

The high life: Hundreds of metres up, the rock stars of Toronto's building boom help keep the city growing

[Peter Kuitenbrouwer](#) Apr 20, 2012 – 11:58 PM ET | Last Updated: Apr 21, 2012 12:27 AM ET



Aaron Lynett / National Post

The view from the cab of George DeFreitas' crane, 150 metres up from the corner of Jarvis and Bloor. "You get to see the black storm clouds come in," he says.

- [Comments](#)
- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)

•

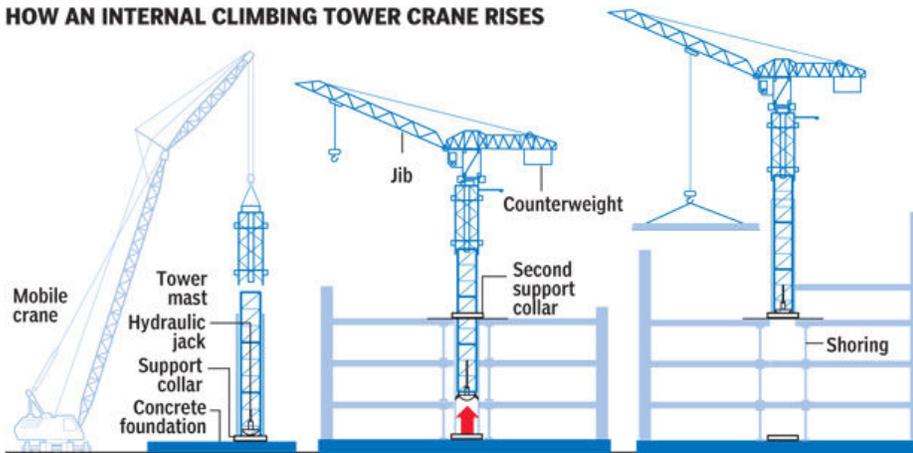
 3

- Like Sign

The office of George DeFreitas is a tiny glass box in the sky. Even the floor is glass. This crane operator's cab, too small for him to stretch his arms, is a spartan spot, with a shade pulled over the glass roof and a yellowed sheet of newspaper taped against the left window. A walkie-talkie rests in a cradle. Plastic water bottles litter the floor. On either side of his chair is a dual-action joystick, with which he controls the crane's five motors.

TORONTO'S CRANE POPULATION EXPLOSION

HOW AN INTERNAL CLIMBING TOWER CRANE RISES

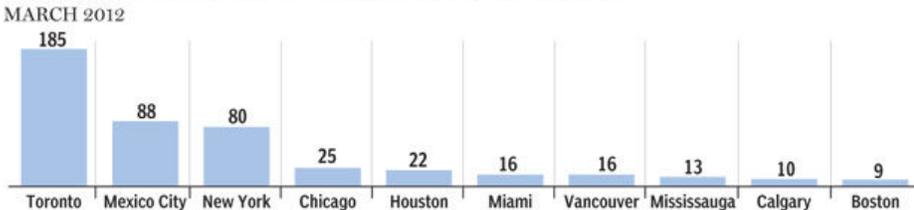


STEP ONE
A mobile crane is used to install the tower crane on a concrete foundation. The crane begins to erect the building.

STEP TWO
Once the building has reached six to eight storeys, the building's floors are shored and a new support collar is installed. The crane is hydraulically jacked from the bottom section.

STEP THREE
When the bottom of the crane reaches the new support collar it resumes operation. As the building grows the process can be repeated.

NUMBER OF HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS UNDER CONSTRUCTION



SOURCES: MONARCH GROUP, OPERATING ENGINEERS TRAINING INSTITUTE OF ONTARIO, EMPORIS.COM
ANDREW BARR, JONATHON RIVAIT / NATIONAL POST

Behind the chair rests his small green backpack; above it on a shelf, a portable radio plays 680 News. On a hook hangs a bottle of Sparkle & Shine, to keep the glass clean.

To get here at 6 a.m. today, Mr. DeFreitas, wearing a jacket and cap of his employer, Italform, rode the construction hoist (a steel cage on a track) up 37 floors that he helped build in the past year on the condo tower, Couture by Monarch.

He then climbed concrete stairs the last five floors to the roof (the tower has reached its planned height, 42 stories). Squeezing his compact frame through some bracing, with his lunch in his backpack, Mr. DeFreitas climbed a white steel ladder, speckled with concrete, up the mast, six flights into his glass box.

Way up here, 150 metres in the air above the corner of Jarvis and Bloor Streets in Toronto, we look out over pale green early leaves spreading on the trees of Rosedale.

“You get to see the black storm clouds come in,” says Mr. DeFreitas.

“You get to see the lightning hitting the crane. And you get to see some women in the neighbouring buildings, changing with the windows open.”

The crane operators’ union estimates 300 tower cranes toil right now in greater Toronto, far more than any other city in North America. Operators are shipping cranes here from the United States, England and Italy to meet local demand.

‘They can run 12 to 14 hours a day, with no lunch breaks, just spending their lunch hour in the machine’



Aaron Lynett / National Post

148 metres up at the 42-story Couture condo in Toronto.

In Toronto's building frenzy, crane operators are the rock stars.

"We're busy. We're very busy," says Mike Gallagher, business manager of the International Union of Operating Engineers, local 793 (which covers Ontario and Nunavut).

