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Tips of The Trade: Be Your Own Concierge

By Rene Chun



Isabelle Hogan, head concierge at **The Mark Hotel**, explains the fine points of securing coveted tables, tickets, and more.

In 12th century France, a concierge was the castle gofer. If a visiting nobleman had a sudden craving for peacock-and-swan stew in the middle of the night, the *comte des cierges* (“keeper of the candles”) rolled out of bed and started slaughtering birds. No favor was beyond the pale. This still holds true at luxury hotels. According to Les Clefs d’Or, the international organization that hands out those snazzy gold key pins hotel concierges wear on their lapels, its members “will accommodate every guest request so long as it is moral, legal and humanly possible.” This includes delivering a horse to Salvador Dali’s suite (The Ritz, Barcelona), installing a tanning bed in Yul Brenner’s room (The Pierre, New York) and, more recently, arranging a private viewing of a Vermeer at Buckingham Palace for an anonymous guest who has a thing for Dutch masters (Stafford, London).

Isabelle Hogan, the chef concierge at The Mark Hotel, specializes in wish fulfillment, too. A favorite of the Saudi royal family, she’s accustomed to shopping with a briefcase stuffed with

cash. Born in Morocco, raised in Jeddah, educated in Switzerland, fluent in five languages, with more connections than a cell tower — her life sounds ripped straight out of a Ludlum novel. So if you check in to the Mark (rooms start at \$600), take full advantage of Isabelle; she's the pretty blond one with the golden key. But if you're not into dropping that kind of coin, here's how to be your own concierge.

After Hours

One of the strings Isabelle pulls is to set up after-hours shopping appointments. The doors are locked to keep out the hoi polloi, and a retail sherpa makes brilliant suggestions as you peruse the inventory at a leisurely pace. No distractions, white noise, or M.I.A. sales clerks. But after hours isn't just for barons any more. The stagnant economy has persuaded many retailers to embrace the solo shopping spree. All it requires is money and the willingness to spend it. If you require an expensive engagement ring, give Tiffany & Co. a call. Want to blow a salary bonus on a designer wardrobe? A Barneys personal shopper will be happy to oblige. Car dealerships, art galleries, and specialty shops will also accommodate the after-hours customer.

Royal Cleaners

"Bag and hang." That's what the dry cleaning industry calls the same-day service provided by mom-and-pop joints on every city block. The service may be quick, but the tradeoff is a shoddy product. These high-volume operations use raw cleaning solvent and toss the clothes in a machine that runs at up to 600 rpm. It's a safe bet they're not filtering the solvent after every load, either. That's like using dirty grease to fry food. Top-notch dry cleaning is something else entirely. The process is extremely labor-intensive and a seven-day turnaround is standard. Luxury hotels feature their own on-site dry cleaning service. Since they're not as busy as the corner dry cleaner, they can guarantee same-day service. This white glove treatment is expensive, maybe four times as much as your local dry cleaner, excluding tip. But for special occasions, like a wedding or job interview, it's worth it.

Secret Weapon

The word "concierge" has been abused in recent years. There are concierge dog grooming services, concierge health care plans, and those anomie-inducing touch-screen concierge kiosks at airports. Even Kmart has launched its own "concierge service." There is no substitute, though, for a genuine 5-star hotel concierge. Crazy but true: these hotel wizards are at your disposal 24/7. Yes, even if you aren't a paying guest. Isabelle still runs interference for clients from her Carlyle and Plaza days. But even if you don't know a concierge and are living in your parents' basement, these magnanimous men and women will still listen to sob stories about the sold-out Gaga concert. Don't waste time Googling reviews. Baby sitter, car service, maid, and hair salon recommendations are there for the asking. If the genie of the lobby does deign to grant your wish, tip heavily. It will be the best investment you ever make.

Table 4 Two

Securing a reservation at a trendy Michelin Star restaurant is the number-one request fielded by the concierge desk. If you have a relationship with a concierge in the city where you'd like to dine, Bob's your uncle. In fact, if you know just one concierge, a reservation anywhere in the world is possible. Les Clefs d'Or is global, well-connected, and all about reciprocity. But what if you're solo in the foxhole? First, be humble. Don't trot out the pathetic "Do you know who I am?" line. If you were known, a table would magically appear. Next, do research. What's the reservation policy? David Chang's Momofuku Ko, for instance, only accepts reservations through its website (dinner: 10 days in advance, lunch: 14 days in advance). Don't put the kibosh

on a Monday reservation. It may be the only night with open slots. Plan B: Do lunch and compliment the maître d' on his hairline. Isabelle relies on reservation sites likeotrestaurant.com and monitors foodie blogs like Grub Street's Two For Eight, which gives a daily update on the booking status of New York's most popular Zagat shrines.