

● SPECIAL REPORT

GET TO WORK!

GRATUITY NOT INCLUDED



ALEXANDER BASEK learns that tips are hard to come by at NYC's Hotel Giraffe

FIRST, I needed a suit. As a bellman for two days at the Hotel Giraffe on Park Avenue South, not only did I have to look sharp to greet guests at the door, I also needed the right duds. And the bellman uniform at the hotel is one that would be approved by even the pickiest fashion plate: a black Calvin Klein suit with a crisp white shirt and a snazzy red tie. And, to top it off, a shiny name tag.

One tailor snafu and a few hundred bucks later, I was ready to report for training.

Nalini, the Giraffe's general manager, gave me a speed tour of the hotel. She explained the differences among the rooms — like no bathtub in Room 204 — as well as the amenities I'd list once I brought a guest to the room.

"If nothing else, offer to bring guests a bucket of ice," she advised.

I was prepared to welcome anyone who came past my station, right behind the Giraffe's surprisingly heavy front doors.

Being a bellman wasn't only getting guests inside. It was like being the utility infielder of the hotel. See a Town Car pull up out front? Prop open the door, grab the bags from the trunk and bring them inside. My fellow bellmen had strong opinions about this aspect of the job. "Europeans," one sniffed. "Why do they always bring those heavy suitcases?"

Struggling to unload a trunk filled with bags, I could already relate — even if the family of four to which those mammoth suitcases belonged were Americans.

When there was too much baggage to carry at once, I used the iconic baggage rack — which doubles as a ferry for delivering dry cleaning to rooms — to get the bags to the lobby. I waited patiently while guests checked in, pointed them to the elevator and accompanied them to their rooms.

During training, I learned the 20-second elevator ride is when bellmen must build an oh-so-crucial rapport with guests. I shadowed another bellman first. Slick from years on the job, he struck up an easy conversation with a guest from Los Angeles as I helped bring his bags. Then it was my turn. I fol-

lowed a middle-aged woman traveling alone to her room:

"So," I said, in the elevator, flop sweat dotting my brow, "first time staying here?"

"Nope." And just like that, we were at the door to the room. I had already forgotten her name.

"Can I tell you about the amenities in the room?" I asked. "Want to know how the blackout shades work?" I was told this was one of the most common questions, and thought I'd beat her to the punch.

"No thanks," she said, thrusting two dollars into my hand. I should have been thankful to get that much. It was half of what I earned that day. My poor social skills were cramping my style. Plus, mid-week, when I worked, is much worse for tips.

The down times — the largest being after checkout until new arrivals start to trickle in around late afternoon — are devoted to the time-honored bellman tradition of swapping stories. The bellmen agreed that repeat customers, who are 80 percent of the Giraffe's business, give the best tips. A bellman can earn up to \$100 on top of his hourly wage, but it is the regulars who have very specific needs. Who knew that anyone asked for softer wattage light bulbs in their room?

By the way, some customers may think they're discreet, but the bellmen have an excellent idea of what you and I are up to. Boyfriends arrive the second a husband leaves; girls sit in the lobby and pay for a room in cash — and it's all happening under the watchful eye of the gatekeepers. They're just usually discreet enough to pretend they're not watching.

"We know what's happening in the hotel better than anyone else," one told me.

At the end of the shift, my arms were sore from handling bags and opening the door. My black suit was damp with sweat. I didn't want to speak to another human, much less tell them about the complimentary wireless or the DVD library. Being friendly is way more work than I'd thought.

And next time, I'll come prepared with something interesting to talk about in the elevator.

After you: Bellman-for-a-day Alexander Basek keeps a firm grip on the hotel's baggage rack.



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