



# Answer Machines

Think of the strangest question you can for a hotel concierge and not only is it likely that someone, somewhere has already asked it, but chances are the reply was quick and correct. *By* CHRISTOPHER KUCWAY. *Illustrated by* WASINEE CHANTAKORN

**W**HEN IT COMES TO BIZARRE concierge requests, it would make perfect sense for a character like Salvador Dalí to top the list. On his visits to Paris in the 1930's, the painter would book himself into the Hotel Meurice for a month at a time. Legend has it that, during one stay, in all seriousness he asked staff at the hotel to catch flies for him across the street in the Jardin des Tuileries. Turns out, the surrealist arrived at the posh address with a pair of pet ocelots—they're medium-sized yellow cats with black spots, in case you were wondering—who just happened to be a tad, let's say, peckish. Dalí's demands were apparently met, though not surprisingly, once he left, the hotel had to completely repaint his suite and redo the carpet.

Strange, yes, but in this age of information overload, where tweets, hits and pokes are all considered completely normal to your average keyboard-wielding adult, queries aimed at the hotel concierge haven't dulled in the slightest. If anything—there's only one way of putting this, so hit me with your pet ocelot if you must—they've become even more surreal. Hotel guests have cottoned on to the value of their friendly concierge.

We're not talking about the garden-variety requests: thousands of roses to fill a hotel room in a "Will you marry me?" moment, or snaring a table at a popular restaurant—though the Mandarin Oriental's Giovanni Valenti once made reservations for someone in Rome. Thing is, Valenti was at the Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong at the time, and the dialing diner, who was in Italy, happened to have his number. So why not ask someone who can get results? These days the barrage of questions a concierge faces is even beyond, say, the demand for extra security because a guest thinks there are ghosts around her villa (One&Only Reethi Rah in the Maldives) or a last-minute plea for someone to belt out a rendition of "Happy Birthday" while dressed as a potato. A spud? Please. No, what we're talking about involves the truly eccentric.

Some requests, often the simplest, can cause a concierge the most frustration. Bizarre best describes the query from a Brazilian couple headed to Sydney's Nikko Hotel Potts Point. The wealthy duo called in advance, asking that the suite they booked be lit only with red candles, no natural or electrical lighting. Fair enough. But that's when things veered toward the peculiar: they also asked that a live lamb be waiting in the room when they arrived. Before you start counting sheep, know that the couple also required a large butcher's knife. Not exactly

chocolate-on-the-pillow kind of guests. With a little detective work—actually, hundreds of phone calls around Australia and New Zealand—the hotel's chef concierge Jorge Sousa discovered that, in Australia, slaughtering an animal is, by law, something best left to a licensed professional in an appropriate location. That means on a farm. Not in a hotel room. At the end of the day, the guests accepted this verdict, stayed two weeks in beautiful Sydney where lamb is usually served on a plate, and returned to Brazil, where they promptly killed a young sheep at a farm in the south of the country. Why? All because a local witch had told them to do so within 60 days or their lives would be in danger.

While the demands a concierge faces have changed, the rules haven't. Any arranger worth his or her salt will never do anything illegal—like, oh

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say, find replacement parts for an AK-47, a request that surfaced at a well-known Los Angeles hotel—anything immoral or, as one Hong Kong-based answer man pointed out, anything outside the laws of physics. Yet few spells behind a concierge desk are ever normal. Staff field anywhere from a handful to hundreds of requests each day, some of which are solvable in minutes, others that can take months to sort. And since time is always of the essence, a concierge is only as good as his or her contacts.

Some innocent requests start out as worryingly cryptic. Once Akane Tanaka, the chef concierge at the Peninsula Tokyo, determined that there was no violent element to one Swiss guest's request for an original samurai sword, she set out in search of a custom-made blade. Recognizing the guest's love of Japanese traditions, Tanaka also enrolled him in a dojo where he spent eight hours learning sword-fighting moves. His own blade is being crafted and will be shipped to Switzerland within a year or two.

