

Travel Feature

The Hotel Concierge: A User's Guide

Sophia Banay, 08.18.06, 12:00 AM ET

Top-tier hotels have a lot to recommend them: luxurious spas, twice-daily room service and superb on-site restaurants, just for starters. But the most valuable resource of all sits in plain view in the middle of the lobby: the hotel concierge.

Everyone knows the concierge can provide a map or a dinner recommendation. But stick to those rudimentary requests, and you're missing out on the wealth of information and network of contacts—including maitre d's, private jet pilots, jewelers and personal shoppers—the typical concierge spends years cultivating.

He or she is paid to be the ultimate insider. Concierges peruse museum exhibits, attend gallery openings, dine at impossible-to-get-a-table-at restaurants and see the newest shows—all to be able to tell *you* what's worth seeing, doing and eating. Best of all? That expansive knowledge is available to any guest, absolutely free.

"The concierge makes the impossible possible," says **Isabelle Hogan**, chef concierge at **The Carlyle** in New York City, who speaks five languages and has worked at a slew of New York's finest hotels, including **The Mark**, **The Waldorf-Astoria** and **The Plaza**. Hogan has secured new passports in under an hour, booked private planes and dog-sitters for guests, and once shuttled a Middle Eastern princess—who finally spent \$100,000 on one gift—from store to store.

"The concierge can do anything," she says.

Some guests dismiss the concierge as an unnecessary middleman or second best to their own assistants. Making that mistake can cost you time, money and effort. To help you take full advantage, Forbes.com spoke with concierges across the globe to glean the secrets of getting super service. Here, we share the five tips to use before, during and after your stay. They're guaranteed to make a concierge convert out of anyone.

Be A Snob

Names matter, especially in status-conscious cities like New York or London. So, choose your hotel carefully: Your concierge may be only as powerful as the name on the towels. "We always get the best," says Hogan, whether it's Broadway tickets or nightclub access. "At my previous hotel, when I called for last-minute restaurant reservations, they'd say 'I'm sorry.' Now that I work at The Carlyle, it's incredible how much easier it is." With room rates at The Carlyle starting at \$650 per night, this access doesn't come cheap; but it may be necessary to plan a special evening.

If you're staying in a hotel with an über-trendy restaurant, like the **Mandarin Oriental New York** (which shares real estate in the Time Warner Center with the 16-table **Per Se**, where two months' notice for dinner reservations is generally required) or the **Metropolitan London**, which has a **Nobu**, preference for tables vacated through canceled reservations often goes to hotel guests.

For dinner reservations outside the hotel, don't think about making that all-important phone call yourself. Local restaurants are more likely to accommodate concierges from top-notch hotels—who regularly send guests spending lots of money—when they request a last-minute seating or a table by the window.

Call Ahead

Whether you're traveling for business or pleasure, call in advance and share your itinerary. The concierge is a local and can tweak your activities in a way your assistant can't. He'll also reconfirm your dining reservations—something secretaries can forget. "If we make a reservation, we're babysitting that reservation," says **Frederick Bigler**, the chef concierge at the **Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park**.

You'll also get a better briefing on the idiosyncrasies of individual cities from the concierge than from the reservations desk, which handles scores of guests a day. If a parade means a section of the city is off-limits during your stay, a national holiday in a foreign country mandates that all stores and restaurants close, or a major sporting event is likely to congest public transportation, the concierge will warn you.

Calling in advance can also qualify you for special pricing. At **The Little Nell**, a **Relais & Chateaux** resort in Aspen, guests who call the concierge seven days in advance of a stay are eligible for discounts of up to \$8 per day on ski tickets (which cost \$78 each in high season). The concierge will also know about seasonal specials the hotel may not be advertising, or opportunities that require advance planning, like the The Little Nell's First Tracks program, which allows hotel guests to do a first run at 8 a.m. before the lifts open.

Finally, your best chance of scoring a table for two at a new hot spot, or tickets to a sold-out show, is to call the concierge one or two months in advance (see the above rule for determining who the most effective concierge will be). Sure, it's sometimes possible for a concierge to get same-night slots through personal connections or a last-minute cancellation, but the more time you give him, the better.

