

The Suburban

# magazine

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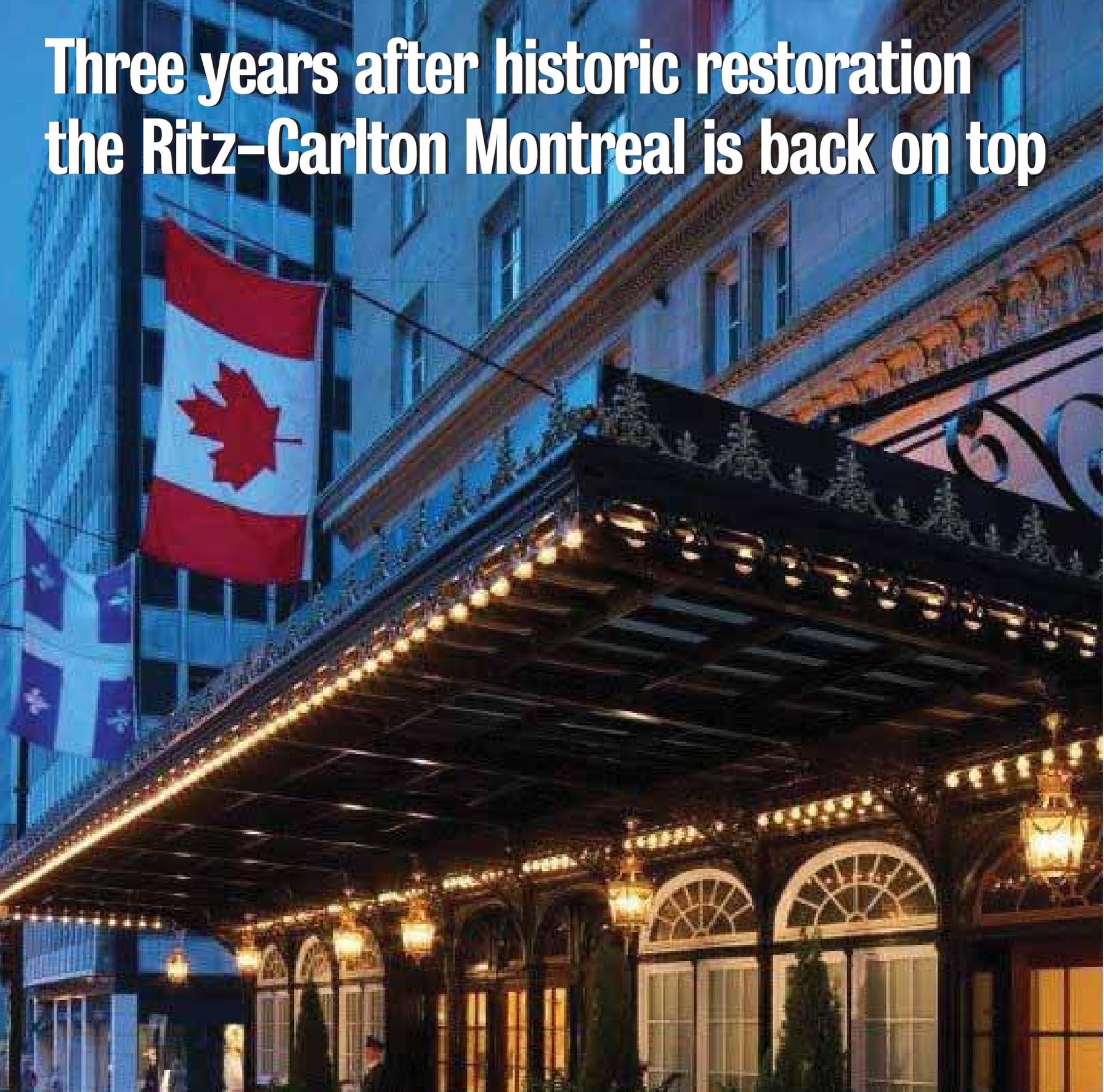
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# Three years after historic restoration the Ritz-Carlton Montreal is back on top



By Mike Cohen  
The Suburban

It has now been just over three years since The Ritz-Carlton Montreal reopened amid much excitement following an extensive four-year, \$200 million restoration.

