

The Great Indoors

Omar Mouallem was sent to WEM for three days and three nights with one rule: He wasn't allowed to leave.

illustration by Isabelle Cardinal



>> Day One

The Fantasyland Hotel elevator is a particularly chatty one. Everyone has one pressing question: What's your theme?

"Truck room," I tell the man wearing the lanyard from any of today's four conferences.

"How's your son like it?"

I don't have kids. I sleep alone, in the back of a dented yellow half-ton and have to remember to turn off all the traffic lights before I go to bed. My carpet is made up of cartoon semis and stop signs. It would be my childhood fantasy if it weren't for the wall-to-wall ceiling mirrors and four-person jacuzzi. This makes watching cleaning ladies hoist themselves into my bed to

change sheets particularly unsettling. But, hey, it's my home.

At least for the next 72 hours. And West Edmonton Mall is my neighbourhood. Chapters, my library. Cinnzeo, my cafe. T&T Supermarket, my grocer. Market Mini Mart, my post office. Wild West shooting range, my therapy. Everything is mine for the using, except for the doors to the outside world.

It sounds absurd, sure, but the Mall is already sitting on residential zoning permits and, according to its brochures, on busy days it out-populates Red Deer, the province's third-largest city with 90,000 residents. It's been Edmonton's most revered and jeered place since 1981, when

"Papa" Jacob Ghermezian and his sons created a "world within a world." In the third year they added rollercoasters, in the fourth dolphins, sharks and submarines, in the fifth palm trees. And more was added until they saw everything they had made and, behold, it was very good.

Now every stone tile is steeped with the memories of 650 million visitors. Dare yourself to recall your earliest Mall memory and you've probably found one as vivid as your current surroundings.

After unpacking, I went to find mine by the old iron whale, where on Boxing Day 1989, four-year-old me couldn't resist hiding in the whale's mouth when my mother turned her back. >>

I panicked when I realized I didn't have a Jiminy Cricket to lead me to back to her. We were eventually united, but when I seek out the scene of my first memory I'm not so lucky. The entire area where the whale once stood has been gentrified by Victoria's Secret's honey-I'll-wait-here lounge.

How'd I miss this? It's not my first visit in 23 years. Not even my first this month. Though I once marveled at the Mall, it's become so comfortable that photographing a shipwrecked Santa Maria replica feels like taking pictures of my living room for insurers. Yet only now do I notice someone's replacing the furniture.

The culprits are a hardhat-wearing army that deploys after the escalators have gone to bed and all that sounds are baby breaths of ceiling vents. This "revitalization" (the same word applied to the resuscitating of the same downtown *The Journal of Pop Culture* accused the mall of devouring) started two years ago and, for the next three, they'll use their weapons of mass renovation to reapply the lustre that every shiny new toy inevitably loses. But this doll's new outfit is conspicuously chic.

>> Day Two

Meet my new neighbours, Scott and Dallas. I found them on the painted coastline of the World Waterpark, or as they call it, "\$20 Mexico" (an early-bird special). They've called this place a semi-regular resort ever since it was "\$15.95 Mexico." Scott, in beach shorts and flip-flops, shaded by the snow piled on the skylight, says, "It's the best kept secret."

That's right, the world's largest indoor water park is a secret apparently, hidden behind the retail that's now the Mall's No. 1 attraction. But if you know the local lore, then you've heard of actual secrets here, burrowing inside the fabled tunnels.

Homeless youth, the so-called mall rats, used to come to Marketplace Chapel for a cup of coffee with some room for dreams, but Chaplain Sylvia Yachimetz doesn't see them much anymore. Not since the 2005 brutal murder of Nina Courtepatte. After the 13-year-old was lured from the Mall and killed at a nearby golf course, security put tighter restrictions on teen loiterers, she says. The people she sees now come with a different void and they "try to fill it with buying things and entertainment," she says. "It's never satisfied."

