

Ritzy Toronto



MEXICO CITY, NEW YORK, LOS

ANGELES...AND TORONTO. It's the fourth largest city in North America, and only two hours from the United States border but it may be the friendliest and the cleanest.

I grew up in Buffalo, two hours away from Toronto, and human nature what it is—many of us figured, "Ah, it's no big deal, it's just Toronto."

It IS a big deal.

Not just because it's big. And not just because it's a kinder and gentler version of any major American city. It's more sophisticated too.

Erin and I were fortunate to stay at the Ritz Carlton for our recent weekend stay. It's like going into a time warp. "Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen," or so the Ritz motto goes.

While waiting in line to check in, a clerk came out to hand us glasses of sparkling wine. It was refreshing in more ways than one, and it set the tone for the weekend.

Our 19th floor room gave us pass-key

access to the Club Lounge one level up. We were able to sit and drink and eat anytime we wanted. There was enough food for any meals. (It truly may be a good investment to pay extra to have access to a concierge floor, in light of the complimentary meals.)

After we checked in, we hit the streets. We walked for two hours around this interesting metropolitan area that has so many nooks and crannies. The Canadian version of MTV was having a big awards



ceremony the next night and we saw two outdoor stages with performers rehearsing. Interesting. The City Hall area, a "Times Square-type" area, Chinatown, and our favorite section, Yorkville which is several blocks of upscale shops and restaurants.

We came back to the room and showered for dinner. The bathroom was spacious and cutting-edge—complete with a TV "within" the mirror. No tangle set, but an 11x14 inch image on the mirror with a remote control helping change the channels.

There's nothing more decadent than going downstairs for dinner. No car keys, no wallet and no sunglasses. Empty pockets.

The Ritz-Carlton Toronto's restaurant is called TOCA. It's on the mezzanine level and is absolutely five-star. Rather than paraphrase it and dilute the impact, here is how the hotel describes its restaurant:

"TOCA offers handcrafted Italian cuisine complemented by seasonal

flavours and locally-sourced produce. Located in the heart of Toronto's Performing Arts & Theatre District, TOCA is proud to collaborate with Chef Oliver Glowig, one of Rome's most celebrated culinary leaders."

Shortly after sitting down and ordering our drinks, a server put a basket of bread on our table. Since we're both gluten-free (me by DNA and Erin by sympathy), we had to tell him "no thank you," something we do any restaurant that puts out bread. But I was shocked at what happened next.

He said, "Yes, Mr. Collins, it's gluten-free."

As he smiled and walked away, I wondered how they would have known about my allergy. I just arrived in the country a few hours earlier! Then it dawned on me, months before our arrival, I may have mentioned it to the Ritz public relations specialist when we were talking about our desire to find a gluten-free restaurant. (Thank you, Mimi AuYeung!)

We had a wonderful meal that began with the Chef's four-course tasting menu. After that I had the filet mignon with baby spinach. Erin had the dry-aged rib-eye. We shared potatoes and vegetables. After a relaxing coffee and dessert, it was a treat to go upstairs to our room—and not have to deal with cars or traffic.

The next morning we took advantage of brunch in the 20th floor Club Lounge before going to the 5th floor spa for his-and-her treatments. The department is called "Spa My Blend by Clarins." Again, let me defer to the experts:

"We have created a one-of-a-kind oasis in the heart of downtown...Basking in the natural light of our glass-enclosed



retreat...you will enjoy sweeping views of the city while our lifestyle experts usher away the pressures of the outside world."

I was fortunate to have Sarah Jean as a therapist. To give you an idea how sincere and professional she was, she kept me late to finish working out some tight muscles. That's thorough.

Erin went with the facial treatment and was very pleased with the service.

After we packed up and alerted the valet service that we were leaving, Erin reminded me I left my phone charger in the now-locked hotel room 19 floors up. Naturally I left it plugged in next to the desk. I saw a man in a suit wearing a name-tag walking toward me and told him my plight.

"Mr. Collins, I'll get that for you right away, sir," he said.

I said, "Now wait a minute, you guys



are good, but you can't be THAT good. How did you know my name?" He said, "I checked you in yesterday, sir." (Turns out it was the Assistant Front Office Manager Alroy Fernandes.)

Wow. That's all I can say is "wow," about The Ritz-Carlton Toronto...and Toronto itself.

We drove out the driveway and assimilated with the rest of the world, but it was certainly a nice break. – Ray Collins