I did not know that when the Ritz-Carlton Montreal opened its doors on December 31, 1912, this was in fact the very first hotel of this glamorous chain in the world. Since then, it has been the address of choice for discerning travelers and public figures, hosting everyone from Elizabeth Taylor and Queen Elizabeth II to Winston Churchill and the Rolling Stones. The recent restoration brought cutting-edge technology to the facility, yet guests can still find historic charm throughout the five-star hotel, from the luxurious accommodations to the lobby, where the curved front desk has stood since the opening.

In its rich past, this Montreal luxury hotel offered more than simply a sumptuous bed; it was a gathering place for the famous Club 55, a group of gourmets who planned epic feasts at the iconic hotel. Today, well-versed palates come to this AAA Five Diamond hotel, the only spot in Quebec for Maison Boulud, an upscale restaurant offering a twist on traditional French cuisine. Meanwhile, the indoor heated saltwater pool overlooks the city from the rooftop, where visitors can get acquainted with the surrounding neighborhood, which includes the Golden Square Mile, high-end boutiques, galleries and museums. The place also remains a gathering place, and offers elegant event spaces for meetings and weddings. Magna Sabella, the director of sales and an employee of the hotel for 35 years, told me that during the four-year closure people who had a family tradition of getting married here actually delayed their nuptials until it was back in business.

“The hotel today is a showcase of modern luxury, but it has not lost the discreet charm of the past or the patina of history,” said Torriani.

Under the direction of Quebec architectural firm Provencher Roy + Associés, the iconic Montreal hotel underwent an exhaustive transformation. The building’s facade was preserved and restored, public spaces were renovated and upgraded, and the guestrooms were redesigned to feature the very best in luxury and comfort. The Ritz-Carlton, Montreal now has 98 rooms and 31 suites. The 4,700-square-foot Royal Suite is the largest hotel suite in Montreal. There are also 45 private residences, which helped finance the restoration.

Added Claude Provencher, the project’s architect: “The restoration of the hotel and its reconfiguration posed a challenge - that of adopting a contemporary design while maintaining a harmonious dialogue with the original building. We there-

fore integrated the principles of the celebrated Venice Charter into our concept, as well as recommendations made in the heritage study of The Ritz-Carlton, Montreal under the supervision of Jean-Claude Marsan.”

Present-day CEO and General Manager Andrew Torriani, his four brothers and their sister were first exposed to the world of fine hotels and luxury travel at a young age by virtue of the fact their father was a renowned hotelier in South Africa.

As a teenager Torriani held a number of positions in the industry. When his father served as assistant manager at the Four Seasons Hotel in Montreal (now the Omni), he studied at the Petit Séminaire de Québec and worked weekends at the Caf'Conc' in the Château Champlain hotel. There were also his stints as a jack of all trades at the Ritz, from dishwasher to busboy. While his family would relocate to Chicago and then Dusseldorf, he chose Canada for his future and graduated from Queens and McGill universities with degrees in mathematics and business respectively. He landed at Air Canada and served as director of Human Resources for 18 years. He returned to the Ritz in 2006. A year later a consortium comprising Mirelis Financial Group and Torriani Group assumed ownership.

It is managed by Torriani Luxury Hotel Management Canada, a subsidiary of Monaco Luxury Hotels and Resorts.

“It was my dad who was originally offered the opportunity to run the hotel,” he says. “He recommended me. The hotel was on the downswing and I saw a huge opportunity to put it back where it was. We have done that.”

For anyone in Montreal considering a “Staycation,” this place should be at the top of your list. The hotel has 300 employees and I must say that all of those I came into contact with, from the doorman, front desk personnel, dining management and the attendants at the pool, they were all so impeccably polite and helpful. “I interview as many of our staff as possible before they are hired,” he says. “Once a month I invite 10 of them for lunch where they can tell me anything on their mind. And in order for them to get a feel for the hotel, each one of them is entitled to stay over for one night.”

The remake of the hotel is not surprisingly Torriani's proudest achievement. He made sure to have the building's façade preserved and restored, as were the lobby, the Palm Court, the Oval Room and the hotel's famed garden. Many decorative details from 1912, such as marble fireplaces in some of the suites, reflect this masterful blend of old and new.

