

Barnett on Business Travel: Ultimate perk for the harried traveler â€” the butler

by *Chris_Barnett*

MUMBAI, INDIA - The butler did it. He saved me from getting completely lost in this chaotic, exciting city, saved me a half-hour of high-powered haggling and saved me at least \$40 in rupees. The convenience is worth 10 times that.

Needing an inexpensive gym-style zipper bag to haul home files, press kits and gifts accumulated on my first trip to India, I was about to plunge into the steamy streets of Mumbai (locals still call it Bombay) on a Friday night to go shopping. But Manoj Gaikwad, a butler with a mile-wide smile assigned to my floor at the stately Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel, said "No, sir. Let me accompany you. It is not a problem."

I always thought butlers stayed in the hotel waiting on guests and congregated in the butler pantry waiting to be summoned. But Manoj, 25 and movie-star handsome, told me "as a career guest service professional at the Taj, my job is to help you no matter what you need." Impressive answer.

We walked about nine blocks, along sidewalks choked with people, past shops and storefronts, either dimly lit or festooned with neon. The air was humid, perfumed with a cloyingly sweet, sweaty smell and music belting from boomboxes. At one point, the sidewalk was gridlocked with bodies and Manoj said, "Come on, we'll walk in the street."

Street? Walking into oncoming buses, cars, trucks, autorickshaws and bicycles that observe lanes? Is he daft? "Don't worry. They're good drivers. They won't hit you."

He was right. We survived walking two long blocks through dust and sidestepping mud.

Back on the sidewalk, we were joined by several young beggars. One looked like a 12-year-old, carrying a 2-year-old; both had their tiny hands out. Manoj, tall, in his Taj cutaway coat with tails, starched white shirt, black tie and gray striped slacks, gave them some rupees, but their little fingers kept grasping for more.

We arrived at an open-air luggage store, actually a wall hung with bags, and Manoj went to work. Never breaking his smile, he launched into a 20-minute verbal joust in high-pitched Hindi, giving me a few translations of the play by play.

His opening line: "How much is this bag?" \$25 was the answer. Manoj: "Come on. I'm from Mumbai. I know how much you paid for this bag - 90 cents."

After a wailing Greek tragedy, Indian style, with Manoj walking away three times, only to return when the price dropped again, we wound up with two large, colorful, fold-up zipper bags for \$12. The price is in line with the rules of engagement for bargaining here: Never pay more than 25 percent of the asking price.

Manoj's coup de grace? " I told him 'make me a proper deal, that my cousin has a luggage store down the street. We will go see him but we just didn't want to walk that far.' I have no cousin."

There are 45 butlers at the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower (www.tajhotels.com). The four assigned to me around the clock were punctual and gracious. They work hard for their money and gratuities. Manoj lives two hours away by train. He has to be up at 3 a.m., and on the platform at 4 a.m. just to get stand-up space in a train car so jammed with humanity at rush hour you can't move your head to the left or right. Astonishingly, 5 million people pour into the city's main train station every morning; Mumbai's population stands at 23 million officially, but the best guesstimate is 25 million.

The Victorian hotel, though, can only be described as a temple of shocking sheer luxury; a throwback to the dawn of the 20th century when India had opulent pockets of wealth, elegance and attentive friendly service beyond the imagination of a Westerner. Five star ratings and superlatives really don't describe it.

Crowned with a shimmering dome, the Taj Mahal Palace, near the financial district filled with soot-stained old British Colonial buildings, has something of a dual personality by design. The original palace, built in 1903, is a blend of Moorish, Florentine and Oriental architecture with vaulted ceilings, tall archways, intricately carved polished wood and art, artifacts and alabaster everywhere. While some hotels cut corners on maintenance, there is nothing worn or threadbare. It's attached to a 22-story tower built in 1973, but the place to stay is the original side. The spacious rooms start at \$517.

The Taj Mahal Palace is the quintessential business hotel, despite the fact royalty - kings, princes, presidents and prime ministers - bunk in here. While I was there, the president of Indonesia and a massive entourage had checked in. It wasn't like 500 life insurance agents had taken over the hotel on a whoop-it-up sales rally; we're talking tasteful.

Every business service imaginable is offered with 19th century style and 21st century efficiency. No, that's not brochure-speak. And with India's gross national product growing today at a stunning 9 percent annually - Germany, by comparison, has a 1 percent GNP growth - commercial travelers are flooding this city and others to get in on the action. The tower has a huge business center, which looks like an office. If you need help at 3 a.m., the door is unlocked by a smiling staffer, not a grumpy security agent. A two-story clubroom with full buffet breakfast, offers gratis PCs, cold washcloths, fresh orange juice, seven newspapers and at least four people serving you.

Have a single shirt cleaned and a butler delivers it to you in a woven black leather box. Need help connecting your laptop in your room at any hour? A butler materializes in a moment and stays with you until you are online.

The best example of the beauty of butler service far transcended tea, coffee or anything you want two minutes after summoning them. Back from a dinner at 2 a.m., I thought I lost my passport and turned a very large room upside down looking for it. I emptied suitcases, bags, pockets, and was convinced it fell out of my coat when I took it off arriving at the sweltering hot airport.

Rang up Manish Ayre, butler on duty at that unholy hour, and he patiently went through every inch of the large room. (Large? The bathroom into the shower was 25 feet long). Ayre came up dry and apologized. Then he called down to a night duty manager to call the private car company. No luck after searching 10 vehicles for the missing passport at 4 a.m. Since I didn't make a photocopy of the document, I was cooked because I had catch a plane to Delhi in two days and the passport couldn't be replaced that quickly with all sorts of reports and formalities starting with a lost report at the Mumbai police.

After a sleepless night, at 8 a.m., my butler rang. The hotel security agent wanted to speak with me. Fine, I'll be right down. "No, she would like to come to your room and take the report." She?

Within five minutes security agent Navaz D. Zaiwalla, all slim and shapely 6-foot-1-inch of her, with sleek black hair, full lips, penetrating pearl gray eyes, appeared at my door, escorted by a butler. She was in a business suit and all business. "May I come in and retrace your steps." Was I about to say no?

Agent Zaiwalla swept through the room with slow, deliberate gazelle strides.

"Is this somebody's passport?" she said coolly but with a faint smile, holding up the Uncle Sam-issued global hall pass. "Absolutely."

I was so overjoyed. I impulsively hugged her and she stiffened. Not a smart idea. She gave me a gentle lecture on the wisdom of my passport, scanning it, e-mailing it to myself and carrying the passport number with me at all times.

My silent butler spoke up. "Is there anything I can get you sir? How about a nice cold washcloth?"

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time and money.

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