

RECORDER

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Keeper Of The Candles: Concierge honored by Les Clefs d'Or

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Ponte Vedra Lodge & Club's Food and Beverage director Alan Lancaster works with the hotel's concierge, Danelle Kensbock on a busy Thursday morning.

For Ponte Vedra Lodge & Club guests, concierge Danelle Kensbock can recommend an elegant restaurant, book your tee time or spa date and schedule your midnight flight to Moscow if you so desire, all with the flip of her secret Rolodex.

"We have to perform magic," she said from behind her desk in the Lodge lobby. "We like to wow our guests."

Kensbock has been welcoming visitors to the Lodge for seven years, and has recently been inducted into the Les Clefs d'Or-translated meaning keys of gold-a prestigious professional concierge association with international membership.

On her jacket, Kensbock sports two gleaming gold pins bearing the crossed keys of the Les Clefs d'Or insignia, recognized the world over as a symbol of dedication and experience.

Kensbock is a hotel visitor's best resource as she can give directions, schedule transportation and make their stay at the Lodge as comfortable or as extravagant as they wish.

"Danelle successfully wears the many hats that make up the concierge, a position that serves as the informational center of our operation," said David Mariotti, the Lodge & Club's general manager. He also credits Sandi Heggess and Heather Ball who are also concierges at the Ponte Vedra Lodge and Club.

Derived from the French Comte Des Cierge, or keeper of the candles, a concierge mixes traditional hospitality with modern convenience and luxury whether the guests are in a castle or a sea side resort.

With a smaller hotel like the Lodge & Club, Kensbock said a concierge quickly "learns to do other jobs to make it look seamless to guests."

Visitors on a romantic getaway often ask Kensbock for rose petals or tea lights scattered around the room or a perfectly chilled bottle of champagne. She has also helped plan quite a few marriage proposals, partnering with other Lodge staff members to make the event one to remember.

"We are all romantics at heart and when we are doing these things, we really get into it," she said. "We don't do anything for any other gain but to make our guests happy."

One couple from Hawaii has Kensbock to thank for their romantic engagement when they visited the Lodge. Kensbock partnered with Patricia Coffey, fellow Les Clefs d'Or member and concierge at the Casa Monica Hotel, to arrange a horse drawn carriage ride through the streets of St. Augustine. When the couple returned for dinner, the bride found her ring in an elegant dessert, hand made by Lodge pastry chef Nancy Slatsky.

Though she often "calls upon my network to get things done," Kensbock assures guests that when she handles a request, it will be done with the utmost care. "One thing about this business, never promise anything you can't pull

off yourself," she said. "If your name and your promise is behind it, you want to make sure it's right."

Long time guests of the Lodge & Club may remember Diana O'Laughlin, a concierge at the hotel from 1998 to 2003. Kensbock said she learned much from O'Laughlin, a woman she considered her mentor who was "such a stickler for good and reliable information."

Aside from the professional distinction Les Clefs d'Or can offer, Kensbock said she also applied to the association in honor of O'Laughlin, who recently passed away.

"She still has so many friends that come to my desk and say, 'Oh, we still miss her after all of these years,'" Kensbock said.

A heart for hospitality

As a 12-year-old girl on vacation at the Boca Raton Hotel & Club, Kensbock, who is originally from New York, said she was dazzled by the ornate decorations and hustle and bustle of the luxury destination.

"I remember thinking, I'd like to do that someday," she said.

She began her hospitality experience after moving from Oregon-where she was an administrative assistant for Nippon Electric Corp.-to Yosemite Park, Calif. in the mid-1980s. With no experience in the hotel industry, she took a job as the assistant front desk manager in the Ahwahnee Hotel and her husband, Bernd, became the hotel's executive sous chef.

It was during her seven years at the Ahwahnee that Kensbock remembered visiting Ponte Vedra Beach in 1986, thanks to her mother. Kensbock first heard of the Ponte Vedra Inn & Club from her grandfather, who experienced the club back in the 1920s. When she saw it for herself, she fell in love with " my favorite jewel out of all the resorts on the ocean."

She began to visit Ponte Vedra regularly when her father moved into Vicar's Landing in 1993 and in 1999, Kensbock and her husband made the move. They were both hired by the Lodge & Club on the same day, she as a concierge and he as a morning cook. Bernd is currently retired from the Lodge.

After she had worked at the concierge desk for five years, Kensbock was ready to apply for the Les Clefs D'Or and called upon her former co-worker and Ahwahnee concierge Joyce Perkins, who is a Les Clefs d'Or member.

It was Perkins who recommended Les Clefs d'Or sponsors for Kensbock when she became interested in the organization in 2003. Both Houston Vissage of the Sea Island Cloister and Patti Coffey, formerly of the J.W. Marriott in Orlando and now of the Casa Monica became Kensbock's sponsors.

After submitting her application, Kensbock was e-mailed a test which quizzed her knowledge on everything from time zones to postage to wine. She estimates spending nearly 100 hours on the task and received her letter of acceptance on Oct. 4, 2004.

She has already become active in the organization by attending conferences in New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Vallarta. In March, Kensbock will make a trip to Vienna for the 2007 conference.