The guestrooms also feature high-tech amenities, such as thermostats that intuitively remember a guest's temperature preferences upon check-in, and motion sensors that activate lights when guests enter a dark room. The 10,000 square feet of meeting space are flexible and offer event planners the possibility of accommodating up to 300 people. Maison Boulud is quite a spectacular place, featuring a 130-seat dining room. There is also the 46-seat year-round greenhouse or the terrace on Sherbrooke Street.

#### Maison Boulud

Another coup for Torriani was persuading acclaimed chef Daniel Boulud to create a new restaurant at the legendary hotel. “We always wanted to add a new offering that would stand out in Montreal's already rich restaurant culture, one that would truly enhance our city's culinary vitality,” Torriani said. “I cold called him. When he got back to me he said he was coming to Montreal and would give me 15 minutes. That turned out to be close to three hours. A partnership was established. We run the restaurant and it has become one of the most successful dining spots in Montreal.”

As with all Boulud's restaurants, the Montreal establishment has been uniquely adapted to its setting. “While I create restaurants that reflect my own distinct style, always inspired by the seasons, my traditional French culinary roots and my standards of hospitality, each place is developed to reflect the culture, tastes and lifestyle of its native city, with a particular focus on local products and purveyors,”

he said

Boulud runs restaurants around the world, including New York's Daniel, Cafe Boulud, db Bistro Moderne, Bar Boulud, DBGB Kitchen and Bar, Boulud Sud and Epicerie Boulud, as well as restaurants in Miami, Palm Beach, London, Beijing and Singapore. The renowned chef comes to Montreal with the support of his Dinex Group, the management company he created in 1997 to assure the consistent quality of his restaurants' cuisine and service. Staff tell me he is on-site in Montreal several times a year.

On the night we ate at the restaurant, we were greeted by our very charming server Marie-Christine. Our table was beautifully situated outdoors, overlooking the garden and the pool where ducks swam by. We started off with some beverages and shared some sensational pasta plates as appetizers (homemade Quebec Lobster Gnocchetti, Leeks, Mushrooms and Coral Emulsion and Homemade Mezzelune Pasta Filled with Princesses Scallops and Black Truffle Mousseline). For our main meals we chose the garlic roasted lamb chops, the Cornish hen and the scallops—each fabulously prepared. For dessert we shared some peach, chocolate and lemon creations. If you have allergies, the staff will do whatever possible to remove certain ingredients.

Maison Boulud has quite a reputation as well. In fact it was named one of the Top 100 Best Outdoor Dining Restaurants in Canada by



The Dom Pérignon Bar.

OpenTable diners. The list of winners is derived from more than 275,000 reviews for approximately 1,600 restaurants submitted by OpenTable diners across the country. The night we were there, every table was taken. Executive Chef Riccardo Bertolino typically makes his way through the restaurant and talks to diners.

#### Champagne Bar

Just less than a year ago the Ritz opened the new Dom Pérignon Champagne Bar. Exclusive to the Ritz-Carlton Montreal—and the first of its kind in all of Canada—it is located in the historic Montreal hotel's famed Palm Court. The champagne menu features both Rosé & Brut Dom Pérignon available by the glass and bottle; the full service bar also features an exclusive cocktail menu, and offers a variety of spirits and drinks. We shared some mini-angus beef burgers and a Montreal smoked meat sandwich, with some sweet potato fries on the side and of course champagne. We saved some room for dessert, chocolate mousse and milfeuilles. It is open nightly.

#### Afternoon Tea

When the Ritz-Carlton Montreal opened in



Maison Boulud.



The pool area.

1912 it became known for its legendary style and impeccable service. The hotel also became known as a comfortable spot for Montrealers to enjoy “Afternoon Tea” and socialize. A century later, the Ritz has revived the tradition of ‘Afternoon Tea,’ a flashback to the Edwardian era when Tea Time was a social ritual. Set amidst the comfort and elegance of the famous Palm Court, a selection of fine teas, homemade canapés, scones and pastries are on offer. Gentle music wafts through the Palm Court providing the perfect ambiance for a moment spent in lavish repose. I recently experienced this treat for the second time, having gained an appetite for this kind of opportunity after my trip to London, England in the summer of 2014.

