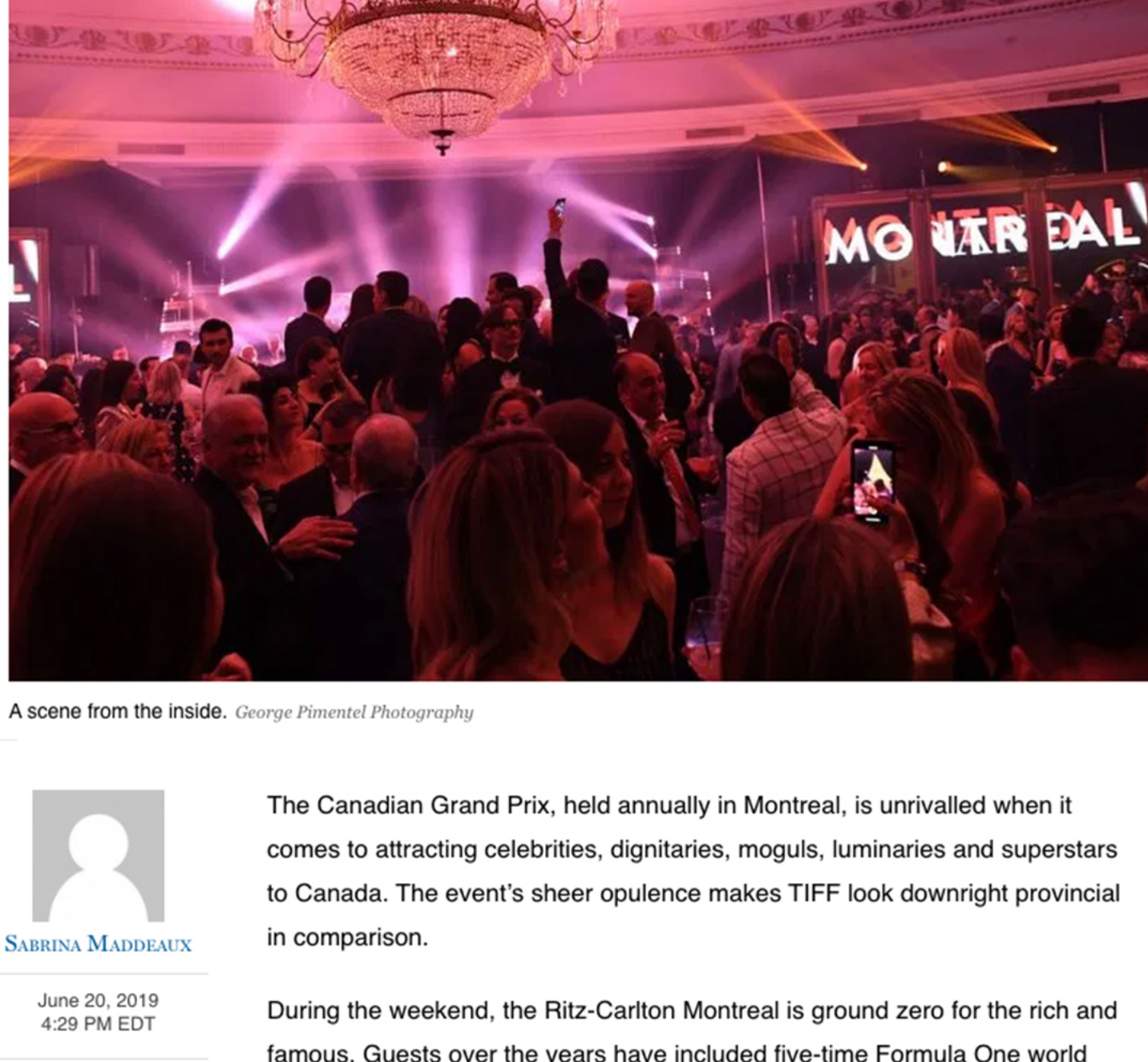
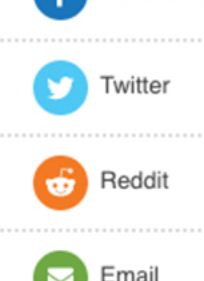


## How the Ritz-Carlton Montreal prepares for the Canadian Grand Prix, the country's biggest weekend bash

*'We thrive on the city's vibrancy during the Grand Prix and enthusiasm for doing our jobs well'*



A scene from the inside. *George Pimentel Photography*



SABRINA MADDEAUX

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The Canadian Grand Prix, held annually in Montreal, is unrivalled when it comes to attracting celebrities, dignitaries, moguls, luminaries and superstars to Canada. The event's sheer opulence makes TIFF look downright provincial in comparison.

