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The Escape Artist {NICK ALTSCHULLER} LOOKING UP

Toronto is a city on the rise.



MODERN LIVING The Dining Room at the Drake, the EdgeWalk and a room at the Thompson Toronto

THE BEST PLACE TO BEGIN a tour of Toronto is in the air, with all the city's superlatives in view. To the south is Lake Ontario and the city islands, home to Porter Airlines, where after a quick flight from Boston, the world's shortest ferry ride (400 feet) drops you off downtown. To the north is Greater Toronto, one of North America's fastest growing cities and home to one out of every five Canadians. Below is nothing but 1,200 feet of atmosphere and the few vital inches of metal grating that make the highest aerial walk on the planet.

Shaped like the Space Needle but triple the size, the CN Tower was the world's tallest freestanding structure until 2007. Earlier this year, perhaps in response to losing the crown, they added the EdgeWalk. After being harnessed to a safety rail and swept for loose change, visitors venture on a 30-minute guided stroll, take in a 360-degree view of the landscape, and pause to poke their toes out over the Steam Whistle Brewery or

hang their rear over the retractable roof of the Rogers Centre, home of the Toronto Blue Jays.

A few short blocks away is the Thompson Toronto, one of several “lifestyle” hotels popping up in the cosmopolitan locale. It's the kind of place where the bellmen wear gingham shirts and skinny jeans, and the definition of “modern amenity” includes a door for the toilet but not for the shower. Even so, with heated floors and a showerhead bigger than a hubcap, comfort is never in question.

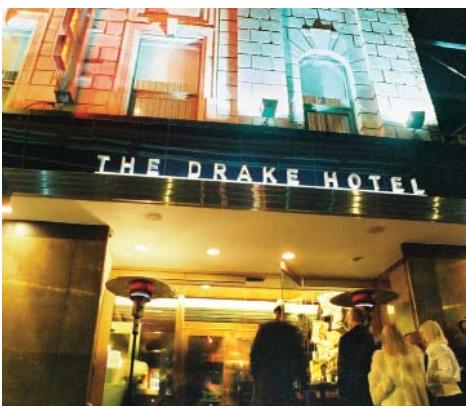
The hotel hosts a nightclub in the basement and a private bar with a pool on the roof. In between are three restaurants, including a diner serving fat breakfasts and spiked milk shakes 24 hours a day. Although there are only 102 rooms, the Thompson is such a hotspot that more than 1,000 people can pack the place on a weekend night. You may find a confused reveler knocking on your door Sunday morning, leaving both of you with a story to tell.

For weekend rambles, stick to King or Queen, two avenues that cross the spectrum of downtown Toronto. Heading east from the hotel, hit the heart of the business district and dally in St.

Traveler's Checks

Art Gallery of Ontario marks the center of the city. Current exhibitions include a look at propaganda works from the Russian Revolution.

Cocktail enthusiasts should stop by barware boutique BYOB and have a drink at the Toronto Temperance Society.



DRAKE'S PROGRESS Toronto's nighttime revels

Lawrence Market. (It's like Quincy Market, except locals actually shop there.) Once in Old Toronto, it's hard not to be floored by the speed of the city's evolution. The home of the city's first mayor? It's now a Starbucks. Site of the first parliament? A parking lot. Past the Distillery District (picture SoWa in 10 years), there's a whole new neighborhood being built for the Pan Am Games in 2015. Facing back toward the city, rows of cranes perch on the urban silhouette, creating an ever-expanding skyline.

On the return walk, a quiet restaurant like Kultura serves up a taste of Toronto's vaunted multiculturalism, with dishes like tandoori octopus salad with chermoula, yogurt, candied red onion and kohlrabi. Or head to West Queen West, a lively SoHo-like neighborhood marked by galleries, boutiques, funky poutine shops and fancy bakeries, like Nadège Patisserie offering mojito macarons and gin-and-tonic marshmallows.

For nightlife, the Gladstone and the Drake are two more lifestyle hotels with a decidedly independent flair. The Gladstone is a former flophouse, but now sports a hip-hippie vibe with organic burgers and a bar where a young Ginsberg fan might croon drunken karaoke. Just down the road, the Drake is packed with a fashionable crowd in the basement concert venue and in the Dining Room, which changes themes seasonally (from the nostalgic Summer Camp to the unusual 1940s L.A. Chinatown). Visit the rooftop Sky Yard to quaff steins with a predominantly local and lighthearted throng.

It's obvious that the Toronto of today won't resemble the Toronto of tomorrow. It's fun in flux, a tour of transformation, so the time to head north is now. ***

CN Tower 301 Front St. West, Toronto (416-868-6937) cntower.ca **Thompson Toronto** 550 Wellington St. West, Toronto (416-640-7778) thompsonhotels.com **St. Lawrence Market** 92-95 Front St. East, Toronto (416-392-7120) stlawrencemarket.com **Kultura** 169 King St. East, Toronto (416-363-9000) kulturatoronto.com **Nadège Patisserie** 780 Queen St. West, Toronto (416-368-2009) nadege-patisserie.com **Gladstone Hotel** 1214 Queen St. West, Toronto (416-531-4635) gladstonehotel.com **The Drake Hotel** 1150 Queen St. West, Toronto (416-531-5042) thedrakehotel.ca

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