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# PUTTING ON THE RITZ

BY LOUISE BOURBONNAIS



© Ritz-Carlton Montréal, Circa 1912, opening



A sybaritic sojourn in a posh hotel is one of life's fine pleasures. And certainly, even among luxury hotels, some are more impressive than others, and leave you with an indelible sense of perfection. As I make my way to that Montréal icon, the fabulous Ritz-Carlton in the heart of the city's Golden Mile, I tingle with the anticipation of stepping through the historic doors of this paragon of good taste.

As I drive up, the porter rushes to open the door of my car with a smile as broad as the Ritz banner. He greets me as if he recognizes me personally, the same way he greets each guest arriving at the Ritz. For here every guest is treated with special deference. And you feel it the moment you walk through the front doors. Having his-

torically honed their skills on such notables as Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill and the Shah of Iran, the courteous and efficient staff continues the tradition of royal diplomacy by taking the acronyms VIP and VVIP very seriously.

After only one night at the Ritz, you'll want to become a habitué of this hallmark establishment that offers incomparable comfort and refined atmosphere. The subtle elegance and exquisite décor epitomize high society style. But beyond the showy crystal chandeliers, marble floors and shining accessories that are almost too perfect, is the clientele who make it the fabulous hotel that it is. The Ritz is the home away from home for politicians, celebrities, business execu-

tives and bon vivants. And of course, designer labels are everywhere you turn, as those with a flair for fashion and elegance flock to this showpiece of Montréal hotels. Even if today some of us may appreciate a casual, relaxed atmosphere, one can never forget the glorious history of the Ritz, and the elite who have stayed here in pursuit of temporal pleasures.

It all began over 90 years ago, on New Year's Eve, 1912, as the hotel celebrated its opening with a fabulous ball attended by 350 privileged guests. The German-born hotel director, Rudolph Bischoff, had aristocratic tastes and adored staging social events like debutante balls, private dinners and tea dances.

The Ritz Hotel was the dream of four wealthy Montrealers who decided that this cosmopolitan city needed a hotel with Old World charm and elegance, to attract those travelling elite who were passionate about fine food and lavish events. One of the investors, Charles Hosmer, had the good fortune to be related to César Ritz, the celebrated founder of the Ritz de Paris, inaugurated in 1898. Hosmer cleverly negotiated with Monsieur Ritz for permission to use the name of that most celebrated of European hotels. Monsieur Ritz agreed to lend his name to the Montréal Ritz upon certain rigorous conditions: The hotel service had to be flawless. The epicurean cuisine and wines had to be of the highest quality. The number of employees had to exceed the number of guests. There had to be room valets and 24-hour service. The hotel lobby should be small, to create an intimate ambience, and it should feature a magnificent winding staircase where ladies could show off their elegant finery. In exchange for the privilege of using the Ritz name, the conditions of César Ritz were respected down to the last letter.

The Montréal Ritz enjoyed a booming success for several years, until the Great Depression of the '30s hit hard. The amenities that this luxury hotel had to

the luxury hotel business at the Manhattan Ritz, and decided to emphasize higher quality service and more exacting standards. Soon after, the Ritz regained its reputation as a world-class hotel for VIPs. The staff lavished meticulous service on guests, while offering extraordinary cuisine, excellent cigars, wines and spirits. And the hotel underwent renovations inspired by the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo.

Over the years, the Ritz was challenged to prove its ingeniousness and savoir-faire to maintain its prestigious rank with Montréal's elite and foreign travellers. Montréal's Expo 67 and the 1976 Olympic Games brought new competition from newly constructed hotels. In 1991, the Montréal Ritz was purchased by a Swiss company, and in 1998 the hotel became affiliated with the prestigious Ritz-Carlton chain based in Atlanta, Georgia, which includes 45 top-class hotels around the world.

Despite changes in its direction, the Ritz has remained faithful to its exclusive reputation, and its distinguished clientele has remained faithful to the Ritz. It is the only Montréal hotel that can boast of an impressive guest list that includes Robert Redford, Paul McCartney, Paul Newman,



## THE MONTRÉAL RITZ-CARLTON WAS THE FIRST RITZ HOTEL IN NORTH AMERICA AND TODAY IT IS STILL THE ONLY RITZ HOTEL IN CANADA.

offer became more and more scarce. Certain gourmet commodities were impossible to procure, and menus were modified to eliminate delicacies such as caviar. In 1939, to forestall the closing of the hotel, a program of modernization was implemented. The dining room dress code was relaxed. Men were no longer required to wear formal dinner jackets and women dispensed with flashy evening gowns. And so, the Ritz was not the same old Ritz.

Yet thanks to the steady patronage of wealthy refugees, ambassadors, business clientele, military officers and heads of state, World War II brought relative prosperity. But it wasn't until 1947 that the Ritz recovered its original pizzazz, under the aegis of a new director who had learned

Burt Lancaster, John Wayne, Cindy Crawford, Diana Krall, Robert de Niro and Tiger Wood, to name but a few. Several U.S. presidents, various heads of state, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, and monarchs of several other countries have stayed at the Ritz. And Elizabeth Taylor married Richard Burton here in 1964!

The Montréal Ritz-Carlton was the first Ritz hotel in North America and today it is still the only Ritz hotel in Canada. It is classed among the top 100 hotels of the world, the only Montréal hotel to qualify for such a distinction. It also ranks among the top 50 hotels in North America. A recent survey in the prestigious American magazine *Travel & Leisure* rated it the number one hotel in Montréal for business travel. The

same survey rated the other top Canadian hotels for business travel, citing The Four Seasons in Toronto, the Fairmont Chateau Laurier in Ottawa and the Pan Pacific in Vancouver.

## HOTEL RENOVATIONS

To celebrate its 90 years of existence, the Ritz Hotel has spent \$11 million in the last four years to renovate its 229 rooms and suites. High-speed Internet access is available in every room, and an IT technician is on call to help guests with technical support. The Ritz Bar has been refurbished to maintain its elite status as a prestigious meeting place in the sophisticated business and political milieu. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**The Café de Paris:** Features classical and French cuisine.

**The Ritz Bar:** In the style of an urban lounge bar, offers conviviality, cocktails and meals at all hours.

**Les Jardins du Ritz:** With its lush and flowering aquatic garden, is renowned as the most exquisite Montréal venue for alfresco dining. Rooms which cost \$3 a night at the hotel's inauguration now cost \$200 a night. Suites which cost \$8 a night in 1912 are now \$300 a night. The Royal Suite (380 square metres) is \$4,500 a night. The Ritz wine cellar stocks 10,000 bottles of wine and champagne and the wine list features 350 red and white wines. Montréal Ritz-Carlton: 1 800 363-0366, [www.ritzcarlton.com](http://www.ritzcarlton.com).