During the weekend, the Ritz-Carlton Montreal is ground zero for the rich and famous. Guests over the years have included five-time Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton, Mexican telecom billionaire Carlos Slim, renowned chef Daniel Boulud, Jerry Seinfeld and the who's-who of the international glitterati — most of whom would prefer not to have their hotel of choice publicized in a national newspaper.

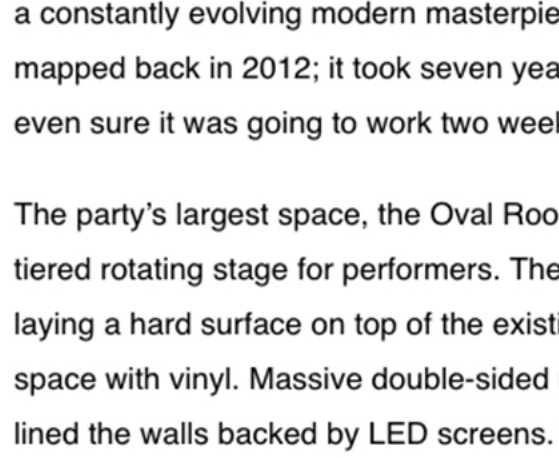
The Ritz-Carlton also throws the hottest bash in town with regular tickets starting at \$650. They shut down an entire city block for the red carpet alone. In previous incarnations, the party has seen Formula 1 cars lowered by crane into the hotel's courtyard, gigantic dancing robots, belly dancers with live snakes and enough champagne to drown a fish. The hotel orders 15,000 champagne flutes just for the occasion.

This year, we went behind-the-scenes to see how the Ritz-Carlton pulls off a weekend where practically everyone is a VIP. These are the unsung heroes of the event who perform near-superhuman feats to make the weekend a success.

### "THE VISIONARY"

#### Mabel Palomino, Founder of Manina World

Mabel Palomino is the creative mind behind the Ritz-Carlton's annual Grand Prix party. The former professional dancer and choreographer was in charge of envisioning the design of nine separate party spaces, including the main ballroom, an outdoor terrace, a hidden garden, several VIP lounges and the 1 OAK nightclub pop-up.



*Moet & Chandon*

This year's theme was "grandeur." Guests entered the party through a maze of larger-than-life mirrors, which opened into the Ritz-Carlton's historic Palm Court serving free-flowing Moët & Chandon champagne. The Court's walls were illuminated with Tron-esque projections, which elevated the original 1912 architecture into

a constantly evolving modern masterpiece. Palomino had the court digitally mapped back in 2012; it took seven years to realize her vision and she wasn't even sure it was going to work two weeks before this year's party.

The party's largest space, the Oval Room, featured a custom-made, multi-tiered rotating stage for performers. The floors were also customized, first by laying a hard surface on top of the existing carpet then covering the entire space with vinyl. Massive double-sided mirrors, made just for the occasion, lined the walls backed by LED screens. Sometimes, they were just mirrors.

Other times, they played digitized scenes, also made-to-order, depicting the Ritz's long history.

A brass band collaborated with local celebrity DJ YO-C through multiple rehearsals to combine their musical styles. Every single song played throughout the event was specifically selected and ordered to create a peak moment where everyone would come together to dance on the spinning stage (which they, in fact, did).

From character actors to singers and dancers, there were over 25 entertainers hired for the night's event. Ten makeup artists and hair stylists were on site. There was a wig master. All the choreography was original; the dancers rehearsed for weeks. Every costume was bespoke, designed by five costume designers.

In the hotel's secret garden, Palomino placed a dancer on a floating platform in the middle of a pond. Partway through the night, the dancer's gloves began to release streams of water through the fingertips, turning her into a human fountain of sorts. This was no pre-existing costume. Her team spent hours with various hoses and pumps, rearranging and slicing them to create the desired effect. "It was very challenging," she says. "People got soaked trying to figure it out."

Not everything always goes smoothly. One model, hired to wear a custom headpiece reminiscent of Medusa, had an allergic reaction to the accessory's glitter the day of the party. Palomino had to bring in a new model at the last minute.

