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# denver

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— JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1963

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## Denverite: Thierry Kennel

THE GENERAL MANAGER OF DENVER'S SOON-TO-BE-OPENED FOUR SEASONS ON HIS NEW HOME, THE ROLLING STONES, AND THE CRAZIEST PARTY HE'S EVER HAD TO BREAK UP. Interview by Nicole Frehsée

Thierry Kennel has lived in nearly 20 countries — including France, Kenya, and Indonesia — so when the GM of the upcoming Four Seasons moved his family to the Mile High City earlier this year, he wasn't sure what to expect. "I was pleasantly surprised by how warm everyone is," says Kennel, who hopes to open the hotel by October. "We last lived in St. Louis, where the hospitality is tremendous. I thought nothing would compare, but everyone in Denver is so friendly."

### Can you name all the places you've lived?

I was born in Strasbourg, France, and grew up all over Africa — in Libya, the Congo, Algiers, and Kenya — then went to Toronto, Paris, and Switzerland, where I attended hotel school. From there, the Four Seasons recruited me, and I went to Houston, then Vancouver, Jakarta, Bali, Chiang Mai (Thailand), the Maldives, Nevis in the Caribbean, Boston, St. Louis, and now Denver.

**Is moving around common in the hotel business?** Most

GMs move about four or five times, so I'm definitely above average. Both my wife and I grew up as expats. My dad was in the shoe business, so we traveled my whole childhood — and my wife is Swiss, but she was born in Burma and grew up in Asia. We have twin 17-year-old sons, and this is their seventh move. The key is to find things they can do in every place. They're competitive fencers, so if they couldn't do that here, it would've been a dealbreaker.

### How does Denver compare?

Some places are exotic and some are a more "normal," but you find a different richness everywhere. We grew up on the beaches, so we're excited to hit the mountains. Mesa Verde is high on our list, and so is learning to snowboard. I also love to golf, and I ride Harleys — I used to race Motocross — so I'm looking forward to doing that, too. We don't have to go to Greece or Africa; we've done it all. Now, our vacations will be in Colorado.

**How did you end up in the hotel business?** As a kid, I was

in and out of hotels a lot, and my brothers and I always got special treatment: We got private tours and got to make our own pizzas. There was a resort in Mombassa, Kenya, where my family stayed three years in a row. Every year, the GM, Mr. Schmidt, would tell us the fun stories that happened at the hotel. At 13, I said, "I want to be like him when I grow up."

**Does Mr. Schmidt know you followed in his footsteps?** I'm sure he's retired now, but I could probably Facebook him. He's probably 78 years old, sitting on some balcony with his computer.

### What's your business philosophy?

Have fun and love what you do. Our business is very simple — understanding what a customer wants and making it happen, knowing someone's favorite Scotch or how firm they prefer their pillow. It's not about how fancy the place looks. If the service isn't there, it's not a memorable stay.

**Have you found a favorite local restaurant?** I'm not much

of a traditionalist — my family and I love eccentric, exotic food — but every Sunday, we go to dim sum, either at Kingsland or Super Star Asian. We're very adventurous; we eat chicken feet, duck tongue, that kind of stuff.

**You must've met some interesting people.** I've met Bill Clinton, George Bush I and II. I've had coffee with AC/DC. In my younger days, I played bartender at a party for The Rolling Stones because they only wanted a manager there. I was in awe at first, but they're just regular folks who like to have a good time.

### Did you see *The Hangover*? They destroy a room at Caesar's Palace in Vegas.

Best movie ever! The beauty is, when something like that happens in the real world, people are actually charged for damages. That kind of stuff doesn't tend to happen in our hotels. People have parties and wine spills on the couch, but there are no tigers in the room or mattresses thrown out the window.

### Have you had to break up any parties?

Can I take the fifth, even though I'm French? I could tell you some stories, but it probably wouldn't be good for my reputation.

### Ever thought about writing your memoirs?

My wife is a writer, and she thought it would be interesting to tell the greatest stories that have come out of my years in the business. We were inspired by the book *Plane Insanity: A Flight Attendant's Tales of Sex, Rage and Queasiness at 30,000 Feet* — a flight attendant writes about the stuff he's seen over 15 years on the job at American Airlines. When I read it, I was like, "I have to write my own book. It would be 10 times better." ☑