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Elite Hotel Concierges Far Cry From Surly Babushkas

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Pavel Nikolayev received a phone call one day. A guest at a Moscow hotel wanted lilac roses to give to his wife for her birthday. The birthday was in three days. Could it be arranged? "Of course, why not?" Nikolayev said.

"A concierge is a person who doesn't know the word, 'no'," Nikolayev said.

As Moscow hosted the international meeting of the Clefs d'Or concierge association for the first time this weekend, it is clear that his approach reflects the essence of his training and experience — and is a far cry from the days when the extent to which one could expect good service in a local hotel was a surly administrator taking your passport and unsmiling elderly women handing out keys on each floor.

Industry experts are expecting that the Russian hospitality sector will continue to improve its attitude.

But the path is not as effortless as it seems, and neither was Nikolayev's task that day.

The specific sort of roses that the husband wanted were not exported to Russia. Moreover, the man wanted the roses bought from the same Paris flower shop that he and his wife visited three years ago, complete with the branded wrapping paper.

Could it be arranged? "'Yes,' I said, when really I'm thinking, 'I don't know.'"

The guest's wife received the roses before midnight on her birthday.

Nikolayev had called a colleague from Paris who arranged to buy the roses from the shop. It took a day for Nikolayev to get a French visa, then he hopped on a flight to Paris and returned the same night, clutching 150 thorny flowers in his arms the entire way.

Service like this is one of the ways that Nikolayev, and his colleagues in Les Clefs d'Or, an elite international association of hotel concierges, are changing the face of Russian hospitality.

"We sell emotions because rooms are more or less the same in every hotel," Nikolayev said of the Clefs d'Or members, which are chosen based on their experience in the hotel industry, local knowledge and willingness to help guests.

Nikolayev is the president of the organization's local branch, which was established 10 years ago and has doubled its membership in the past year. The chapter now has 27 members in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Sochi and Kiev, and Nikolayev said he is looking to recruit members in Kazan and Yekaterinburg.

As the Russian hotel industry gains more Clefs d'Or members, it becomes more prestigious, said Michael Hopf, vice president of Les Clefs d'Or Russia.

"We're helping our industry here to make things work, to grow, to perform better," he said.

The situation was different 10 years ago, when Russia was still learning the meaning of hospitality.

"You were not providing bad service. You were not providing the concept of service [at all]," said Aldo Giacomello, who acted as the international president of Les Clefs d'Or when Russia was accepted as a member.

But major upcoming sporting events, including the Olympic Games and the football World Cup, have put the country in the spotlight of the international hospitality industry.

"We predict incredible growth for the Russian [branch], and we also predict incredible opportunities with the countries that are around Russia," said Virginia Casale, international president of Les Clefs d'Or.

The opening of new luxury hotels locally will also attract more attention to the quality of Russian hospitality, Hopf said. Some of these international hotel chains, such as InterContinental and Baltschug, have a requirement that at least one concierge have the golden keys on his lapel.

The country's young generation is expected to fill the new concierge positions. Already the local concierges are younger than their European counterparts. The average age of a Russian concierge is 26 years as compared to 37 years for West European concierge, Nikolayev said.

Association members are confident that the current generation of local candidates is capable of providing the kind of hospitality that luxury hotels require.

"They have an absolutely different mentality to what it used to be," Nikolayev said. "They're just more helpful. They are more service-oriented."

The young staff undergoes training to bring them up to the association's standards. One of the key lessons for a Russian concierge is about the meaning of luxury.

"We have to teach our members first of all about the lifestyle of the guests they serve," Hopf said. "They don't know what the difference is between a bag you buy in a regular store and a Louis Vuitton bag. We bring them the understanding of quality, of luxury."

A big challenge for the association is to attract new recruits. The shortage of qualified staff is still a big problem for hotels.

Unlike their European counterparts, Russian hotel workers are not familiar with Les Clefs d'Or, which makes recruitment difficult, Nikolayev said. He met five concierges during visits to Sochi and St. Petersburg who fit all the membership requirements, but never applied to the association because they did not know about it.

Part of the problem is that the concierge position is not as prestigious here as it is in Europe, where there are sometimes waiting lists for a spot to open up, Nikolayev said. Salaries for concierges in Russia are much smaller and many still consider working in a hotel a low-level service job.

But Michael Romei, international general secretary of Les Clefs D'Or, has already received letters from Almaty and Baku concierges who are interested in joining the organization. He said he expects that more inquiries will follow.

"It shows that there is a spark there. It's beginning," he said.

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