He is sitting in the palace the union, with 12,000 members, built for itself a few years ago in Oakville, with a soaring light-filled entrance atrium. "We have close to full employment. We have a lot of work in Ontario right now, and there's more coming."

Notes Kevin King, a high-rise project manager at Monarch Corp., which is right now building six condo towers in Toronto: "The operators, they are pretty much worth their weight in gold. If you find a good one, you hang on to him."

Crane operators on residential projects, including vacation pay, pension and benefits, earn \$54.53 per hour — double-time after eight hours. Right now, some crane operators pull in north of \$130,000 a year. This union will even pay a lawyer to write its members' wills and negotiate the closing of their houses.

Crane men's high life comes with a trade-off: long hours. "Usually I'm the first one to come out, and when I come down everybody's gone," says Mr. DeFreitas, 48, a father of three.

"They can run 12 to 14 hours a day, with no lunch breaks, just spending their lunch hour in the machine," says Gordon Graham, general superintendent of Forma-Con, with 20 cranes working in Toronto. "They will start early unloading re-bar, then pour concrete, then you tell other trades, 'You can come at 5 o'clock if you want to hang precast,' and the crane operators have to stay.

"There is a shortage of operators right now because Newfoundland is busy, out West is busy. It's not always easy to find someone."



Aaron Lynett / National Post

The boom of tower DeFreitas' crane peeks out from the top of the 42 storey-tower.

Days off are few.

"If I was a labourer I could say, 'I don't feel like coming in today,'" says Mr. DeFreitas. "But it doesn't look too good when you have 60 or 70 guys down there waiting for the crane and you don't show up. The crane is the workhorse of the job."

Crane operators use radios and hand signals to communicate with their "swamper," the man on the construction site who attaches loads to the crane's hook.

"I've got two eyes on the load and my ears on the crane," he says. "As it winds up, if it sounds funny, I gotta stop it. If the crane twists the wrong way, you gotta stop it, maybe one of the lattices broke." Amid the bustle, it's a solitary job.

"I'm actually a very quiet person," says Mr. DeFreitas. "I tell my swampers to shut up. They're jabbering away. I say, 'Don't talk. Just show me with your hands where you want the hook to go.'"

'Usually I'm the first one to come out, and when I come down everybody's gone'

At 9:30 a.m. he lowers a bucket with a rope, and a worker puts in an egg and sausage sandwich and a cup of coffee from Tim Hortons.



Aaron Lynett / National Post

When Brad DaCosta was 18, his father, who repairs tower cranes, asked him to help change a sheave (a 1.5-metre diameter pulley) on a crane perched above a water treatment plant project.

“It involved walking out onto the boom,” Mr. DaCosta recalls. “I went up and I liked the adrenaline rush. There is a very small margin for error.”

I met Mr. DaCosta, now 21, at the Operating Engineers Training Institute, the school run by the union, behind its office building, to train crane operators.

During six weeks here, the high school graduate will spend three weeks in the classroom, learning hoisting theory in conjunction with virtual reality simulation, before moving to three weeks learning on cranes in the yard. Training includes hot lunches, such as spaghetti or lasagna, cooked on site.

(Sitting in the simulator is like being in a real crane, with screens on both sides, in front and above you; I tried moving a concrete block. It’s difficult. I slammed the block into a fence, forcing the director of training, Dave Healey, to restart the scenario.)

‘You just get to see the whole job growing below you. I like the power, controlling the beast. Everybody looks up to you’



Aaron Lynett / National Post

The construction hoist takes DeFreitas up the first 37 storeys.

Mr. DaCosta, who grew up in St. Catharines, began working locally as an apprentice on the Trump Tower, greasing the derrick crane that completed the building's spire. Last fall he moved to Etobicoke, "to be closer to all the work, because it's really busy." Now, he is collecting EI as he trains to operate a crane.

"I like the heights," he says. "You just get to see the whole job growing below you. I like the power, controlling the beast." And, he adds, "Everybody looks up to you."

There is one other little tricky detail: nature's call.

"If you're pouring concrete, you're staying up there," Mr. Healey says.

"You bring a two-litre bottle. My cardinal rule is this: you empty it every day, you clean it every day."

Even so, "If you're doing No. 2, you're coming down."

Back at Couture by Monarch, Mr. DeFreitas calls it a day. He smokes a cigarette and tosses it over the side. As a boy, Mr. DeFreitas dreamed of operating a freight train, seeing Canada.

"I always thought I would go out West, you know, to where the work is, but I never had to, because I always had work in Toronto."

He straps on his backpack, descends one ladder and then stops and pulls out two pins which fasten the crane to the turntable. Doing so allows the crane to swing with the wind, like a weather vane, during the night, so the wind won't strain the crane's steel frame.

As we stand in the light wind, up here with the birds and planes, we can see, south of us, about 40 cranes perched on towers, some of them bobbing in the afternoon sun. I ask the crane man what he thinks of all this construction work.

'I went up and I liked the adrenaline rush. There is a very small margin for error'

“I hope we have enough people to fill these condos,” he says.

Climbing down the ladders, then down the stairs, we arrive at the construction hoist on the 37th floor. Mr. DeFreitas turns to the operator. “Down,” he says.

National Post

- Email: pkuitenbrouwer@nationalpost.com
- Twitter: [@pkuitenbrouwer](https://twitter.com/pkuitenbrouwer)



Aaron Lynett / National Post