steves** writes.

Along the heights of the Amalfi Coast in Italy, every inch is terraced, connected by steep, stony staircases that tempt visitors with twinkling — but treacherous — Mediterranean views.

Climbing through terraced orchards of lemon trees, I'm hot and thirsty, fantasizing about fresh-squeezed lemonade. And then, just like a fairy tale, I come upon the daughter of a farmer who seems to be waiting for a lost and parched traveller. She welcomes me to her terrace to join her for a little slicing and squeezing. As if teaching me a very important life skill, she demonstrates how you halve your lemon, stab it with a knife, and then — cupping the fruit with one hand — you wiggle the knife with the other, and watch the juice fill your glass. She adds lots of sugar, gives it a good stir, and hands me a glass of lemonade I'll never forget. As I drink, she quizzes me about my journey. It's one of those moments you travel for.

I'm staying in Sorrento, a town wedged on a ledge between the mountains and the sea. An hour south of wild and crazy Naples, Sorrento feels like its opposite: calm and genteel.

Crowding onto the early bus

for the ride along the Amalfi Coast, I sit on the right, primed for the big coastal views and bracing myself for one of Italy's great thrill rides as we make our way to Positano. The trip gives me respect for the engineers who built the road — and even more respect for the bus drivers who drive it.

Maybe I'm just hyperventilating, but I'm struck by how the Mediterranean, a sheer 150-metre drop below, twinkles. Cantilevered garages, hotels and villas cling to the vertical terrain. Exotic sandy coves tease from far below, out of reach.

Early the next morning, riding the 30-minute ferry from Sorrento, I head for the enchanting isle of Capri. I think of the rich and famous who've headed to the same island over the centuries.

Today, Capri is expensive and glitzy — and a world-class tourist trap. Landing on the island, I'm met with a greedy line of white convertible taxis, eager to sweep me away. Zigzagging up the cliff with the top down, I think that despite its crowds and commercialism, Capri is still flat-out gorgeous. Chalky white limestone cliffs rocket boldly from the shimmering blue and green surf.



The enchanting isle of Capri has attracted visitors to its sparkling shores since ancient times. **CAMERON HEWITT/RICK STEVES' EUROPE**

Strategically positioned gardens, villas, and viewpoints provide stunning vistas of the Sorrentine peninsula, Amalfi Coast and Mount Vesuvius.

To give my Capri visit an extra dimension, I take the scenic boat trip around the island. It's cheap and comes with good narration. Riding through the pounding waves, I work on my sunburn as we circle the island, marvelling at a non-stop parade of staggering cliffs and listening to stories of celebrity-owned villas. There

are also some quirky sights: a solar-powered lighthouse, statues atop desolate rocks and caves in the cliffs, with legends reaching back 2,000 years to the time of Emperor Tiberius.

The last stop is the highlight: the fabled Blue Grotto, with its otherworldly azure water. At the mouth of the grotto, dinghies jockey to pick up arriving tourists, who need to disembark from their larger transports. The grotto's entrance hole is small, so only these little rowboats can fit

through. If the tide's too high or the chop too rough, even dinghies can't get in, and visitors are turned back.

Nervous that the waves will close it down, I gingerly climb into my dinghy and my raffish rower jostles his way to the tiny entry. He knows enough English to explain to me (jokingly, I think) that if I don't scrunch down below the gunwales, I'll smash my skull on the rock and, as I've already paid, that was no concern of his. Taking a moment to feel the rhythm of the swells and anticipating the instant when the dinghy reaches the low point, he pulls hard and fast on the old chain, and we squeeze — like birthing in reverse — into the grotto.

Inside, it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the brilliant blue of the cave's water (an effect caused by sun reflecting off the limestone at the bottom). As my man rows me around, singing a little O Sole Mio, I enjoy the iridescent magic of the moment.

Beaches, boutiques, blue grottos, and fresh-squeezed lemonade — it all combines to make clear why, for centuries, holiday-goers have chosen this corner of Italy to make their Mediterranean travel dreams come true.

This article was adapted from Rick Steves' 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 him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.