



THE BUTLER DID IT

INVESTIGATING THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE BUTLER-COME-CONCIERGE

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Think 'butler' and the image that's likely to materialise is of a balding man with an upturned nose, wearing a penguin suit and carrying a silver tray. The traditional manservant of yesteryear is associated with a scornful expression and a distinct air of superiority – he is enough to make all but the most self-assured aristocrats wish the Persian rug would swallow them up. But as the high-end travel industry opens its mind to a new generation of adventurous and free-spirited, yet nonetheless wealthy and demanding clients, it seems Jeeves has been made redundant. The new wave of experiential suppliers understands that travel is a highly personal experience – as such, they are overthrowing stuffy, impersonal service in favour of a radical new approach.



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One such example is [Dive Butler International](#): the brainchild of PADI Master Instructor and Dive Centre owner Alexis Vincent. His pioneering concept provides private, personal scuba diving guides and instructors to super yachts, charter companies, luxury five star resorts and VIP individuals across the world. Offering hard-to-get access to unspoilt, inaccessible and unexplored territory, their bespoke itineraries cater for everyone from novices to experienced divers; plus, their multi-lingual, multi-faceted team of diving professionals offers additional services ranging from Pilates, to underwater videography and marine conservation tutorials. The difference between Dive Butler and a standard tour operator is the focus on one-to-one care: as with traditional butlership, Dive Butler assigns one 'dive butler' to an individual for the duration of their stay.

Writing for [ehotelier.com](#), Hotel Butler and Experience Counsellor Osvaldo Torres Cruz suggests that through their continued exposure to a guest, butlers have the ability to identify their emotional needs and adjust their own services to match – it seems the traditional role of the butler is evolving into that of a modern-day personal concierge. In fact, Ceil Miller-Bouchet observes in [NY Times' In Transit](#) that, "In the race for an increasingly personalized luxury hotel experience, the butler may be the ultimate amenity."



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In the context of travel today, butler and concierge services are an extension of the highly personalised journeys that Private Travel Designers create – they are the eyes and ears on the ground that allow for real-time tailored adjustments to the details of a trip, subject to the client's whims and changing circumstances. As if to demonstrate this, luxury tour operator [Quintessentially Travel](#) gives its clients membership to its 24-hour concierge service, Quintessentially Lifestyle, as standard in the run-up to and for the duration of their trip – thus granting them access to a PA come translator come event organiser come personal shopper come publicist, or almost any other conceivable service they might desire. Indeed, at Dive Butler, Vincent is reportedly planning to expand his concept with the launch of private, specialised lifestyle and wellness services for exacting travellers in the high-end sphere, though the exact details remain as yet undisclosed.

There are those who would reject the idea of grouping butler and concierge services together on the basis that doing so threatens the integrity of traditional butling. The debate raves in [The Wall Street Journal](#), with chief executive of The International Butler Academy Robert Wennekes suggesting that over familiarity and a preoccupation with technology are leading to the downfall of the profession. Yet others – such as former butler Vincent Vermeulen, who has recently set up the School for Butlers and Hospitality in Brussels, and director of London-based Bespoke Bureau Sara Vestin Rahmani – believe that “times are changing” and butlers should “be of service in a 21st-century kind of way”.



Certainly, in a new initiative at the [St. Regis Bal Harbour Resort](#) in Florida, guests and butlers can communicate before, during and after a stay via eButler, the hotel's dedicated online platform; talking to [NY Times' In Transit](#), the vice president of North American brand management for St. Regis Anthony Ingham quips, "Our butlers today are more Pepper Potts in *Iron Man* than Alfred Pennyworth in *Batman*". While [Silversea Cruises](#) may initially appear to stick more closely to the traditional template, their Guild of Professional English Butlers-trained staff are a far cry from the stiff upper lips of old. Among a long list of 'unobtrusive' services they carry out both traditional butling duties – including serving breakfast, shoe shining and presenting no fewer than eight pillow options – and other, more dynamic tasks – such as party planning and the organisation of on-shore activities in partnership with the shoreside concierge, with whom they work closely.

The trend for butlers is not dying, but it is moving away from overly elaborate turn downs (involving swans bizarrely sculpted from towels and the like) and other fussy, yet ultimately unhelpful deeds – as Hugo Mechalse, Senior Instructor and Consultant at International Butlers states, "'window-dressing' is not an option when you are serious about delivering high-end service to your guest". Today's experiential butler errs towards a practical and intuitive form of butling more akin to a concierge service, which arises from being emotionally in tune with a guest. Thus, where once having a butler was merely a symbol of luxury travel, it could now be instrumental to emotional travel.