She's been here since 1986, when a new theme hotel completed the grand design of Papa's grandeur. The Mall, city and citizens were riding high, all of it apparent in our repeated struts to the Stanley Cup finals. But two years later the Winter Olympics shifted the spotlight south

and Gretzky traded his long johns for Bermuda shorts. The city's stature shrunk. It became Deadmonton. The "Boiler Room" of Canada, according to Mordecai Richler in the *New York Times*. The "cultural deprivation tank of Edmonton," snidely retorted *Rolling Stone*. Saying "City of Champions" with a straight face became an acting exercise. Now, all that's left from those



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glory years is the Mall, sitting in our city like it does our psyche, taking up 5.3 million square metres of the collective consciousness.

And even its stature has shrunk too, not just by the placid megamalls of China that have made regaining the "biggest mall" title a near impossibility, but our own loss of pride. Are we embarrassed that our defining monument — our Empire State Building, our Great Pyramid — is a shrine to commercialism? It wasn't always so.

The Mall was born in a broken home, the post-National Energy Program recession of the 1980s. It wasn't raised to be a retail powerhouse (not with three Tip Top Tailors and four Fairweathers, it wasn't) or an urban centre (though it's the only place you're guaranteed shoulder-rubbing), but an escape on a budget. To the credit of the Ghermezian grandsons, Don and David, the high-end makeover will likely help the mall pull out of a \$500 million debt. Maybe that's what's behind the contempt: The vacuum, as Sylvia called it, that brings us here for feeding.

To comprehend Edmontonians' love-hate relationship I head to Chinatown, where one naturally finds American Apparel, the arbiters of insolence. "It's kind of trashy," says store clerk

Kaylin, when I ask him why the Mall is so polarizing. But, says the second-year anthropology student, it's urban, cosmopolitan and ultimately the only thing outsiders believe makes Edmonton special.

"We're always kind of like" — rolling his eyes dramatically — "ugh, the Mall. But, secretly, we love it."

>> Day Three

Given that there's a snowstorm outside, jogging the perimeter of the mall in shorts seems perfectly normal to my neighbours.

I run from Bed Bath and Beyond, and beyond. Through Chinatown and past the bingo hall few know about. I don't catch a single cackle or stare until — where else? — Europa Boulevard. But the eyes are far away, behind a window on the mysterious third floor, where a shadow of a figure watches over the world. It so happens that it's my next stop.

After washing and changing, I step inside a gold elevator, which takes me above Professor WEM's Adventure Golf to the steakhouse-brown offices of Triple Five Group, one of the wealthiest companies on the continent.

At first, I'm not convinced the view — rows of beige houses sucked into the white horizon by the snow-covered shingles — isn't a Group of Seven painting. But the architecture of these three-bedroom, two-bathroom houses is too recent. It's certainly not the background I thought would inspire a family of Iranian carpet dealers to build a billion-dollar multinational conglomerate with a financial portfolio as diverse as the Mall itself.

As I wait for David Ghermezian in the boardroom, I'm supervised by a portrait of Papa in a black suit, black hat and a commemorative medal for the 125th Anniversary of the Confederation of Canada. I wonder what he'd think of the contemporary tiles with angelic snowflake designs resting against the window, awaiting an executive decision to finish replacing the Ice Palace's cartoon architecture of the '90s.

With Executive Vice-president and childhood friend Jeff Sheckter at his left, David sits at the head of the table, his Prada belt buckle and light jeans contrasting the Jewish orthodox attire of Papa behind him. Same Oz, new Wizard, and this one's focused on convincing America's biggest retailers to make their Canadian premieres here.

Like his father, uncle and grandfather before him, David isn't averse to bold claims. "Even though I can't substantiate it, there are more places in West Edmonton Mall that sell \$300-plus jeans than anywhere in the world," he says. >>



She comes here several nights a week, staying until the last bus in service takes her home to downtown. "I'm just forgetting my day," she says, "trying to get some peace and quiet."

"The sales are stagnant on the amusement parks, but on the cash registers, the sales are going through the roof."

