

A Holiday From Heavy Lifting

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After a long vacation or business trip, "there's no place like home" often rings true. Especially when you return to a spotless house, a full fridge — and new hardwood floors.

And these days, it doesn't take ruby slippers to make this happen. Last Christmas, for instance, a client asked Toronto-based Zebrano, a seven-year-old personal concierge services company, to co-ordinate ripping up old flooring and installing new hardwood on three levels of a house while the family went away for two weeks. The normally intrusive task meant clearing out furniture and letting the sawdust fly, says the company's founder and president, Wendy Davis.

Zebrano is part of a growing trend in the travel-services industry that caters to busy people who are money-rich and time-poor — or simply can't be bothered with details. Until recently, firms like Zebrano handled mostly mundane tasks such as picking up dry cleaning or buying Father's Day gifts. But these days, some are jumping into the travel niche by offering high-end, uber-specific services. And why not? Vacation time is ideal for home renos. No need to live with plaster dust, buzzing drills or 6 a.m. wake-up calls when the contractors arrive. Better yet, Davis says, Zebrano visits the site at least twice a day to ensure that the work stays on schedule.

"Any messy things we can do while our clients are away, well, of course we're going to try and plan them when they're off on a trip," she adds. "Our objective is to try and minimize any disruption to our client's everyday life."

The company also offers a professional cleanup service "top to bottom" before clients return home, Davis says, which means clearing out the furnace, ducts, air conditioning and venting system. Blinds are also sent away for a professional wash. In fact, Zebrano will tackle almost any challenge — travel, personal or reno-related — as long as it's moral and legal. Want to find the safari vacation most likely to land you a photo of a giraffe? The company will find it, book it and then develop an itinerary. Need someone to water your plants, babysit the kids, sort your mail, have the car maintained or clean carpets while you're gone? For a \$60-an-hour fee, your wish is their command.

Beyond vacations, many professional clients use personal concierge services to help them deal with the stresses and strains associated with too much business travel. Cynthia Pickering, owner of Time is Money Executive Concierge in Calgary, says she started her company last May after spending years in the oil and gas industry as a credit analyst. Flying back and forth between Calgary and Houston, she realized other executives must also be struggling with keeping their work and home lives in balance. "You get home from the airport on a Sunday night and you don't want to go to the grocery store. So you're looking at your curdled milk in the fridge for the rest of the week," she says.

Now that Pickering has ditched her own dawn-to-dusk corporate gig, she's the one stocking clients' fridges, organizing house cleaning and changing linens. "I know how nice it is to come back from any trip to fresh linens," she says.

Absentee car servicing is also popular, says Jayson Gagnard, president of VIP-Services in Mississauga. When Gagnard started his business a year and a half ago, he wanted to help clients find the best deals on vehicles, but, finding that market too limiting, he expanded his services. Now, he and his four employees also handle travel-related requests, from booking weekend jaunts to snow shovelling while clients are away. Plain-Jane house-sitting, however, is the company's bread and butter. "If you're on vacation but worrying about your home and if it's been broken into, you're not going to have any fun," he says.

Yet even busy people have a hard time unloading to-do lists onto strangers sometimes, and finding the right person to trust isn't easy. Gagnard says he has had success when clients outsource small jobs first, then build up to trips, kitchen renovations or wedding planning. "Once you've gained that trust, then you're home free," he says.

Although Zebrano client Harold (who doesn't want to disclose his last name for privacy) has never needed to use the company's home-maintenance services while away, he regularly depends on Zebrano to plan his family trips.

The company goes well beyond what a typical travel agent would offer. During the last Winter Olympics, Zebrano developed a trip for his two grown sons, sending them off to Turin with Canadian men's hockey tickets in hand, then on to Bali, Australia and New Zealand. It even threw in a copy of bestseller *Honeymoon with my Brother*.

Before travelling, clients receive a binder full of tools to make the trip stress-free, from visas for each country to airline flight and hotel confirmation numbers, details about transfers, numbers to call if a driver or guide doesn't show up and tourist information about the locales they're visiting.

Harold's itinerary for his own recent Australia and New Zealand trip was even more specific, right down to golf tee times, restaurant reservations and sightseeing tours. At the same time, he says he and his wife felt they could deviate from the plan if they needed to.

Of course this kind of trip isn't for people who think planning a vacation is half the fun. "A concierge service is ideally suited to people like my wife and I. We're not the kind of people who dive into the Internet and research the heck out of things on our own," the retired Toronto-based lawyer says. "We rely on Zebrano to do the research, have the contacts, make arrangements — and we just go and enjoy the trip."

Naturally, concierge services don't come cheap. Zebrano clients buy 50-hour blocks of time for \$3,000. Calgary-based Time is Money uses a membership model that charges \$175 to \$1,000 a year, plus an hourly rate (non-members pay \$110 an hour, while members get discounts of up to 25 per cent). VIP-Services is the most affordable of the bunch at \$40 an hour.

But for some people, the money's worth it. Zebrano's Davis, for example, once negotiated with Four Seasons hotels in Provence to allow her client's 16-year-old daughter to use the resort spa services, which are usually off-limits to anyone under 18. One of Pickering's Time is Money clients, meanwhile, e-mailed her from Rome asking her to drop off her boyfriend's favourite ice cream at his office.

"It was probably the most expensive ice cream she's ever bought, but one look at his face and it was so worth it," Pickering says.

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Time is Money Executive Concierge: Calgary; 403-612-2993; www.timeismoney.ca.

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