

Putting on the Ritz

A couple of low-rent grifters sample the high life at the famed Montreal hotel

By Jesse Brown

Hypothesis

Believe their brochure—Montreal’s Ritz Carlton is indeed one of the finest hotels in the world. At almost 100 years old, it is refined, elegant, classic. Everything from the magnificent ballrooms to the fine dining rooms evokes fading images of a simpler era, one of true aristocracy.

Today, things are different. CEOs wear blue jeans and common thugs wear Prada. It’s getting hard for a hotel doorman to know who to welcome into the arms of luxury and who to show the snowy curb.

Though the Ritz gets top marks from all the major hotel guides, no one has tested it on this one crucial standard: can its staff identify and exclude people of limited means and poor pedigree? More important, how many freebies and perks can such a miserable person finagle out of the Ritz? I’m just the guy to find out.

Apparatus

- My one good suit
- A dead cellphone
- Leon, my roommate

Method

One snowy afternoon, I walk into the Ritz, dead cellphone to my ear.

Observations

6 P.M.

I march purposefully toward the stocky doorman. “Oh, really?” I say into the dead cellphone. “And just why should that be my problem?” I share an exasperated eye roll with the doorman, who guides me into the Ritz’s magnificent lobby with a smile. I proceed directly into the wooded, velvety warmth of the Café de Paris bar and lounge, settling myself onto a plush sofa. A dapper, elderly waiter soon

approaches, and I order a gin martini, dirty. When the drink arrives with a silver bowl of plump macadamia nuts, I request today’s paper as well.

“Will the *Times* do, sir?”

“I suppose.”

7 P.M.

The room fills up. To my right, a gaggle of sales reps laughs unconvincingly at a client’s jokes. In the corner, an attractive young couple coo at each other. From the other corner, a bejewelled, richly perfumed poodle of a woman shoots me brazen glances. Not a moment too soon, Leon arrives, looking dapper in his dark blue suit, which is making its first appearance outside of a synagogue. Leon orders a vodka martini, very dry, and with it we are presented a plate of complimentary shrimp dumplings. Delicious, yes—but a little more ethnic than I care for from the Ritz. (What of caviar? Is there no place left preserving the old ways?)

We head upstairs to the mezzanine, our ascent placing us directly outside the Blue Room, where a formal reception is taking place. A sign on an easel by the door reads “Stewart Title Guaranty,” and on a nearby table sit a few remaining name cards, with pins. Leon grabs “Jean Valiquette,” and I take “Dolorés Pilon.”

We weave through the middle-aged crowd and make for the (open) bar. Noticing an unopened bottle of Moët, I decide that champagne cocktails are in order.

“We’ll have two kir royales, my good man.”

“Sir, I would have to go downstairs for the crème de cassis.”

“If you must, you must.”



Photograph by Kristin Sjaarda

After a quick toast, we split up. Leon, his face already a little flush from the booze, bravely approaches a coltish brunette in a backless evening gown. Meanwhile, I have caught the attention of a very drunk notary. She’s had three children, she’s outlasted most other independents in her field, she’s looking for new clients, don’t I just love Montreal, am I a lawyer? Of course I am. I accept her card and excuse myself, quickly grabbing Leon and another couple of cocktails.

9 P.M.

We explore a vast, empty ballroom. Leon tries unsuccessfully to pick the lock on the grand piano. I find a phone and call down to the front desk. I ask the whereabouts of the hotel swimming pool, and they tell me there isn’t one. Regrettable, as both Leon and I are wearing trunks under our suits, and mine have begun to bunch.

9:30 P.M.

We wander through the halls, floor by floor. Finally, on the ninth, we see it—a door swung wide open. Cautiously we enter and look around the deserted suite. To our delight, it is also deserted: two plates of vanilla mousse sit atop a room service cart. We help ourselves to one and then take the elevator

down and continue our comprehensive search of the Ritz in the lower lobby. We follow voices to a dingy little office in the corner, where a group of valets are about to begin their regular poker game. I want in, but the action’s a little rich for Leon’s blood, so we head back upstairs to the Stewart party for one last flute of Moët. Leon disappears, and an anxious-looking brunette in a sparkly gown approaches me.

“I’m told that you are a lawyer,” she says, with a certain suspicion in her tone.

“That’s right. And you are...?”

“I’m Barbara. I’m with Stewart Title Guaranty. We’re hosting this party. Tell me, what firm are you with?” Holding her gaze, I do my best to remember the name of a relation’s high-powered law firm.

“Osler. You know, on Bay Street.”

“Oh. Well. Uh, does Osler use Stewart?”

I chuckle at the question. “Osler is a big firm, Barbara. I can’t possibly keep track of every title guaranty house we deal with. I work for Bob Thompson, though, and he asked me to come check you guys out.”

“Wait right here. I want you to meet my boss.”

“I’d be thrilled to.”

As soon as she’s out of sight, I head for the door. But where’s Leon? I finally find him in the men’s room, at the urinals, in conversation with a man I recognize as the husband of one of the party guests.

“Well, the notary game’s not what it used to be,” asserts Leon gravely.

“Ah, we’re doing well,” says the spouse. “A lot of people have closed down, but my wife’s business still grows. We do great. Not as good as the rich Jews downtown, but still...”

“Oh, really?” asks Leon, grinning violently.

“Perhaps we should go,” say I.

11 P.M.

We go to the Copacabana, the seedy Copa up the Main, where I’ve misspent hundreds of nights, but never while wearing a suit. Drinks are a third of what they cost at the Ritz, but there are no free dumplings, no *New York Times*, no macadamia nuts, no notaries. There is, though, a drunk guy I’ve met four times before, who yells to our table, “Are you guys Mormons?”

Conclusion

Does the Ritz fail to identify and exclude commoners? I wouldn’t know. Having successfully suckled from the bosom of luxury, I now deem it my right and role to do so whenever I please. As my fellow nobleman Iggy Pop once said, “All of it is yours, and mine.” □