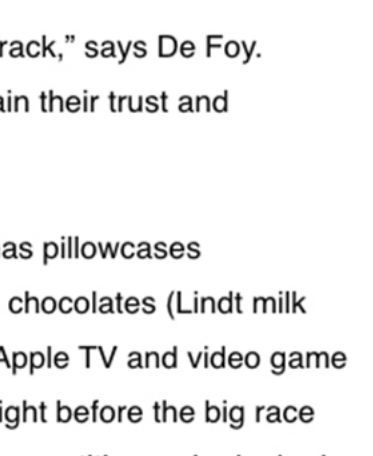
Remarkably, the entire party from floors to lighting, floral displays, furniture and food stations was set up in under 72 hours by about 150 people. Some of the team was running around screwing light bulbs into fixtures minutes before the party began. "The real challenge is to create fast. A lot of people didn't sleep for 48 hours. The crunch time happens at the last moment because it's a hotel. You can't stop operations. You can't tell people not to come for a week," says Palomino.

### "THE PEOPLE PLEASER"

#### Veronica De Foy, Director of Guest Services, Ritz-Carlton Montreal

Veronica De Foy is the woman in charge of making sure all the bigwigs and boldface names stay happy. For VIPs, she's reachable by text almost 24 hours a day. Requests range from retrieving a specific colour of pocket square to match a guest's suit to securing the best table at a fully-booked restaurant (last minute, of course), arranging a babysitter for their dogs or slipping them through backdoors of nightclubs.

The petite brunette is a force to be reckoned with: "No' is not in my vocabulary," she tells me. Flashing her business card and title go a long way towards making things happen around town, but when that fails, her strategy is to exhaust people with relentless persistence. "I have a way of getting what I want. A lot of people will say no at first, but I keep following up and eventually people give in."



*George Pimentel Photography*

The key to her job is preparation. Her team researches not just VIPs, but every guest who stays at the hotel ahead of time with the help of Google and social-media profiles. For celebrities, they communicate weeks ahead of time with agents, assistants and handlers. De Foy particularly delights in surprising guests with personalized touches.

"Sometimes these high-profile people are hard to crack," says De Foy. "They're not that friendly right away; you have to gain their trust and confidence."

For Lewis Hamilton, a longtime repeat guest, she has pillowcases monogrammed with his initials, places his favourite chocolates (Lindt milk chocolate, specifically) in his room and sets up an Apple TV and video game console. One year, she gave him a chocolate bar right before the big race and he won. Knowing that athletes are notoriously superstitious, she looked up his upcoming races for the remainder of the year, bought a bar for each one and wrote the location and date of each race on a bar. She gifted him them to eat for good luck before each race.

De Foy used to stock every room with a chocolate race car for the Grand Prix weekend, but noticed few people ate them. After several baffled guests in the hotel each morning, her team decided to setup "pit stop" hangover stations in the lobby, where guests can grab complimentary smoothies, energy drinks, protein snacks and other healthy treats to recover and take to the track. They also create colourful race-themed balloon bouquets in-house and leave them in rooms as a surprise.

Her job doesn't end when guests check out. She sends top guests Christmas cards and calls them on their birthdays. After 17 years on the job, she knows some clients better than their own families.

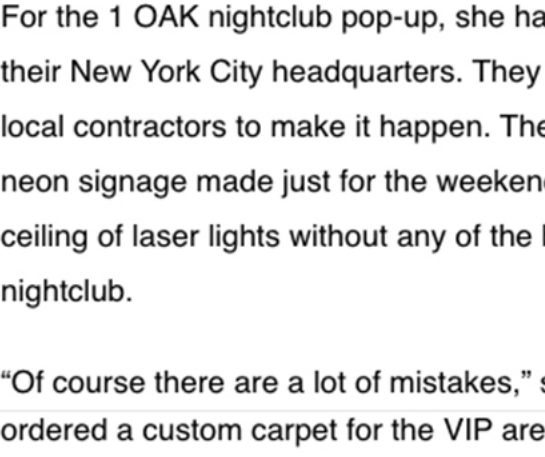
### "THE FIXER"

#### Madeleine Kojakian, Founder of Maddy K Events Atelier

After Mabel comes up with the party's creative direction, Madeleine Kojakian (Maddy K) deals with the logistics. She makes sure they stay within budget, oversees construction, sources furniture, coordinates deliveries, finalizes floor plans, handles sponsors and leads event setup and teardown.

After the big ideas are agreed upon, Kojakian contacts local contractors to see what's possible to build within the Ritz-Carlton's timeline and budget.

When it comes to food, it's not as simple as ordering off a catering menu. Kojakian sits down with the Ritz-Carlton's chefs alongside food stylist to ensure everything doesn't just taste good, but looks the part.



