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Escaping the **ELECTION SEASON**

by **ANDREW RIMAS**

IN THE BATH-
room of our hotel
suite, I felt the dis-
tance between
worlds. Montreal is
a mere five-hour
drive from Boston, but, in
that sterile, glass-walled cu-
bicle, facing the Toto Washlet
with integrated toilet, I knew
what it meant to stand on the
shore of San Salvador and see
a galleon crest the horizon.

"People like to post YouTube videos of it," smiled the woman from the Ritz-Carlton's marketing department.

I laughed, but I was terrified. This toilet was possessed of higher powers. When I stepped into the cubicle, it raised its lid in an automated salute. And while a heated seat is a relatable luxury, three different settings for personal cleaning jets and a temperature-adjustable dryer is a miracle out of a Philip K. Dick story. The toilet would have to be approached with respect. And caution.

Back home, if a toilet tried to interact with me, it'd be reason to call a plumber, possibly a priest. In Montreal, it just reminded me that the world isn't ringed by I-495.

NAME A COUNTRY, THEN CONSID-
er the first image that springs to mind. Japan, Croatia, Nepal. You get a mental flipbook of stereotype (violet prodigies, picturesque coastlines,

monks). Russia, Madagascar. Furry hats, lemurs. It's a distillation of the pictures in grade school geography class, in Tintin comics. A Belgium of high quality chocolate. A Saudi Arabia of sexism. A Nagorno-Karabakh of... I have no idea.

And what about our closest neighbor? I can no longer think of Canada without envisioning a martini glass containing a clear portion of vodka, Cointreau, coriander, ginger syrup and white cranberry juice, chilled by a sphere of ice inside of which blooms, as if trapped in amber, a single pink orchid.

An ornate cocktail isn't reflective of the typical Canadian stereotypes (superior health care, low crime, beavers). But a recent weekend in Montreal etched a set of fresh assumptions on my mind, largely ones grounded in the fact that Canada ranks in the top 10 of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report on the "happiest" countries in the world (the U.S. does not). My epiphany started the way most epiphanies unroll into the conscious, by remembering that the universe is about 93 billion light years wide, in all of which it's impossible to avoid advertising.

It started in September. Election season had begun to weigh on my spirits like a limestone blanket. The overwrought voiceovers on TV, the hysterical headlines, the depressing

quotes from undecided voters—it made me pine for the liberation of being illiterate, deaf and standing in a 10-foot deep hole. It was time to get away. Since I'm shamefully unversed in French, I figured a weekend in Quebec would be a good way to escape. Seeing an "Arrêt" sign at an intersection was just the sort of reminder I needed that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in basic cable programming.

THE RITZ-CARLTON MONTREAL is the original Ritz-Carlton. (Though it's not the original Ritz. That pedigree belongs to a place in Paris.) Exactly 100 years ago, the property launched on the presumption that people would pay top nightly rates for a private bathroom.

Straddling a desirable block in the desirable neighborhood called the Golden Square Mile, the hotel hosted everyone from Douglas Fairbanks to Winston Churchill to Mick Jagger. In 2008 it closed, to reopen this spring after \$200 million in surgery, sinking it in plush carpets and grafting a Daniel Boulud restaurant onto its flank. The lobby remains a study in white marble, with plain lines, a curved stairway built to show off ladies' ball gowns as they sweep downstairs, and a reliance on polish. The Palm Court, with its ceiling painted with fronds and parakeets, still feels like a backdrop to an Evelyn Waugh novel. But the Japanese garden in the back courtyard is lifted from modern Tokyo, and Maison Boulud is



Escapes

relentlessly of-the-moment, down to the textiles on the walls and the lobster lasagnette with cipollini. If you head up to the eighth floor you can see the Royal Suite, a grandiose apartment of giant baths and unexpected sitting rooms. Elizabeth Taylor married Richard Burton for the first time here, and despite the remodeling, the apartment still has a sepia air.

