

OutThere

Experiential journeys for men of distinction



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The modern concierge

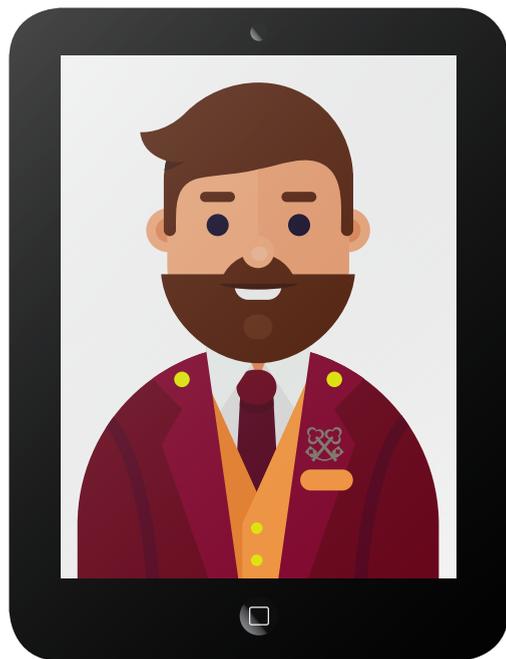
Whether it's chartering a private plane for a pooch or arranging an illicit encounter with an off-duty policeman, New York concierges are well used to pandering to their hotel guests' every whim. But has the internet changed all of that and even made their role redundant?

I've always been a fan of hotel concierges and an admirer of their great art, particularly in New York City's luxury hotels. These perfectly groomed, effortlessly patient and polite (at least to your face) walking encyclopedias hold some of the closest-kept secrets in the city, not to mention the connections to get you access when and where you need it.

Some of the best discoveries I've made in New York were through their introductions. Just a few years ago, for instance, after a particularly heavy weekend, I took a recommendation from Michael Romei of the Waldorf Astoria and enjoyed a serene picnic (complete with mouthwatering pumpernickel bagels from the Ess-a-Bagel bakery on 3rd Avenue) in seldom-visited Greenacre Park in Midtown East. And it was Frederick Bigler, chief concierge at the Peninsula, who first introduced me to the secret garden on the roof of Carnegie Hall and told me about the institution's gay history. Did you know that Tchaikovsky conducted his *Coronation March* at the opening concert there in 1891? Frederick also told me about its gay present: the New York City Gay Men's Chorus perform a number of shows at the concert hall each year and during WorldPride in June they will be celebrating the 40th anniversary of their founding at a gala concert there.

The word concierge conjures up images of yesteryear grandeur and the role and value of an NYC concierge has changed significantly, especially in today's digital age. I recently learnt that many of the city's concierges are now outsourced, as they commonly are in high-end hotels around the world. Some hotels have even done away with the role completely, replacing them with sophisticated digital databases that guests can access at the touch of an iPad. And the word on the street is that JW Marriott Essex House may soon be rolling out 'Alexa' concierges, something that the parent company has been trialling with Amazon.

Outside the hotel environment, it is open season in the concierge market. Global contemporary



candle-and-key services such as Velocity Black and Quintessentially promise members an all-access service via their phone, while DIY inspiration platforms such as Culture Trip are revolutionising the online space, offering browsing-to-booking opportunities.

With all this accessibility at our fingertips, I set myself the challenge of finding a way for OutThere travellers to explore New York through one of these 'contemporary concierges'.

But I'm tough to please. I've been to New York City many times and have experienced what it offers luxury travellers. I'm keen to dig deeper and find a way to access genuine personal recommendations; to receive the service of a concierge, but in a modern way. And like many OutThere travellers, it would be great if I could support an LGBT+ business.

Ask and you shall receive: over cocktails on the top floor of the historic Knickerbocker hotel overlooking the roofs of Times Square, I receive an email from Andreas Leuzinger, travel curator and founder of LOCALIKE. He's heard that I'm looking for the inside track to the city and he wants to meet to tell me more about what he does and how he can help.

We meet at the south-west corner of Bryant Park. I know this place well, as it's close to my favourite Japanese bookstore and canteen, Kinokuniya. It sells the most awesome East Asian lifestyle magazines. I could while away hours flicking through *Popeye* or *Brutus* as I have my fill of the onigiri on sale in the first-floor canteen.

As soon as we meet, Andreas is leading me to Blue Bottle café. We order what he says is Midtown's best drip-coffee. Much to his bemusement (and mine), I decline cake. We walk back to the park to talk.

Leuzinger – the name gives it away – is originally Swiss, from Zurich. He loves New York City, most likely because it's in his blood. His mother is a third-generation Manhattanite. We share stories and exchange tales of the city; the discoverers in us are kindred spirits.

Andreas tells me that NYC is more than an inspiration for him; it's a treasure trove of creativity. And his hunger to discover the city has led him to search high and low for the very best experiences and use his background in marketing to find ways to deliver them in the most curated of ways. From museums to art galleries, theatre to dance productions, music to food, he spends his days and nights – and most of LOCALIKE's working capital, it seems – discovering the very best morsels of culture across the five boroughs.

In an efficient and systematic way (that only the Swiss can achieve), Andreas has also created an online algorithm, where perspective explorers fill in a comprehensive questionnaire that determines their travel and lifestyle preferences. The results of that survey then become the foundation for a personalised itinerary to the city – a menu of customised suggestions. And, like a bespoke suit, this list fits the interests of each individual, couple or group with recommendations on how to make the most of each visit. There's even a 'fitting' process (to take the tailoring analogy a little further), where Andreas or a

member of his team goes over the results to match the needs of the client.

Being an innate traditionalist, I'm glad there's a human being involved. Andreas doesn't like being called a concierge (just as today's 'experience designers' don't see themselves as travel agents), but he acknowledges that what he does is the same, despite all the tech.

Back in the old days of concierges, letters would be sent ahead of time to the hotel, detailing the specific or even niche requirements of the arriving guest. The concierge, receiving the requests would spend some time getting a handle on things, confirming the guest's preferences and starting to make plans for their arrival.

Andreas's system does the same thing. After all, the system still relies on real, local knowledge delivered on a personalised level. Plus, a knowledge of who to call to make those hard-to-get reservations and, should their customers require it, added value service.

I pore over the comprehensive questionnaire. There are hundreds of possible lines of questioning and it's a case of the more I give, the more I get back. I'm keen to put this to the test, so I answer in much detail and add that I'm keen to experience the city and all its boroughs in a way I haven't done before. In 48 hours, I will receive my NYC inside track.

Less than 24 hours later, I'm having an afternoon snack in chef Geoffrey Zakarian's the Lambs Club, part of Manhattan's iconic Chatwal hotel. I'm imbibing Broadway history: it was here in this Stanford White-designed edifice that the famous Lambs theatrical club used to meet. A roster of the good and the great of American theatre have passed through its doors.

I have an email. It's from Andreas, letting me know that my proposal is ready. To make it easily manageable, he's split it up into a three-day itinerary. Some suggestions I can see in my own time and others have numbers where I can make a reservation and, of course, someone I can contact if I need more help. At the top of the list, I spot something right here in this neighbourhood and I dive straight in. I could have been anywhere in city, but it's almost as if Andreas knew that I'd be right here in Midtown and in need of some retail therapy.

