



ELVIS SOIZA PERFORMS MIRACLES. He has done so ever since he became a hotel concierge nearly 30 years ago. Quirky requests are his specialty, but nothing compares with the time an Arab sheik approached him just as he was starting his shift at the Londonderry Hotel in London's Park Lane. The man asked Soiza to find him a pink elephant for his wife's birthday.

"I automatically thought he meant a cuddly toy and said 'Sure, no problem,' " Soiza recalls laughing. "And he said, 'You can find a real elephant?'" "

"The saying goes, 'Nothing is impossible, everything is possible—all it takes is a bit of money and a few phone calls,' and we had promised him, so we had to do it."

By an astonishing coincidence, the circus was in town, and the enterprising Soiza was able to negotiate an elephant rental. He then called the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to obtain permission to spray-paint the animal pink—the sheik's wife's favorite color. No problem, he was told, as long as the paint was water-soluble and he avoided painting certain body parts. Finally, he secured a London Council permit to arrange a police motorcycle escort.

Meticulous planning completed, Soiza had the elephant brought up from the loading bay precisely at five o'clock and presented the gift to the delighted couple outside the hotel's main entrance. As they rode off, watched by a throng of bemused passersby, Soiza and his colleagues quietly congratulated themselves before turning their attention to the next request. Miracles are all in a day's work for a hotel concierge.

Aside from the routine calls for dinner recommendations, scarce theater tickets, sightseeing information, and limousine service, most concierges are best friends to out-of-town visitors, especially those concierges who have earned a coveted membership in Les Clefs d'Or (The Gold Keys society). The organization, founded 76 years ago in Paris, is dedicated to ensuring sublime service in the

hospitality industry. Soiza, currently the chef concierge at Brisbane's Sofitel Hotel in Australia, has been a member for 20 years.

The 3,000 members scattered worldwide adhere to a very strict code and membership is an honor not taken lightly. Candidates must have served as concierges for a minimum of three years and be recommended by their hotel manager as well as their local Les Clefs d'Or members. Then they are anonymously spot-checked to see how they cope with various challenges.

Shujaat Khan was elected president of the U.S. chapter earlier this year, and from his position as chef concierge at Washington's Capital Hilton Hotel he has dealt with some difficult situations. Like the time a powerful out-of-town corporate lawyer discovered he'd left a box of essential court documents in the back of a taxi.

Distraught and with the outcome of a major lawsuit in the balance, the man turned to Khan for help but drew a blank when asked which company the cab belonged to. Neither could he remember the color of the cab nor the driver's appearance. Khan began interrogating him for clues.

"He was in a panic. I felt so sorry for him," Khan says. "I asked if the driver had a CB radio. Did he talk to anyone? All he could remember was that the man was listening to a sports talk-radio show. The only sports radio show in town was Ken Beatrice's. All of a sudden a window opened up in my head."

Khan calmly called the talk show and got himself on air. Seizing the opportunity to reach out to the cab driver, if he were still listening, he pleaded for him to return the box to the hotel.

"Guess what? Ten minutes later he was back," Khan says. "This was so incredible. I had so much satisfaction."

The Indian-born Khan prides himself as being the ultimate problem solver. Once his hotel hosted the annual Gridiron Dinner during President Bush's first term. All of Washington's elite were invited. An hour before he needed to be on site, the master of ceremonies discovered he had picked up the wrong tuxedo and rang Khan up in a panic. It was 4:30 on a Saturday afternoon and all the tuxedo shops were closed.

Khan made some calls and eventually tracked down a tuxedo-shop manager who agreed to meet the embarrassed emcee for a fitting. The man made his engagement with 15 minutes to spare. Once again, Khan had saved the day.

Cooperation between Les Clefs d'Or members is just one of the invaluable benefits of membership. Networking around the world is common. Robert Watson, vice president of Les Clefs d'Or International and chef concierge at London's five-star Landmark Hotel, several years ago received a cry for help from a Chicago hotel concierge. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, a guest at the U.S. hotel, wanted desperately to watch the Grand National Horse Race, Britain's equivalent to the Kentucky Derby.

"I phoned the BBC here to see if they had sold the rights to any U.S. networks," Watson recalls. "They hadn't. So we taped the race live for her and got it shipped by FedEx, and she actually saw it at breakfast on Sunday morning."

Like many concierges, Watson has often been asked to purchase a hard-to-find food or beverage for a guest. Celebrities, especially, make demands to which the hotel management will normally agree. They want their favorite water provided. Or, a jar of blue M&Ms in their room continually topped off. Once Watson had to shop for a particular brand of mustard that his client could not get in Scotland, where he was away on a golfing holiday. The client sent his private plane south to pick it up. Watson was waiting with the condiment in hand.

“My own rules at my concierge desk: We will do anything, absolutely anything, as long as it is legal and moral,” Watson declares. “We will never cross that line.”

That includes the requests male concierges routinely get to secure drugs or hire escorts. Hotel security is normally advised of the drug requests, while the concierge will direct gentlemen to the relevant section of the yellow pages for the latter.

Female concierges often find themselves in embarrassing situations, too. Bertine Hage of Vancouver’s Four Seasons Hotel was in the early days of her career when the personal assistant of an Arab sheik called and asked her to find a virgin, native-Canadian princess to welcome the sheik to British Columbia.

Unsure whether such a person existed, but satisfied the sheik had no devious intentions, she called around to various tribes and native associations until she found a chief of a tribe outside of Vancouver who responded affirmatively. Yes, we have a young princess, she was told. Then Hage steeled herself for the embarrassing question: Is she a virgin?

“He told me ‘I have a 12-year-old princess, and I can’t guarantee it but I am quite sure she is still a virgin,’ ” Hage recounts with a laugh. “So they sent her out to the airport and we did a traditional welcome with a bida-style necklace. We had a private air strip arranged, and the jet landed and the princess was there welcoming the guest on behalf of the Four Seasons to B.C.”

Hage has since had other unusual requests, which she enthusiastically fulfills. The strangest? Two stockbrokers whose nicknames were “Croc” and “Bull” wanted help throwing a party in a Vancouver restaurant. Wouldn’t it be nice if Hage could find them a real live crocodile and bull to liven up the party?

“We had a few days. We got a crocodile from a company that works with animals in the British Columbia film industry, and they were happy to get a crocodile to the restaurant.”

And the bull?

“The bull was a little more challenging. We ended up calling the slaughterhouse and we saved him for a day!” ★

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