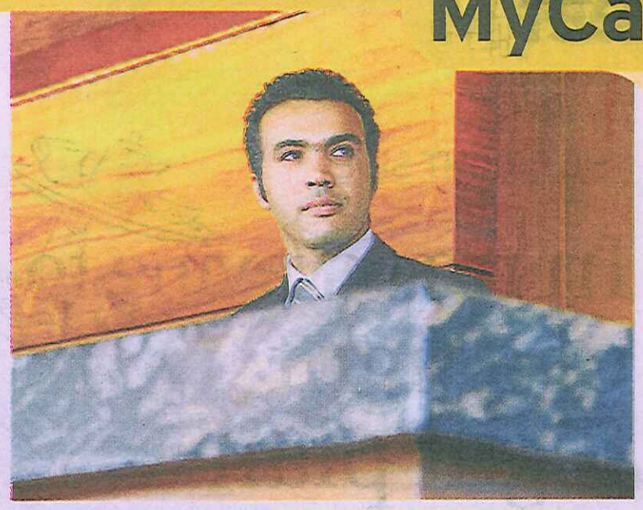
TALES FROM THE TRADES

A camel? Of course, sir ...

The requests made of hotel concierges can be out of this world, writes **Marcella Bidinost**.



Connected ... good customer service can lead to some enviable perks. Photo: iStock

The role of hotel concierge has been described as among the few jobs in the world with a one-line job description: to serve a guest. But considering the spectrum of needs a guest might have during a hotel stay, from the demanding to the bizarre, a concierge experiences all.

Using their knowledge of the city and a contacts list longer than their arm, most concierges say they'll do almost anything for guests.

The requests of a concierge might be as simple as buying a packet of cigarettes or as challenging as booking tickets for a sellout show that starts in seven minutes, organising seats on a Cessna flight (now), or finding a room at 6pm on New Year's Eve, plus ideas for where to put an accompanying, medium-sized dog.

A concierge will recommend activities, chase bookings, even listen to personal problems – "Though you have to put a limit on that," says the former chief concierge at the Grand Hyatt, Christian Espino, who has experienced his fair share of guests checking in after a blue or separation from a partner, the kind who figure he'll lend an ear.

Once, Espino even surrendered the belt around his waist to a tuxedo-wearing visitor who'd forgotten his own. "The shops were closed, the guest was in a fix and my belt happened to match his suit and fit him perfectly," he says. Later, Espino found some twine to keep his own slacks up.

A concierge acts as the conduit between the hotel and the outside world and the role often includes helping guests beyond their stay in the hotel. One guest who'd stayed at the Grand Hyatt called from her home in the US wanting Espino to track down the recipe for a chocolate pudding she'd tasted in, her initial description, "a restaurant". Despite there being more than 3000 eateries in Melbourne, Espino prised a better description from her and within three hours, he'd found the restaurant and the recipe.

Hump day ... some requests are over the top. Photo: Christine Gleisner

John Elmas is the former chief concierge at Melbourne's Westin Hotel and now looks after residents at the prestigious No. 150 Clarendon Street apartments. He recalls organising a wedding for a guest who wanted to get married within a day and a half.

"The guest had been living with his fiancee for seven years and decided, while he was staying in the hotel, he wanted to marry her," Elmas says. "He asked if I'd arrange the wedding and be the witness. So off I went, organising the location, celebrant, marriage licence, photographer, picnic basket and limousine. His fiancee knew nothing about it and when we headed to the Fitzroy Gardens for the ceremony, she just thought we were going there for a walk – and found it a little odd that I was coming, too."

At the Sofitel Melbourne, the concierges' eyeballs still roll a little at the guest who, on Valentine's Day, requested rose petals be scattered across his bed spelling out the words: "To my beautiful X, I love you truly, madly, deeply. Will you marry me?"

"We didn't think there were enough rose petals in the world for that," laughs guest relations manager Terence Murphy.

"I'll often get guys call me in advance of their stay so I can organise a romantic set-up for when they arrive on that special occasion with their partner," he says. "So I'll order the roses, champagne, chocolates and a card, then I'll ask what they'd like to say on the card. The response there is often a pause and then, 'Oh mate, how about you make up something for me'."

For one client's Christmas party, Murphy recalls having to track down a camel.

"We ended up finding one at a wildlife park on the western outskirts of Melbourne. Thank god it was well behaved."

