

At the Boxotel in Montreal, life Is lofty

TRAVEL

By Michael Kaminer - The New York Times

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Check In

Boxotel, 175 Rue Ontario Est, Montreal; boxotel.com.

Rates

Rooms start at about 165 Canadian dollars (about \$131 at 80 cents to the U.S. dollar).

Basics

For her first hotel project, the Montreal property developer Marie-Jeanne Rivard wanted to mix the coziness of homestays, the services of a hotel and the downtown feel of loft living. The result, open since last winter, is something new for Montreal: Twenty high-ceiling, clean-lined rooms equipped like small apartments, complete with top-end appliances, tableware and cutlery. Abstract photomontages of Montreal street life adorn the whitewashed walls. A sleek aesthetic extends through Boxotel's airy, poured-concrete lobby and to 175B, a subterranean gallery showcasing Quebec and Canadian artists. On Boxotel's sixth floor, a tiny gym and sauna open to a sprawling outdoor terrace with panoramic downtown views. A reality-TV star in Quebec — she renovates and sells homes on the hit show "Flip a Fille" — Rivard often checks guests in herself at Boxotel's tiny front desk, called "The Box Office."

Location

With shabby residential buildings nearby, Boxotel's block can feel bleak. But its Ontario Street location, a five-minute stroll from buzzy Blvd. St-Laurent to the east and the Quartiers des Spectacles zone of cultural attractions just south, makes Boxotel an ideal home base.

The Room

All blond wood and white walls, my 390-square-foot Loft King Luxe room, the second-largest category, felt like a chic Montreal pied-à-terre. Meticulously fitted cabinetry hid sleek washer/dryer, dishwasher and refrigerator units from upscale German brand Blomberg; nooks held helpful basics like detergent and dishwashing liquid. The Montreal potter Benoit Daigle supplied the moss-green tableware. Scandinavian-inspired furniture, including a desk and love seat, added pops of color. Working in the room was challenging; the desk lamp was weak, and just two outlets faced the desk. My king bed was firm, and crisp sheets made falling asleep easy. But nonstop street noise punctuated my slumber. A deep-soaking bathtub between the bed and the sliding terrace doors went unused. Clamor aside, it was easy to imagine living in my "box" — as rooms are cheekily called — for an extended stay.

The Bathroom

The gray-paneled bathroom made me glad to be traveling solo; just a clear pane of glass separates the toilet from the shower. A simple button operates the enormous rain shower head, but kept popping off the wall. A backlit makeup mirror suspended above the compact sink adds a thoughtful touch. Rivard worked with the Montreal skin-care company Cocooning Love to create aroma-infused bath amenities like hô wood shower gel and lemon-cypress shampoo.

Dining

Montreal's beards-and-tattoos set has already made Boxotel's tiny Café Nomade a favored hangout. A counter with a compact kitchen, the cafe makes picture-perfect cold dishes like yogurt with fresh fruit, chia seeds and local honey (\$6.95), and elegantly piled-up sandwiches like the Quebecois (\$8) — creamy chicken salad, lettuce and pickles on sourdough. (The menu changes often.) Dense breads and pillowy croissants come from Montreal bakery Arhoma; Café Williams of Sherbrooke, Quebec, supplies beans for superb coffee drinks. From 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., guests can order room service; my Turkish breakfast (\$8) and strong brewed coffee (\$2) came in about 20 minutes, cheerfully delivered by Café Nomade's barista and food preparer. A wooden block carried four nutty raisin-bread halves alongside tiny cups of almond butter, honey, and olives, mixed nuts and dates. It was filling and fortifying.

Amenities

Aside from the top-end appliances and kitchen accouterments, amenities are basic: High-speed internet, high-definition TV and a yoga mat rolled up in the entry closet of your "box." Most rooms have terraces, which make perfect coffee-sipping spots in warm weather. Staffing here is lean, with just three or four T-shirted staffers typically on duty, but they're courteous and responsive.

The Bottom Line

Even in hotel-saturated Montreal, Boxotel feels fresh. The lack of traditional hotel-style pampering, and a very low staff-to-guest ratio, means the property is best suited to independent travelers. But it's a terrific way to experience downtown Montreal like a local.