

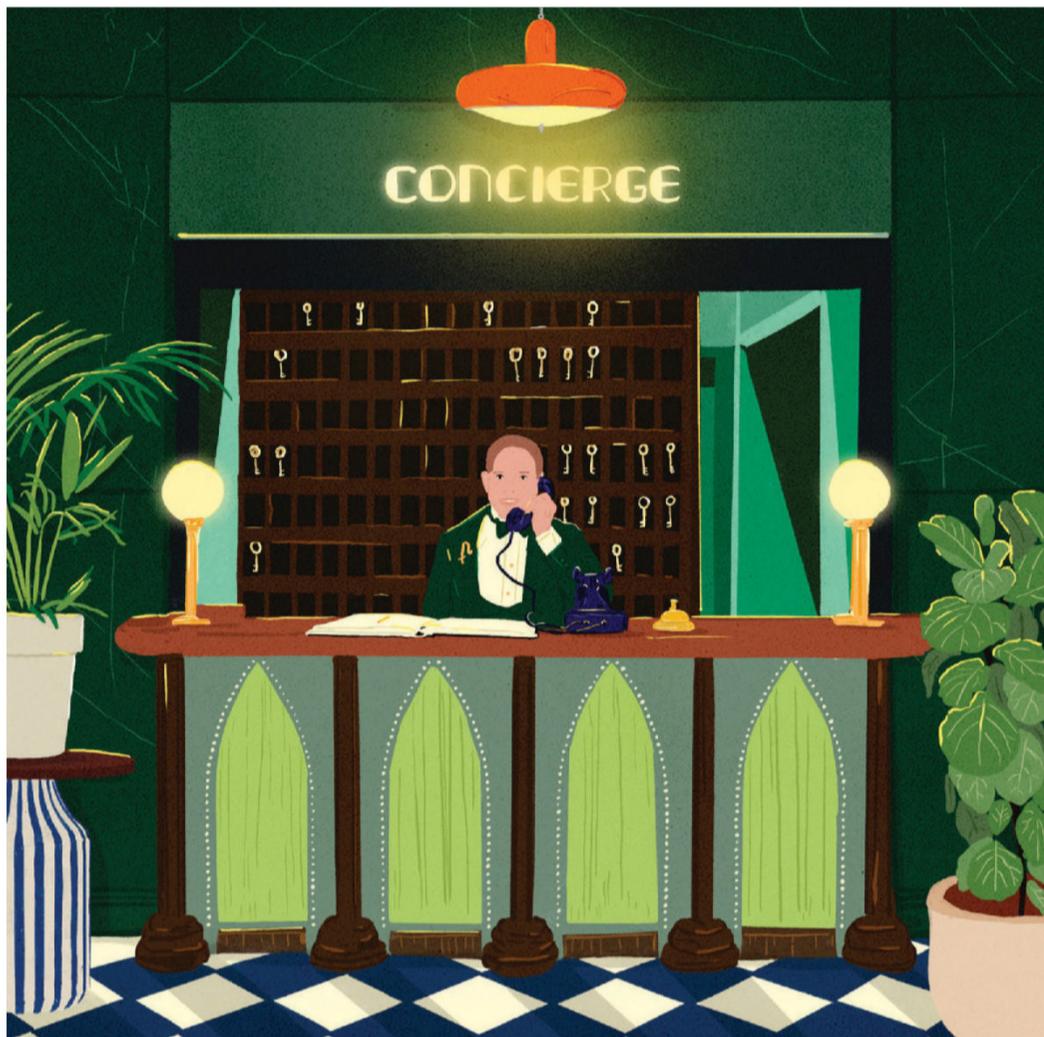
TRAVEL + LEISURE

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Keys to the City

Long lines, sold-out attractions, and impossible-to-get reservations are just a few of the summer travel headaches a trusty hotel concierge can cure. **By Jennifer Bradley Franklin**

ON A RECENT TRIP to Florence, I made a rookie mistake: as I was putting together the last-minute getaway, I neglected to reserve timed tickets to the Uffizi Gallery and the Galleria dell'Accademia. These iconic attractions are known to sell out days if not weeks in advance, so I was more than a little sheepish when I asked the concierge at **Hotel Savoy, a Rocco Forte Hotel** (rocco.fortehotels.com; doubles from \$661) if they could do anything to help. Twenty minutes later I had reservations at my preferred times for both—no waiting in ticket lines required. (Turns out, the Savoy's head concierge, Ruggero Vannini, always keeps a few tickets on hold.)

The old-school, real-live-human concierge, it seems, is back. Les Clefs d'Or, probably the best-known association of hotel concierges, saw membership dip early in the pandemic, as some hotels trimmed staff.

But that decline has now reversed, at least in the U.S., where the organization saw a 53 percent increase in member applications from 2021 to 2022—a trend that has continued this year.

"We know how to create magic," Vannini told me after my stay. "If you reach out to us a few weeks before you arrive, our team can craft a personalized itinerary for you."

That's true whether you're in search of hard-to-snap tickets, a hot table, or just a locals-only recommendation, says Nathan Goff, a concierge and president emeritus of Les Clefs d'Or USA, whose members wear crossed golden key pins on their lapels and work exclusively in-house at hotels. "Our members take a personal interest in the success of each guest's stay. They are not commission driven; they're relationship driven."

That sort of local connection can lead to experiences you'd never find

on your own. "We will always have the most up-to-date knowledge," says Salvatore Bartolone, head concierge at **Shangri-La The Shard, London** (shangri-la.com; doubles from \$752). Bartolone has been known to arrange everything from helicopter tours to guided visits to the Tower of London that access hidden corners not open to regular ticket holders. "A skilled concierge can uncover gems that not everyone has the opportunity to enjoy—we might know a manager of a restaurant who can offer a table that you otherwise wouldn't be able to get."

While professional concierges are adept at fulfilling last-minute requests, advance notice can help create an even more memorable stay. "I encourage guests to reach out," says Chris Gabaldon, senior vice president, luxury brands, for Marriott International. "Knowing your preferences, interests, and tastes in advance lets us arrange exclusive experiences. For example, our team at the **Ritz-Carlton New York, NoMad** (ritzcarlton.com; doubles from \$895), frequently arranges private tours of Museum Mile and blue-chip art galleries in Chelsea."

On occasion, concierges are willing to lend a hand even if you're not staying at the property where they work—though tapping their expertise demands courtesy. "We do our utmost to assist everyone who reaches out to us," Vannini says. Still, honesty and appreciation go a long way, the pros say. "We like to focus on guests who are currently registered or will be staying in the future," says James Little, chef concierge at the **Peninsula Beverly Hills** (peninsula.com; doubles from \$1,105). "Still, there are always exceptions. The cardinal rule is, don't call and pretend you're a guest."

As for tipping, concierges say there really is no hard-and-fast rule. Simple requests such as directions or a nearby shopping recommendation don't warrant a gratuity. For above-and-beyond asks such as rebooking a flight, securing tickets to a sold-out show, or setting the stage for a marriage proposal, expressing appreciation with cash is appropriate. "There is no set rate," Bartolone insists. Other concierges concur. "A gratuity is never expected, but always appreciated," Little notes.