



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Shane Downey, managing director of the Chelsea Hotel, stands outside the Yonge Street landmark, which has anchored the changing downtown strip for 50 years and continues to draw tourists, hospital families and visitors for concerts and games.

Still standing on Yonge

As Yonge Street evolves further and further away from its Sin Strip days, the Chelsea Hotel reaches half a century as a downtown mainstay

DAVID SILVERBERG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Ask any Torontonian what's changed on Yonge Street between Queen and College in five decades and brace yourself for a long answer.

In the late '70s, Yonge Street between Queen and College buzzed with controlled chaos. Movie-poster stores sold cannabis leaf pins, peep shows flashed overcompensating neon signs, and oversized pizza slices tempted the hungry. "Sin Strip," as it was known then, was loud, smoky and unpredictable — you never knew what would happen next.

Today, the stretch feels more sanitized. Chains like McDonald's, Popeye's and Jollibee line the sidewalks. Many shops are boarded up or surrounded by scaffolding. Bubble tea stores are as popular as cannabis shops. The street's energy remains, but its edges are softer and gentrified, its character more polished.

Amid these changes, the Chelsea Hotel has remained a fixture for 50 years. Located just off Yonge and Gerrard, its two towers house 1,590 rooms, making it Canada's largest hotel. It often operates near capacity — sometimes approaching 90 per cent occupancy — a reflection of its enduring appeal in a downtown core that has grown denser and more expensive.

The lobby hums with activity. Tour groups crowd the front desk as rows of Korean Air stewardesses wait to check in. Older couples in full Blue Jays gear stroll from the elevators to the Gerrard Street exit, while men in blazers drift toward the Elm Street Bar and Lounge.



Monarchs Bar, formerly located in the lobby of the then-Delta Chelsea, is shown in 2003. The royal-themed bar has since closed.

TOBIN GRIMSHAW/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO



Former federal Indigenous Services minister Seamus O'Regan, Kashechewan First Nation Chief Leo Friday and Ontario Indigenous Affairs Minister Greg Rickford sign a \$1-billion relocation agreement at the Chelsea Hotel in 2019. The signing reflects the hotel's long-standing role as a site for major civic and political events.

Walking just 10 paces, it is very easy to bump shoulders with guest after guest. The space is short on luxury and tall on hustle, more transit hub than retreat. A "living wall" of plants adds texture and a moment of calm to the constant movement.

Step outside the doors and the crowds blend seamlessly into the steady stream of Yonge Street foot traffic, the hotel dissolving almost instantly back into the street that feeds it.

The Chelsea isn't aiming for the

luxury market of Yorkville. Instead, it serves what managing director Shane Downey calls purpose-driven visitors: tourists, hospital families and political guests who want proximity, not polish.

"We're a 15-minute walk to the Rogers Centre, very close to SickKids, not far from Yorkville," Downey says. "People come here for concerts, games and conferences. They're here for a reason, and they want to be centrally located." That sense of purpose, he adds, has long insulated the hotel from the ups and downs of retail turnover and shifting street life along Yonge.

Gary Myers, the hotel's director of guest services and security since 1981, recalls how events once shaped the Chelsea's popularity. "You should've seen how huge the Phantom of the Opera run was for us," he says, noting how the hotel also drew large hockey crowds when Maple Leaf Gardens was active on Carlton Street.

He's proud that the Chelsea has maintained its appeal even as Yonge Street has changed. "We used to have so many little shops, selling everything from hats to BlackBerry phones to furniture, and it was very welcoming," he says. "Now, some stores today don't make it past a year."

Another key demographic staying at the Chelsea are families with children receiving treatment at nearby hospitals. The hotel offers complimentary and discounted rooms to out-of-town families visiting Sick Kids, a five-minute walk away, as well as discounted rates for families connected to other nearby hospitals — stays that can stretch from days into weeks.

Chelsea's connection to Yonge Street has kept it relevant. Visitors have always arrived with a purpose — concerts, sports events, conferences or hospital visits — even as the reasons people come downtown have shifted over time.

