

## An Uphill Battle

### *Rule change hinders resorts' worker hunt*

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LAKE TAHOE -- On a calm and windless day last week -- perfect for hitting the slopes -- children scrambled onto a fluffy snow patch under the practiced guidance of ski instructors.

A Scottish lilt drifted in the chilled air, interspersed with a rich, South American accent, urging the small charges to lean this way or that way at Lake Tahoe's Squaw Valley ski resort.

For Northern California ski resorts, the legend of the American ski bum is vanishing because living in cramped quarters in pricey locales no longer appeals to many U.S. youths.

As a result, as many as one out of every five ski resort workers in California comes from overseas.

"For me, it's the lifestyle here in Tahoe," said Bartosz Kosmider, a 27-year-old instructor from Poznan, Poland.

For resort operators unable to find enough U.S. workers, people such as Kosmider are crucial.

"If we didn't have them, we wouldn't be able to operate," said Karen Roske, who recruits seasonal workers for Squaw Valley.

But this could be the last year for Kosmider and many other resort veterans.

Unless Congress acts before the next winter season, Sierra resorts such as Squaw Valley could be looking at a short supply of veteran workers in key positions that include ski instruction, grooming runs and managing parking lots.

As skiers crisscrossed their way downhill last week, Kosmider joined other instructors in a lounge with picture-window views of the challenging, snowy mountainside.

He said his third season could be his last because he has encountered increasing difficulty getting a U.S. visa.

"I give up," he said, bending to fiddle with his boots.

With a master's degree in marketing, he values the cultural experience his time abroad has given him, but he's ready to settle down.



LEDE -- On a visa from Australia, Patrick Poelsma an instructor and manager for the Kid Ski School at Squaw gives a high five to one of his students for being a good learner. Of the 10,000 seasonal workers hired at all California and Nevada ski resorts, 2,000 must be hired off foreign shores, mostly in the Lake Tahoe region. An unexpected shift in immigration regulations greatly limited the number of visas for seasonal workers this season, leaving some resorts to scramble to replace veteran instructors, groomers and parking-lot managers. Without an act of Congress before the next season, Sierra resorts will be in straits again. With native workers harder to recruit, the returning foreign workers are crucial, say resort operators. Picture taken January 9, 2008. Sacramento Bee Bryan Patric - Sacramento Bee Staff Photo

"I think I'm more confident about myself," he said.

Surrounded by a virtual United Nations, Kosmider can't see how he and others will be easily replaced.

"If we wouldn't come, I don't know who would do it," he said.

Of the 10,000 seasonal workers hired by California and Nevada ski resorts each year, 2,000 typically are lured from foreign shores. Most of those work in the Lake Tahoe and Mammoth regions, according to the California Ski Industry Association.

A shift in federal regulations last year decreased the number of visas available for temporary workers who are not students or agricultural employees.

A 2005 federal law granted visas to seasonal workers returning under so-called H-2B visas without counting them toward the annual cap of 66,000 applicants. But the law's supporters failed to get the provision renewed beyond 2007, which means all H-2B applicants count toward the cap.

It left some winter resorts out in the cold.

"None of us knew it was going to happen," said Roske, who handles workers' applications for Squaw Valley near Lake Tahoe's north shore. The resort hired 118 workers with H-2B visas -- about a third of the staff -- from 11 countries this season; the hires were made just days before the federal cap on such applications was reached in September.

"I feel lucky," Roske said.

Alpine Meadows, another Lake Tahoe area resort, wasn't so fortunate.

"We missed the deadline by one day," said Judy Lee, the resort's human resources manager. She had applied for 30 of the H-2B visas, 15 for returning employees.

"I could have sent it in a week earlier. Now I'm kicking myself," she said.

She had hoped to get two men from Argentina who had managed the resort's parking lots for four seasons.

"They really knew the program," Lee said.

### **'We hope to get enough visas'**

Dodge Ridge Wintersports Area, in Tuolumne County, had planned to hire 10 returning H-2B visa-holders as ski instructors, but also missed the deadline.

"We have been able to work around the small gap in personnel, but would like to see the returning-worker exemption restored by next season," said Andy Wyllie, public relations-communications manager at Dodge Ridge. "If not, then we hope to get enough visas before they run out."

Summer resorts also will be sweating it out.

For the summer season, applications hit 33,000 -- the cap for seasonal summer workers -- Jan. 2, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Last year, the cap wasn't met until March 16.

The H-2B visa program was ensnared in politics, said Bob Roberts, executive director of the San Francisco-based California Ski Industry Association.

"It just got caught up in immigration issues," said Roberts, who is working with small business groups and resorts to get the old provision reinstated for next winter.

Roberts, a former ski bum, said U.S.-born youths seem unable or unwilling to work at resorts far from urban centers. Foreign workers are more willing to share tight living quarters to make ends meet.

"In all the resorts, the Aspens of the world, the price of real estate is making it difficult," Roberts said. "We just can't find people."

For skiers, the visa crunch may mean fewer instructors at resorts, he said.

At Squaw Valley, the demand for ski instructors is huge. As many as 400 children a day sign up for lessons during the holidays.

In his third season at the resort, Patrick Poelsma, 27, supervises the instructors. During the summer, he lives about an hour outside Melbourne, Australia.

As he ate a snack in the lounge with other instructors, Poelsma said he almost missed out on winter at Lake Tahoe because of the new restrictions.

He said he values his experience with youngsters, which will help him when he gets his teaching degree.

Poelsma is living with three others near the resort in a two-bedroom apartment with one bathroom.

Raising his arms toward the expansive windows and the mountain beyond, Poelsma said the living situation is a small price to pay for enjoying a world-class resort. He can't understand the reluctance of Americans to join him: "They're missing out."