

Living Unscripted

Canada's luxury niche thrives on fostering personal connections

BY SARAH B. HOOD

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Khabouth spends 75 to 100 hotel nights a year all over the world “and I see different definitions of luxury. We can all talk about the touch and feel of the linen you're sleeping on, the marble in the bathroom, but for me, what sets the tone is how well-trained the staff is,” says Khabouth, CEO of INK Entertainment in Toronto, who is not only a frequent traveller, but also a hotelier in his own right. In the fall of 2017, INK opened the 44-story Bisha, a luxury hotel/residential complex in Toronto's Entertainment District.

Khabouth says luxury today is measured by the “elevated experience and intuitive service” that makes every guest feel like a valued personal connection. “And I like unscripted service,” he adds. “Some hotels are luxurious, but everybody says the same thing.” Only after that, he says, come the sensory experiences: the smell of each room, the curated music, the texture of fittings and, of course, the flavours of the

food-and-beverage offerings.

“To us, it really is about high touch and understanding what our guests want,” says Greg Doman, SVP Development & Residential with AccorHotels, which operates Canada's Fairmont and Sofitel properties. “To that end, we operate our own properties — the ‘secret soft,’ as we call it.”

Recent growth in luxury properties is largely taking place in the top urban markets. For instance, in the summer of 2017, Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth reopened in Montreal after a year-long modernization that added 35,000 sq. ft. of



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convention space, made most rooms accessible and introduced the Artisans Market — an urban food-shopping zone inside the hotel — as well as three new restaurants (Rosélys, Bar Nacarat and Café Kréma) as well as the Agora, a multi-use area for public events.

“It is a complete redesign of all the public spaces, all the rooms; it really is like a completely new hotel,” says Doman.

In July, Hotel Arts Group relaunched its Kensington Riverside Inn in Calgary as Hotel Arts Kensington (a move that marked the end of the property’s membership with Relais & Châteaux). The 19-room boutique property and its

(clockwise from top left) Rosewood Hotel Georgia; Bisha Hotel and Residences; Hotel Quintessence; Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth



restaurant, Oxbow, have been extensively renovated to reflect the rebranding.

In the same month, Group Germain Hotels opened its 16th Canadian property — Le Germain Hotel Ottawa — a mixed-use building that’s part of the Ottawa Art Gallery expansion and Arts Court redevelopment. Designed by Montreal-based LemayMichaud Architecture & Design, it includes 115 rooms and suites that feature commissioned original artwork and a Canadian-themed restaurant, Norca.

It’s easy to understand the appeal this sector has for guests with the means to enjoy it; for the older segment and frequent business travellers, faultless amenities and a high level of personal service ease the discomforts of travel. Meanwhile,

younger guests place a high value on qualities such as uniqueness and authenticity — less often associated with typical chain properties.

Both heritage buildings and new builds hold strong positions in the Canadian market.





“More established guests may look to one of the older hotels, whereas the millennial may look to the JW or Autograph [brands],” says Brian Stanford, senior managing director with CBRE Hotels. “The common element is going to be service.”

A Fairmont report titled Stewardship of Iconic and Historic Buildings points out that, “Many guests feel iconic hotels offer unique and ownable emotional benefits due to their ability to evoke ‘place identity’ — properties enable guests to psychologically merge with the history of the hotel.” This is equally the case with a grand-old railway hotel or a small boutique-style property.

For example, Hôtel Quintessence in Mont-Tremblant, Que. was developed in 2003 on a residential property in a fairly remote region, but “being on the shore of Lake Tremblant, by the slopes of the mountain, is a better location than any developer could have imagined,” says general manager Sophie Racine.

Patrick Wallace and his wife/partner Pamela recently acquired Trout Point Lodge, an intimate 12-room luxury lodge in a pristine wilderness environment in Nova Scotia. “What we’re able to do is provide personal touches,” says Wallace. “When you’re here, we’ll cater and tailor your experience to whatever you like.”

The luxury niche is attractive for operators and developers, too.

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Stanford notes that both occupancy rates and revenue are higher in Canada’s upscale-hotel market than across the national average.

“Developers are looking at it in two ways,” he says. In cases such as Toronto’s Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons and Shangri-La, “the appeal has been to blend the luxury component of a hotel into a residential complex.” On the other hand, since the growth of the boutique concept, there has been “effort on the part of smaller properties to compete with larger luxury hotels.” In short, he says, “there’s a really broad parameter there, from a developers’ perspective.”

Then there are the intangible

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Fairmont Banff;
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Georgia (bottom)



benefits. “This is a special experience; you have to be passionate about it to want to give that category of service,” Racine says. “It’s an appealing clientele and you innovate with them, you react with them, you become connected with them and you relate to them over a very long period of time. It’s a special contact.”

So far, in Canada, luxury is, generally, not being packaged with other categories. “Luxury isn’t something that has lent itself well to dual-branding,” says Stanford, “because what you or I might consider to be that secondary brand may not measure up well to the main brand. Having said that, we’ve had the recent opening of the Vancouver casino hotels: soft-branded facilities along with a JW,” he notes, referring to the JW Marriott Parq Vancouver and The Douglas, an Autograph Collection hotel.

Neither Fairmont nor Sofitel has dual-branded luxury properties in Canada, but parent company AccorHotels has done it overseas, says Doman, in cases such as the Fairmont Makati and Raffles Makati in Manila. “In some cases, we will look at it if we think it’s compelling for each of the brands. I’m not sure we’re going to see a lot of dual-branding at the luxury level, because we don’t want to see a dilution of that higher-end property,” he says.

What makes a great property? All the expected items — from plush amenities and lightning-fast Wi-Fi to incomparable dining — must be there and be excellent.

Trout Point Lodge offers its guests unique experiences through a staff naturalist who arranges guided hikes. “Our guests love our wood-fired hot tub on the banks of the Tuscan River,” adds Wallace. But “the most important thing is the personalization of guests’ experiences.”

Hôtel Quintessence offers massages in each suite, but “what people like about us being a small locale [is that] we call them by their names,” says assistant GM Delphine Elefante.

Across the board, it seems, personal interactions make the difference. “For me,” says Khabouth, “my biggest investment, outside of the physical construction and the quality, is in the training of the staff.” ♦