Originally the Delta Chelsea, the hotel opened in 1975 with 808 rooms. It expanded to 1,000 rooms soon after, then added another 590 rooms in the mid-1990s. Designed in a Brutalist, no-frills style, the building has adapted over the decades to meet the needs of a city that has grown taller, faster and more expensive around it.

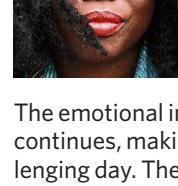
Downey says the Chelsea often hosts foreign ministers and the occasional celebrity. One notable guest was the late primatologist and conservationist Jane Goodall.

"Before she left our hotel one time, we took a photograph together, at her insistence, not smiling at the camera but looking directly into each other's eyes," Downey recalls. "She said we should look into each other's eyes. That's how we truly connect." The moment, he says, captured the warmth and sincerity that defined her.

Managing 600 staff in the country's largest hotel can be unpredictable, but Downey says that's part of the appeal. "It's not boring," he says. "I might think I know what my day will look like, but I never really do. That kind of spontaneity is fulfilling."

Chelsea's story mirrors Yonge Street itself: ever-changing, bustling and occasionally unpredictable, yet enduring. Over 50 years, the street has transformed from a chaotic, edgy strip to a more polished, gentrified corridor. The Chelsea has remained — still standing on Yonge, holding its place as the city moves around it.

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The emotional intensity in the air continues, making it another challenging day. The potential for unnecessary drama will be high. Due to the heightened moodiness in the atmosphere, even the smallest issue could be blown out of proportion and snowball into a larger problem. There could also be an inclination to nurse old wounds at this time. As such, it may be best to lay low for the day and focus our attention on activities that promote calmness, joy and relaxation. We should be mindful of ruminating on the past or giving in to negative feelings.

ARIES (March 21 to April 19)

Be mindful of holding yourself to perfectionist standards. Give your

self a little more grace. You are only human.

TAURUS (April 20 to May 20)

Some sacrifices aren't worth making. Don't compromise if you aren't fully comfortable.

GEMINI (May 21 to June 20)

You might feel called to help others, but take care not to overextend yourself. You're probably already doing more than enough.

CANCER (June 21 to July 22)

Are you shrinking yourself to make someone else feel better? If so, perhaps it's time to give yourself permission to stand out and shine.

LEO (July 23 to Aug. 22)

It's impossible to always be right or always have all the answers. The best thing you can do is to follow your intuition as much as possible.

VIRGO (Aug. 23 to Sept. 22)

Beware of letting the past affect

your joy now. You've done a lot to move on from it.

LIBRA (Sept. 23 to Oct. 22)

You can't make everyone happy. Accepting this fact will protect your own happiness.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23 to Nov. 21)

Don't allow yourself to become so busy that you neglect your well-being or self-care.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22 to Dec. 21)

Try not to base your worthiness on what you have and what you don't. You are worthy — period.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22 to Jan. 19)

Don't be afraid of rejection or let it slow you down. Finding love or building friendships sometimes requires a risk. Be brave enough to put yourself out there!

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20 to Feb. 18)

If it's praise or recognition that you want or feel you deserve, be pre-

pared to pat yourself on the back and acknowledge your own accomplishments.

PISCES (Feb. 19 to March 20)

Avoid comparing yourself to others. You're meant to follow your own path.

Amanda Peet, star of movies including "The Whole Nine Yards" and "2012," is turning 54.

You don't just talk about what you want to do or achieve; you make sure to put in the work to get where you want to be. You have an inquisitive mind that is always hungry for information and knowledge. You enjoy asking questions and learning as much as you can. Solving problems and puzzles may be something you enjoy, too. This year will give you plenty of opportunities to put your powerful brain to work. You might reach one of your biggest goals as a result!

BIRTHDATE OF:

Mary J. Blige, singer/actress; Amanda Peet, actress/author; Kim Coles, actress/comedian.