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King Edward Hotel reopens after \$40 million renovation

Historic Crystal Ballroom also to get rebuild in hopes it can be open for New Year's 2016



Vince Talotta / Toronto Star / Gil Blutrach, a major stakeholder in the King Edward Hotel, in the newly renovated main lobby.

By: [Susan Pigg](#) Business Reporter, Published on Wed Sep 09 2015

Toronto's 112-year-old Omni King Edward Hotel is celebrating its official reopening this week — despite the fact it never really closed — after a two-year, \$40 million renovation meant to catapult it back into the city's luxury hotel lineup.

And the best may be yet to come.

In a move that could make the King Eddie the hottest New Year's Eve 2016 ticket in town, owners Skyline International Development and Omni Hotels have started a much-delayed, \$7 million restoration of the famed 17th-floor Crystal Ballroom.

The stunningly ornate, but long-neglected room, the epicentre for grand balls and elegant events in the roaring 1920s, is one of the city's most hidden architectural gems. It boasts 12-metre ceilings and now new floor-to-ceiling windows offering views on three sides of the city.



Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / The newly upgraded Vanity Fair ballroom is part of a \$40-million upgrade to the 112-year-old King Edward hotel.

It's been closed since the 1950s, apart from Open Doors tours, the odd wedding shoot and, strange as it seems, technique-building sessions for fly fishermen.

"This is now a five-star hotel," says Skyline International founder Gil Blutrigh, surveying the King Eddie's updated lobby with its giant black chess pieces and freshly polished original marble.

All 301 rooms and meeting rooms have undergone complete renovations while it was business as usual, except during the nine weeks the iconic lobby had to be relocated to allow for complex restoration.

“We weren’t trying to create something completely new, but to take the King Eddie, once the cultural heart of this city, to the next generation — to move it forward.”



Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / The Consort Bar's new look.

The parlour-like Consort Bar, with its soaring windows on King St. E., has had a facelift, but true to its historic roots: “When World War I started, reporters rushed to this bar with the news and people gathered on the street,” says Blutrich.

In a nod to the present, Toronto’s first Lavazza coffee shop, an import from Italy, has opened at street level on the easterly corner. A new steak house is expected to move this year into the empty northwest corner of the grand hotel, built by booze baron George Gooderham at the turn of the 20th century.

Sunday brunch and high tea will continue, as they have for decades.

When Skyline — owner of hotel and vacation resorts as diverse as the downtown Cosmopolitan Hotel and Barrie-area Horseshoe Resort — bought its stake in the aged King Eddie for \$48 million just five years ago, some 30 per cent of the 600,000 square foot landmark sat empty.

Many of its 300 rooms couldn’t be used because they were so desperately in need of repairs.

“It had become a bottom feeder. Room rates were as low as \$99 and \$150 a night,” says Blutrich of the landmark, the site of protests in 1964 when the world discovered that Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton — both married to others — were staying together in the Royal Suite.

A few months later, some 3,000 teenagers created a frenzy when they found out The Beatles were staying at there.



Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / A look at the Sovereign ballroom, formally know as the Victoria ballroom.

Three whole floors of the hotel, a former design exchange, had been a dead zone for years when Skyline took over. It moved quickly to convert the prime second- to fourth-floor space to condo units and sold them for \$750 to \$850 per square foot, giving the new owners access to the hotel's amenities and bringing new life to the lobby.

Omni took over management, and a partial stake in the grand dame, in August, 2013.

“It’s like we’re a whole little family here,” says resident and local realtor Janice Rushford, who bought one of the condo units 2 ½ years ago. “It’s just an amazing place to live. You know walking into the lobby that so many great people from the past stayed here.”

The only glitch in the renovations came when workers were touching up the exterior and adding balconies to some of the condos. At a time when luxury competitor Trump International Hotel and Tower was coming under fire for falling glass, Skyline found itself with a problem of more historic proportions: Some of the crumbling decorative masonry fell to the sidewalk.

That resulted in unexpected, and highly specialized, exterior work that drove up renovation costs considerably, says Blutrich.



Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / A view of the lobby from the second floor.

Getting all the details right has been critical, he stresses, right down to restoring decorative plaster mouldings in the Crystal Ballroom, named for three massive chandeliers that are long gone.

“Every decision and every movement in the ballroom will be monitored very closely — not just between the architect and the designer, but with the City of Toronto, the heritage board ... This room is one of the most spectacular and important historic rooms in the city.”

With that, Skyline and Omni will have lots of help.

Since Skyline announced its purchase in 2010, Blutrach has been deluged with photos and artefacts. Many have been carefully framed and are on display.

“In new hotels, when you wake up, you aren’t sure where you are — you can be in Bangkok, New York, San Francisco,” says Blutrach. “When you are at the King Eddie, there is no mistaking where you are. You’re experiencing the history of this city, the present and going forward.”



Vince Talotta/Toronto Star / The modern-looking Royal Suite.