*George Pimentel Photography*

There are many things Kojakian handles that the average partygoer would never consider. City permits to place the red carpet on the sidewalk. Adhering to rules set by the Ritz-Carlton's employee union. Calculating how long it'll take guests to get a drink at the bar. Getting approval from sponsors on each and every

element: Where do they want the bar positioned? Do they want napkins branded? Cushions branded?

For the 1 OAK nightclub pop-up, she had to follow brand guidelines sent by their New York City headquarters. They require chevron floors, so she found local contractors to make it happen. They like neon lights, so she had custom neon signage made just for the weekend and figured out how to create a ceiling of laser lights without any of the built-in lighting infrastructure of a nightclub.

"Of course there are a lot of mistakes," says Kojakian. "For example, I'd ordered a custom carpet for the VIP area meant to cover the entire floor. When it arrived one day before the event, the carpet was only one-third the size it was supposed to be." She worked with the supplier to get a new carpet by the next morning. However, the mixup meant she also had to delay delivery and setup of furniture and florals since they can't go in before the carpet. Her strong relationships with suppliers after over 15 years in the business saved the day.

This is all while the hotel is fully operational (and fully booked). In fact, other events take place directly before and after the big bash. Due to a conference earlier in the day, Kojakian's team had only 12 hours to set up the 1 OAK space complete with bars, DJ booths and VIP banquets. Grand Marnier and Daniel Boulud hosted an elaborate lunch hours before the party, and the following evening saw the Oval ballroom transformed once again for the city's inaugural Artists for Peace and Justice gala complete with a performance by Arcade Fire.

"At the end of the day, it's my responsibility to make the event happen no matter what," she says. "I've been doing this party for six years and I can't drop the ball."

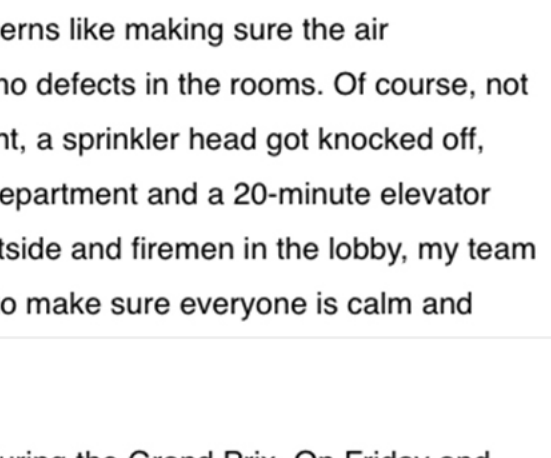
### "THE BOSS"

#### Andrew Torriani, CEO & General Manager, Ritz-Carlton Montreal

Andrew Torriani, who manages the hotel, has been in the hospitality industry since he was 10 years old (his father was a renowned hotelier in South Africa). He's pretty much seen it all.

While the Grand Prix is certainly one of the hotel's busiest times of year, in some ways he finds it easier to manage than other weekends. For one thing, most guests are there for the same reason and have similar schedules, wants and needs. "It's the one time you don't actually have to divide the types of clients you have in the hotel," he says.

This certainly helps when it comes to hosting an epic bash without drowning in customer complaints. In fact, most guests actually attend the party. "Every now and again, you'll get one or two people who are in town for other reasons and we'll place them on the top floor or in a far corner to minimize any noise," he tells me. "There are very, very few people coming to the Grand Prix who expect to go to bed at 9 p.m."



*George Pimentel Photography*

While Torriani is the ultimate overseer of any and all events taking place at the hotel, he also has more practical concerns like making sure the air conditioning is working and there are no defects in the rooms. Of course, not everything goes as planned. One night, a sprinkler head got knocked off, which resulted in a visit from the fire department and a 20-minute elevator outage. "When you see a fire truck outside and firemen in the lobby, my team and I have to quickly manage guests to make sure everyone is calm and knows everything is OK."

Torriani survives on almost no sleep during the Grand Prix. On Friday and Saturday night he clocked two hours. The man is in high-demand. Over the weekend, I saw him popping in and out of numerous events, managing employees, playing host to visitors from the Ritz-Carlton and Marriott corporate offices, giving speeches, entertaining clients and VIPs at the racetrack and handling media. Not once did he seem tired or stressed — quite the opposite, actually.

"It's a lot of work and a lot of sleepless nights, but I'm used to it and the team is used to it," he says. "We thrive on the city's vibrancy during the Grand Prix and enthusiasm for doing our jobs well."

It's hard to imagine Montreal being as vibrant as it is over this weekend without the the Ritz-Carlton Montreal's amazing work behind the scenes.