But, of course, the toilets are the first point of interest. They're even self-cleaning. The rooms also sport automated window shades, century-old marble fireplaces and Bose sound systems. These are the sort of suites in which the bathtubs are too deep for you to get a proper view of the flatscreen television next to the sink (the angle's better from the walk-in rain shower).

Next year, the rooftop swimming pool is due to open, but for the moment the best reason to visit the Ritz-Carlton is Maison Boulud, the cuisine of which makes that of other contemporary French restaurants look like gum scraped off a shoe with a stick. The dining room, designed by hotshot Japanese architecture firm Super Potato, shimmers with a mirrored gas fireplace and chandeliers made of inverted crystal goblets, while the bar thrums with the well-to-do and dapper. It's there you can order the cosmopolitan de l'orient, cooled by an iced orchid. The menu leans heavily on spectacle: burrata appears in a nest of woody chanterelles; venison chops glow with a garnet sheen. But a simple side dish of fried artichoke hearts tastes just as spectacular as an intricate in Kriek beer and framed with a pistachio tuile.

The Ritz-Carlton is a melding of Old Montreal charm with ruthless, intimately charming technology, but the dichotomy between history and the present is nowhere more

extant than a five-minute drive away in l'Auberge Saint-Gabriel, a restaurant/nightclub set in a 17th-century inn said to be the oldest in North America. In 1769, the building received the first liquor license in Quebec under British rule; today the sommelier pours British Columbian fortified wine that could thumb its nose at the snootiest casks from Oporto. Stepping into the colonial stone structure (a bouncer stands at attention during nightclub hours), a guest's first impression is of determined cool, and of a whale's backbone, stretching up two stories through the center of the bar. Next to the restrooms, a pair of taxidermied moose stand headless, conjoined at the neck like a Dadaist statement on bourgeois concepts of biology. The cuisine, however, is deeply serious, if a giant "egg in snow"—a globe of sweet foam encrusted with candied nuts and draped with two velvety dessert sauces—counts as less whimsical than delicious. Which it is.

While the menu tinkers with traditional Quebecois fare like homemade charcuterie and local cheeses, it takes flight when it takes chances. A chateaubriand appears in two stages: a traditional filet with wild mushrooms, and a masterly "evolution" of braised tenderloin served in a martini glass with whipped potato, bacon and truffles. (Order this. It's reason enough for the 10-hour round trip.) The wine list trumpets the surprising virtues of Canadian bottles, or you could just drink a glass of beer on one of the barstools embroiled with the coat of arms of the Royer 22nd, a francophone Canadian regiment. Then, if you need a further reminder that you're in a foreign country, step into the men's room and take note of the dental floss dispenser. Montrealers, it turns out, aren't just overdeveloped in cuisine and hospital-

ity. They have high standards of oral hygiene.

Of course, there are familiarities, too. Walking past the endless boutiques on Rue Saint-Denis, or by the jewelry shops on Sherbrooke, the brands are all familiar from Newbury Street. True, the signs are French, but a venti in Starbucks is still a venti. Even the famed Montreal smoked meat sandwiches taste suspiciously familiar, like pastrami that's taken seasoning lessons from a hot dog. And poutine, nowadays, is a staple in every gastropub in Boston. Might as well just call it curds, gravy and freedom fries.

I called a friend who works for a Canadian political party and asked him about our civilizational differences. Apart from the usual jokes about canoes and medical marijuana,

na, he didn't come up with a whole lot. He did complain, however, that Canada's manufacturing sector has been hit hard by the downturn in the U.S. economy. "It's time you guys started buying some stuff. You could really stand to be more materialistic, you know."

Back at the Ritz-Carlton, the Toto Washlet roosts in its aerated chamber, spritzing itself, its sensors primed like an Air Force drone. It, like Montreal, is businesslike, contemporary. It, like Canada, is modern. **xxx**

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