Years ago, Murphy became the regular butler for a society doyenne to whom he presented silver-service breakfast each morning.

"When I arrived with her breakfast for the first time, I took the toaster out of the cupboard for her to make her own toast when she was ready. She looked at me and said, 'My dear, you may find this hard to believe but I don't know how to use it'."

Working as a concierge doesn't require a qualification. Many move into the role after running hotel reception or in other VIP settings.

And once the 100-odd tasks a day are performed, the perks can be enviable. Concierges are often wined and dined at venues they might recommend to guests and gratitude for their work often comes in the form of tips, bottles of Moet et Chandon or, in Murphy's case, a regular delivery of half-a-dozen duck eggs from two of his guests in the Yarra Valley.

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FIRST AND WORST

HANNAH GADSBY
This comedian has seen a little too much leg.

MY FIRST JOB was at a supermarket in Launceston. I worked in the delicatessen. My boss Raelene frightened me and I didn't realise anyone other than my mum was allowed to growl at me. I didn't like cleaning the fish cabinet. It made me retch and that made Raelene angry. I had to wear a white dress. I am not partial to dresses and I'm not a fan of white – combine the two and you have the fat lesbian's kryptonite. I hung up my paper hat when I slipped on chicken fat and had to undergo a complete knee reconstruction.

MY WORST JOB was head projectionist at the Deckchair Cinema in Darwin. I had to write reports but the unfortunate thing was everything could be said in a sentence. In Darwin there are too many large men who insist on wearing child-sized Stubbies shorts. I went slightly mad in the heat.

EFFIE MANN

Hannah Gadsby will perform at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival from Thursday, March 25, to Sunday, April 18, comedyfestival.com.au, Ticketmaster 1300 660 013.

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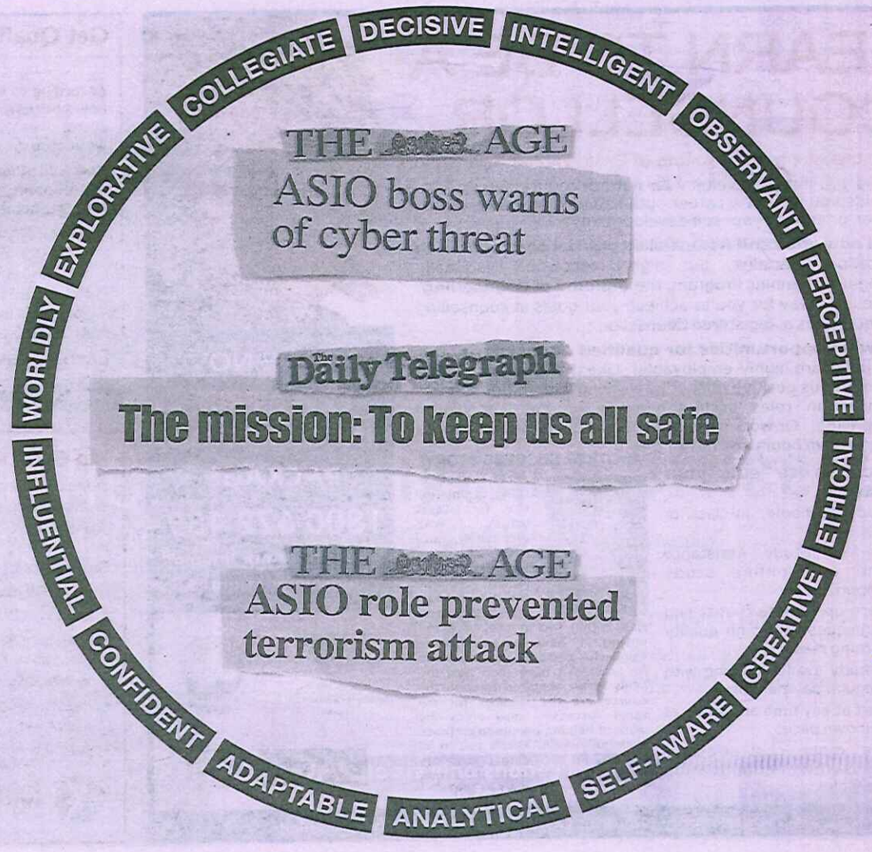
Applications close Friday, 9 April 2010