He says audiences are changing, children are harder to retain, parents' tastes harder to please. Until you offer them luxuries. "Every time we introduce more higher end stores," he says, "the more successful it is."

But how much of this is tied to Alberta's affluence, I ask, and does he worry that another recession could unravel their "revitalization?"

"Regardless of what happens to the economy, we're moving forward. You see all these American tenants now, but the next round of American tenants are going to be even bigger names."

Shekter leaves and returns with a binder that he gives to David. He flips through architectural renderings, some already implemented and some to come, like the sexying-up of Bourbon Street. "We're rebranding it," says Jeff, "B-R-B-N, Bourbon Street, like textspeak." Think of it as New Orleans by way of Vegas by way of Quebec's award-winning GHA Architecture. "Look at that," David says, pointing to glass chandeliers hanging over darkly lit quartz floors. "It looks like a nightclub. A nice nightclub."

It will be one of the final nips and tucks for the Mall that's been playing catch-up to the recently contemporized Southgate Centre and Kingsway Mall. "Now if [it's] not the nicest in Edmonton by everybody's standard, than the nicest in Western Canada."

David flips a few more pages. I spot renderings of a luxury department store that's yet to open in Canada and whose name he asks me to withhold. He shoots me a De Niro-like nod with pursed lips, as if to say, "it could happen."

Did Papa make the same face when he presented his plans for the world's largest rollercoaster between four walls?

After our interview, I make the best of my press badge and hop on the Mindbender until I'm whiplashed back to my childhood. I feel my way through a 3-D funhouse, take a boat to nowhere and ride a carousel until the last parent's dirty look says it's time to go. Then, I take in a meal on Bourbon Street, savouring every vowel about to meet its maker. By the time I'm done, the first battalion of construction workers are propping their ladders and dialing their radios to The Bear. And then I meet Doreen, alone in the food court writing letters to her friends in California, her native land.

She comes here several nights a week, staying until the last bus in service takes her home to downtown. "I'm just forgetting my day," she says, "trying to get some peace and quiet."

She knows the Mall intimately and is thrilled to have an audience. She tells me about watching the underwater dive crew chop up and remove the submarines last spring, another thing I blinked and missed. The Mall, she says, is "the only reason I can stand Edmonton." But that's starting to change. "They're destroying what they had to get it really contemporary looking ... It's so contemporary, it's boring."

"I tell you, this whole food court used to have a bunch of big, phoney palm trees," she says, adding that they reminded her of home. "It was beautiful, but they took it out because I guess they're remodeling this next."

I tell her about the plans for Bourbon Street. "Oh," she says about the rebranding. "Oh," about

the chandeliers. "Oh," about the quartz tiles. "Well, good thing I took some pictures."

The next morning, after literally climbing out of bed and packing, I stop by the church and promise Sylvia I'll visit. Soon. Like, probably in a week.

En route to meet my wife in the parking lot, I stop to observe a chandelier that wasn't there when I moved in. It descends from the ceiling in the form of black and gold blown-glass oil drops, hovering above an old bronze statue of riggers pumping oil out of a marble bench that a dozen shoppers rest upon with their shopping bags. I don't even lift a pen to capture this metaphor. I just hope it doesn't fall.

Premiere Shopping

The Mall has always been a retail magnet but only recently has started aggressively chasing major high-end U.S. retailers to make regional, even national premieres in Edmonton.

Anthropologie – First in Canada
 Apple – First in Alberta
 Dr. Martens – First in Western Canada
 J. Crew – First in Alberta
 Lolë – First in Western Canada
 Michael Kors – First in Alberta
 Oro Gold Cosmetics – First in Canada
 Simons – First outside Quebec
 Victoria's Secret – First in Canada

>> Read the full Q&A with third generation West Edmonton Mall co-owner, David Ghermezian at AvenueEdmonton.com

>> See life in the Mall, moment by moment, at 3daysinthemall.tumblr.com.