



ETIHAD'S SAVOY-TRAINED BUTLERS STRIVE FOR CONSISTENCY

News / Airlines



White gloves might be de rigueur for royalty or a trip to the opera, but it's also what your butler will be wearing when he or she delivers a hot towel during your next journey with Etihad Airways' The Residence.

A uniform prerequisite for the carrier's team of 52 butlers, they can take some "getting used to", according to butler Thomas Piroška.

"Sometimes I have guests who request me to remove them," says the 31-year-old, from Slovakia. "I tell them that it's part of my uniform, but they say no, I want you to feel comfortable."

Etihad's Savoy-trained butlers are one of many reasons the airline secured the coveted "five-star" rating from Skytrax last week.

Etihad has been ramping up its premium offering over the past two years. It launched its three-room suites, The Residence, and first-class Apartments (private cabins) on its long-haul flights in

2014 and its butlers the same year. The butlers only work for The Residence on Etihad's nine A380s, doubling up as F&B managers if the suites are unoccupied.

Mr Piroška says that when he first started the job, he expected the guests to be royalty and celebrities. "But actually it's nice, normal ladies and gentlemen who are not really demanding," he says, adding that he considers himself more of a "lifestyle manager" than a traditional butler. Another feature that helped Etihad gain its five-star accolade is its new fine dining "food philosophy", launched earlier this year.

"We took a lot of inspiration from Michelin-starred restaurants around the world," says the carrier's line manager for in-flight chefs Francois Banzoyo, from South Africa.

Mr Banzoyo makes sure the chefs follow the guidelines. "These have photos attached so chefs can follow them exactly to a T, to create consistency."

Etihad's eggs for the upper classes, however, are customised to each passenger. To fry one, the pan goes into a special aircraft-friendly oven. "In case there's turbulence, we can't have oil flying around", he says.

But all this precision will cost you. A return flight to London Heathrow on The Residence will set you back around Dh83,000.

Q&A

Eugen Pongracz, performance manager at Etihad, tells Jessica Hill about his role overseeing the airline's team of butlers:

Do you have male and female butlers?

I have almost equal numbers. Some guests do prefer to have female butlers, but most have no preference. We have to look at the demographics of where we're flying to – some guests prefer an Arabic speaker, some prefer English butlers.

What does the butler training involve?

Butlers have one week at West London University and two weeks at The Savoy hotel. Then we have follow-up training here in Abu Dhabi.

What is the most valuable lesson from the stint at the Savoy?

We're like a breeze, you feel it but it's not there. That means being very discreet and sophisticated at the same time.

What's the hardest aspect of being a butler?

We want to be able to provide everything the guest requires, but sometimes we simply don't have that particular thing they want on board the aircraft. A guest might ask for a certain type of beverage or sushi – if we haven't ordered it before the flight there's nothing we can do. But there's always an alternative we can offer instead.

What do customers like most about flying Etihad First Class?

They appreciate the products, especially the Poltrona Frau leather seats and the Panasonic entertainment system. But what's most important is our hospitality mindset.

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