Reserve A Room

If you've done some cultivating and are on a first-name basis with the concierge at your favorite hotel, take the relationship a step further and make your room reservation through him. Most concierges are happy to accommodate a regular, and although they'll work with the reservations department to secure your stay, you'll have someone personally accountable for making sure that your special requests (a room near the business center, no feather pillows on the bed, a favorite CD playing) are accommodated. You're also likely to get more personal service from someone who knows you--and hopefully, your previous largesse (see our next "tip")--than from an anonymous reservationist.

Tip

While there's no wrong way to tip, some of the concierges we spoke to said the most attention-getting gratuity is the one that slides into their palms within minutes of a guest entering the lobby. Not only does it hold the promise of further recognition, it shows a genuine appreciation for the time and effort that the concierge will then be sure to lavish. Other concierges said they prefer to be tipped at the end of a stay, once they've proved their mettle. And while they swore up and down that every guest receives the same service regardless of their tip-wattage, all the concierges--most of whom are paid an hourly wage--also agreed that tips are always welcome. (See "[Luxury Travel Tipping Guide](#).")

If you're feeling stingy, don't skip the tip entirely--defer it. Concierges receive everything from Tiffany bracelets to Nova Scotia salmon to expensive bottles of whiskey, sent annually at Christmas or after a particularly long stay. And since many hotels have the concierge desk, which may consist of more than ten staffers, pool and divide their tips, straight-up gifts are an effective and non-divisible means of saying thanks.

And if the crass exchange of commercial goods makes you shudder? "A nice little letter to the general manager to say, 'The service I received was excellent'--that says more than any money," says **Joseph Winders**, the chief concierge at **The Balmoral Hotel**, a **Rocco Forte & Family** property in Edinburgh, Scotland. It also ensures you'll be remembered when you come back.

Work The Globe

The hospitality industry is a small one, and the network of high-end concierges is even smaller. Organizations like **Clef D'Or** or the **National Concierge Association** ensure that concierges are well connected, even across different countries and continents.

"Last Friday, we had two guests who wanted to go to the Ivy in London," says Winders. (The Ivy is a London restaurant favored by celebrities and generally booked solid months in advance.) "We managed to pull it off through our Clef D'Or connections. We help each other big-time." To maintain those connections, Winders goes to London every month to meet and network with his colleagues there.

Mission: Possible!

A day in the life of three top hotel concierges.

Joseph Winders, chief concierge at The Balmoral Hotel, a Rocco Forte property in Edinburgh, Scotland:

Last week, we had two guests who flew out from Edinburgh to Nice [France] on a private flight, for a meeting. They'd flown out very early in the morning and left the make-or-break documents for their meeting in the hotel safe. One member of our team, Rob, flew down after them with the papers and met them at their private villa. It wowed them.

Randy Ross, assistant chef concierge at the Four Seasons Hotel, New York:

One day, I came to work, and I was going to a concierge function, so I dressed up and put on a suit, tie, everything. This poor guy, from who knows where, was staying with us for a meeting being held in the hotel, but no one had told him it was a formal meeting. He walked in, realized the dress, got super embarrassed and came down to me. I went, 'Well, I'm a little bigger than you, but I'm sure it's better than nothing.' I gave him everything--shoes, pants, shirt, tie and jacket. It wasn't perfect, but he made it into the meeting!"

Frederick Bigler, chef concierge at the Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park:

We get a lot of questions from people visiting the country--odd items they can't get in their own countries. I had a prime minister visiting once who wanted Orville Redenbacher Caramel popcorn. We didn't know it, but it's only sold in certain sections of New Jersey. We sent a page out in a limo, and he wasted so much time searching all the New York City grocery stores; it became a huge day-long event. Finally, we called Orville Redenbacher and found these New Jersey stores that sold it, about an hour and a half outside the city. We bought out a few shelves of the product at each store for his family--we probably located about ten cases at four different stores. The limo for the day, at \$600, was more expensive than the popcorn.



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