

At the Taj Pierre Hotel in New York City the staff has a motto: 'The difficult will be accomplished immediately and the impossible will take a moment longer'. While this adage could be used by many employees at the world's finest hotels, it is especially true for the concierge, of whom the impossible – or at least the improbable – is often expected.

The head concierge, also known as the Chef Concierge, at the Taj Pierre is Maurice Dancer, a veteran of the industry who calls his work "an art". As a young man, Maurice made good on his family name by gaining a degree in theatre and art, and spending a decade in professional modern dance. He has no regrets about his change of career, however: "I'm in one of the most fabulous cities in the world, doing a craft that brings me into contact with dignitaries, celebrities, the movers and shakers of the world, and of course the general public – I've met some really wonderful people."

The craft of the concierge is one that is practiced throughout the globe – wherever there is a thriving metropolitan area and an adventurous traveller, there will be a concierge to help the pair get to know one another. From the Middle Ages to the

present day the role has evolved considerably: initially a member of the royal staff charged with protecting the palace keys, in the 1800s the concierge became a resourceful hotel caretaker. Today the concierge is a polymathic resource of information and contacts, able to achieve the unachievable in pursuit of a guest's happiness and satisfaction. For some visitors this will be fairly straightforward challenges such as getting tickets to a popular show or finding a restaurant that will provide the 'wow' factor for a business client.

However, requests can be considerably more outlandish or demanding. Claudie Dussouillez is Head Concierge at the Radisson Edwardian May Fair in London; for some time she was the only female head concierge in Great Britain. In addition to the usual requests for tickets to Wimbledon and the Chelsea Flower Show she has had to organise a private viewing at the Tate Modern and once found herself purchasing a puppy for a guest's daughter.

Such requests can push the boundaries of what is administratively and legally possible. Joe Lai, Assistant Concierge at the JW Marriott Hotel in Hong Kong, remembers the ✈



A good concierge can make the difference between an average hotel stay and an unforgettable one. *Nick Blackmore* meets some of the top concierges from around the globe to discover how *On Business* readers can make the most of their unique services



CLOCKWISE: MAURICE DANCER; THE TAJ PIERRE HOTEL; CLAUDIE DUSSOUILLEZ; THE RADISSON EDWARDIAN MAY FAIR HOTEL IN LONDON; JOE LAI; JW MARRIOTT HOTEL IN HONG KONG



frenzy when a guest left for the airport while his ticket stayed in the hotel bar. Reuniting the traveller with his ticket in less than an hour and ensuring the guest could still check in for his flight took considerable effort and all of the Marriott's negotiating power.

Maurice recalls a situation in which he and the staff of the Taj Pierre had to go even further to help a guest visiting from Europe. The gentleman in question was returning from a visit to the golf courses of Florida and, during his stay in New York, left his antique golf clubs in a taxi that he had no receipt for. As desperation set in, Maurice began "looking at cameras and getting medallion numbers," until the cab in question was finally identified. He called the NYC Taxi & Limousine Commission and finally the driver, who flatly denied any knowledge of the golf clubs. Since the Taj Pierre's director of security lived in the vicinity of the driver, Maurice asked if he would go and see him in person. When the director of security pulled up outside the driver's home, he was stunned to see the golf clubs sitting on the porch. "It shows that sometimes we have to go the extra mile," Maurice says.

A concierge's success is dependent on two factors. Firstly, he or she must have a patient, rationalising brain. "When guests make enquiries, you need to take in that information quickly and process it to its bare essence," Maurice explains, "so you need to adapt quickly and be flexible. And never make it personal – you are there as a conduit." This ability to remain confident and self-assured, no matter what the situation, is vital, "you must not get stressed, otherwise you may lose control," Claudie agrees. "You have to prioritise and deal with it." For these reasons, Claudie, Maurice and Joe all speak of an 8-12 hour day as being more mentally tiring than physically tiring.

The second factor is the concierge's network of contacts: this is what facilitates those last-minute front row seats and VIP passes. In fact he or she will have several such networks, increasing in size from the hotel outwards. In a hotel with a large staff, the concierge can rely on his or her assistants to have developed contacts in cultural arenas – nightclubs or galleries – that he or she might not be so familiar with. Outside

the hotel, there is the city itself, which may have its own local concierge association; this can allow the concierge to find out what's happening in other areas of the city and call in a peer when he or she is having trouble in fulfilling that illusive request. Beyond this there is Les Clefs D'Or (literally 'keys of gold'), the international union of hotel concierges, which has 3,300 members in 37 countries and holds an annual convention in a major city. The motto of Les Clefs D'Or – 'in service through friendship' – is more forgiving than that of the Taj Pierre's, but it is the very essence of a successful concierge: the more friends he or she has, the more their guests will benefit.

For a guest to make the most of their concierge's expertise, it is integral that they get to know them, and get to know them early. Claudie advises preparing a few questions in advance because things naturally prove harder to achieve if they are asked at the last minute. If a guest stays regularly at a hotel, he or she may be able to build a special relationship with the concierge in which the service becomes seamless: "they know that they have nothing to worry about – when they want something they don't even have to ask: it's done already." During her 15 years in London, guests have followed Claudie from hotel to hotel because of her abilities. "That's the best proof you can have and the most rewarding commitment you get as a concierge," she smiles.

It's worth remembering that your concierge probably has contacts outside the city he or she is working in – thanks to Les Clefs D'Or a concierge in Chicago might be able to get you tickets for the Sydney Opera House, and a concierge in Paris could use his or her network of associates to make your tour of Europe an easier and more enriching one. For Maurice, this is what distinguishes the concierge in the age of the countless guidebooks and online reviews: "Concierges are constantly honing their craft by studying and going out; we're always looking for that 'off-the-beaten path' experience. Most travellers want to be dazzled and delighted but they also want insight. And that's what your concierge is striving to do on a daily basis: give you a moment of insight into their city." 📱