Breakfast Tea is served daily from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and afternoon Tea at 1 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. This is not something commonly available at Montreal hotel or restaurants and most definitely an experience that should be on everybody's “to do” list. The fun begins by choosing from among a list of different teas. We chose the afternoon option and started things off with some glasses of champagne, followed shortly thereafter by the three tiered tray featuring delicious finger sandwiches (cucumber and cream cheese on brown bread, smoked salmon with tarragon mayonnaise on pumpkinseed bread, chicken breast, with truffle mayonnaise on six grain bread and confited tomatoes, with goat cheese on tomato bread); the scones; and tantalizing mini-desserts. The cost is \$32 per person (\$45 if you include champagne). “It does really well,” said Torriani. “This is something that goes back to our history.”

#### Top Ranking

The Ritz was recently named the “number one city hotel in Canada” by Travel + Leisure, as part of the magazine's 2015 World's Best Awards Readers' Survey.

“We at Ritz-Carlton Montreal are delighted to be selected the ‘No. 1 city hotel in Canada,’” said Torriani. “It is an honour to be recognized by such a well-regarded travel publication. We take great pride in maintaining high standards of quality in all areas from design, to service and amenities, and are grateful for the recognition by all the readers who took the time to vote.”

Every year, the readers of Travel + Leisure, the largest travel magazine brand in the United States, vote on their favorite destinations, hotels, resorts, spas, airlines, and more in the annual World's Best Awards Readers' Survey. This year's winners are announced in the August 2015 issue of Travel + Leisure and

onTravelandleisure.com/worlds-best.

This is the third award bestowed on the Ritz-Carlton Montreal in 2015, following notable achievements with Forbes Travel Guide and the 2015 AAA Five Diamond Award. The hotel has also been named one of the best in the world by Robb Report, Condé Nast Traveler, and Fodor's. Coming soon to the hotel will be a much anticipated spa.

Torriani, his wife and their three children reside in West Island Kirkland where he has coached different sports. “At the end of the day we chose a place to live our kids could enjoy from a sports perspective and the open air,” he says. “Kirkland is a well-managed city, well maintained and highly non-controversial.”

#### Computer controlled blinds and lighting

The lighting, heating and energy functions are computer-controlled, the blinds controlled from the bed, with touchpoints that are as easy as possible for clients to understand.

“We are able to detect if a compressor in the air conditioner is going bad, quickly identifying the problem before the client notices,” says Torriani. “An air conditioner can be replaced in 15 minutes. The system can also detect water overflow immediately—something that could take three or four rooms out of commission.”

Torriani sees the residential element as a return to the past. “In the early 1900s, 10 to 15 per cent of the clients were permanent residents. Over time, that waned. This is the return — it's hotel living, but clients can retain the amount of privacy they want.”

#### The Suites

When staying at the hotel check out the swank corner suite with expansive city views. This is a luxurious bedroom, with a plush King Bed for ultimate comfort. The living area is adjoined with a fireplace. There is a spacious marble bathroom with heated flooring, a deep lounging tub, a separate rain power steam shower, double sink and a toto multi-functional toilet/bidet featuring a heated seat, automatic sensor and remote control. The floors are heated. I must say this is probably the first time I have devoted this much space to a bathroom.

There is a large walk-in closet, two executive working desks, two 47-inch LCD flat-screen TVs (and a smaller one in the bathroom), On-demand movies, internet access, free Wi-Fi, nightly turndown service, a large choice of bath amenities upon request and a pillow menu. “Remember,” Torriani says. “We blew down everything here. A lot of family experience went into the room designs, especially the large bathrooms. Our toilets have even made it to YouTube.”

#### The Pool

Open year-round, the pool area located on the top floor is a particular delight during the warmer season. The heated salt water pool has a most unique design attached to it. There are comfortable lounges and chairs to sit on, with a beautiful wood deck and umbrellas to shield you from the sun. Staff welcome you with a towel, a cold bottle of water and any assistance necessary finding just the right spot to sit. “It took a lot of engineering to make our pool a reality,” he says. “As for the deck, it gives the feel in the warmer months of having an outdoor pool.”