Culture, of course, invades our every move when we travel. Some love a place, returning constantly »

to absorb the feel of the street, eat good food, take in the arts. Others among us go once, and decide to bring it all back home like some oversized postcard. We're not talking here about the knock-off watches sold along Hong Kong's Nathan Road or that stiff made-to-measure suit from Bangkok's legend in his own sign, Peter Armani. No, think bigger. Italian Renaissance big. At the Four Seasons in Florence, one art-loving American guest requested an exact, full-scale copy of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*. After finding a capable sculptor and outlining the project over several meetings—in the 15th century, Michelangelo toiled on his original marble creation for more than a year—a replica was commissioned. The two-meter-tall copy is being duly chiseled and will be delivered in a wooden crate to California once it's finished.

## One guest demanded front-row tickets to the singles finals at the Australian Open. The *problem* was that the request came as quickly as a SLICED Federer serve

When something completely unwieldy—at least something that can be taken apart—has to be there the next day, everyone knows to call FedEx. That's what Javier Loureiro, the head concierge at another Four Seasons, this one in Washington, D.C., did. Loureiro had a Ducati motorcycle disassembled and sent by courier overnight from San Diego to the U.S. capital. "I've been doing this so long, even the extraordinary becomes routine," says the 30-year veteran of the concierge desk. The guest rode it once, before the bike—another Italian work of art, come to think of it—sat in storage for six months. Then, out of the blue, came the demand that it be shipped overnight to Seattle. Says Loureiro: "Fortunately, that's the last I saw of it."

Current events cross the desk too. Most recently, a high-end Dublin hotel noticed that Iceland's volcanic disruption bumped up the number of guests requesting propeller planes or helicopters. And in the first week after the iPad launch, the Peninsula Beverly Hills concierge desk reports that it purchased 17 of the devices for hotel guests.

More mainstream are requests for tickets to sporting events. But even those can raise an eyebrow or two. Just ask Andrew Natoli, the chef concierge at the Sofitel Melbourne. In 2007, one guest demanded four front-row tickets to the men's singles finals at the Australian Open to see Roger Federer battling Fernando González for the Grand Slam title. Fine, if expensive. The problem was that the request came as quickly as a sliced Federer serve, only *hours* before the match. Through his contacts, Natoli finagled four tickets. Then the guest decided he didn't want the two couples sitting together, so he cancelled his request. As quickly as he had purchased the four seats, Natoli was able to resell them. Federer won in straight sets, the two couples avoided each other and Natoli went back behind his desk in the lobby.

Not all demands are all that difficult to meet. It's the reason behind them that's hard to fathom. Falling into that gray area is the guest who asked for chocolate body paint and a pair of disposable overalls—one of those moments where you have to marvel at the abilities of a good concierge to remain utterly, resolutely expressionless.

As you would expect at the Four Seasons Resort Whistler in Canada, little surprises chef concierge Hana Lynn when it comes to winter-related requests. Book a helicopter tour for two to a nearby glacier? Not a problem. Until, that is, the couple returned. They arrived lugging a five-kilogram cube of ice in a soggy brown box, their very own piece of the glacier they wanted to send home. In South Carolina. Shocked but not showing it, Lynn went back to work, arranging for a freezer box to ship—and preserve—the block of ice more than 4,000 kilometers to the far side of the continent.

Finally, there's the money-can-buy-anything crowd. Plenty are the tales of a sheik or a royal wanting a shopping mall open at 2 A.M. for his family's retail therapy. A twist on this took place at a resort in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on a booking for a horseback-riding trip. Now, if you happen to be the eight-year-old son of an African princess, you'd be forgiven for wanting a parrot perched on your shoulder while astride a horse, no? After all, there are parrots swooping through a nearby forest, so having one of your own is hardly absurd. Enter the concierge who met the odd demand by tracking down someone who trains parrots. As with so many of these tales, the story didn't end there. Said princess took such a shine to the bird that she hired a private jet to fly it back to Africa. Money or intrusive customs agents were obviously no object. Kind of leaves Salvador Dalí in the dust now, doesn't it? ✚