

Thursday, November 1, 2001

Land of Opportunity: Foreign workers begin yearly trek to area in search of seasonal work

By Lara Mullin
Sierra Sun



Tahoe ski resorts are hiring, and their employees are coming from all over the world. Above, Javier Guzman meets with personnel at Northstar-at-Tahoe's job fair Saturday, while below, Arturo Orozco talks with Northstar employee Mickey Cotton.

- Photo: Grant Barta

As the snow begins to fall, the small towns throughout Tahoe begin to take on an international flair.

Accents can be heard in passing on the streets and in local restaurants, and suddenly a lot of new faces abound. The revolving door of seasons in the area is bringing in a new crew of workers to man the ski resorts this winter season, and many of them are coming farther than an 1985 Subaru can take them.

Every year hundreds of workers from Australia, New Zealand, Peru, Brazil, South Africa and elsewhere apply for visas to spend the winter months working in Tahoe. Exchange corporations like Work Experience USA recruit workers, provide information about various work opportunities and ski towns throughout the United States and make travel plans for foreigners. While students can save money on group flight deals, they often have to pay a sizable amount to the agencies for visas, insurance and employment fees.

Foreigners can work abroad with one of two visas: J1 and H2B. J1 visas are purchased by foreigners (mostly students) in their countries before their departure and are valid for three to four months. This is the category most workers in Tahoe are armed with, often expiring in February when school is back in session in New Zealand and Australia.

Workers from South American countries like Argentina and Brazil have a slightly different school schedule and usually arrive in January and stay until March or April. This late season availability has spurred resorts like Northstar-at-Tahoe to "actively recruit Brazilians, Argentineans and Peruvians," according to Human Resources Director

Debbie Kelly-Hogan.

The second form of visas is H2B visas, a more professional variety that is distributed by the resort and remains valid for six months. To hire a worker with an H2B visa, resorts must demonstrate their inability to fill all available positions with American citizens. Recipients of H2B visas can also only work in the specific department and for the resort that issued the visa, thereby eliminating any option to change departments or employers during the six month period.

H2B workers are skilled employees like ski instructors with the necessary qualifications and certifications to teach skiing. J1 visas, on the other hand, are issued to workers for more general employment and do not require prior training.

Squaw Valley USA hired nearly 100 J1 workers and 40 H2B workers last year comprising approximately 10 percent of the resort's total peak season employment. They sponsor a recruiting agency that in turn charges a fee for each employee hired by the mountain.

"It makes the work environment more interesting when you have people from several different countries and I think the American workers really enjoy the experience," said Katja Dahl, public relations director at Squaw Valley.

Foreign workers at Squaw Valley, like many local resorts, have to find their own housing once they arrive in the area a task that is often a difficult one. Squaw coordinates with Northstar and Alpine Meadows to run shuttle buses down to the Reno area, where many foreigners eventually settle for the season.

"We encourage workers to look for places down there," Dahl said.

Northstar-at-Tahoe is anticipating approximately 110 foreign workers this year D roughly 10 percent of their total employment. Earlier in the season they had more foreigners pledging to work, but the events on Sept. 11 have changed the minds of some.

"People are afraid to come here, or their parents won't let them. Either way, there are still plenty of students who do want to come to America," said Kelly-Hogan.

While Northstar does provide some housing in the Hilltop area in Truckee, they currently have minimal employee housing options for foreigners. The resort is working on building employee housing on site, but that option will not be available this season.

"We have a good reputation for taking care of those people," Kelly-Hogan said. "We have the Tahoe Trolley as well as a local shuttle to help workers get to the mountain."

At Diamond Peak Ski Resort in Incline Village, foreign workers comprise nearly one-third of the total staff. With a housing coordinator and recruiter on staff, the resort locates housing for much of its staff D in particular the foreign workers. Rent is fixed at \$350 per month at all housing venues, though for many foreigners this price is an expensive standard of living.

New Zealand native Bee Ferrato came to work at Diamond Peak over 20 years ago with an H2B visa that the resort procured for her.

Today she is a U.S. citizen, thanks to her American husband, and runs the Child Ski Center as well as spearheading recruitment efforts worldwide.

For Ferrato and Diamond Peak, the recruiting effort has been fairly simple.

"It is a nice, controllable snowball," said Ferrato. "Kids come and then the next year they tell their friends. Most are very impressed with the standard of living and it is such a wonderful experience for them."

While workers from South America and other countries who speak a foreign tongue may have heightened problems with assimilation than English-speaking workers from Down Under, resort representatives and workers do not see problems with co-mingling.

"Some of these guys can't speak English very well, but they are so hilarious it doesn't matter. We all get along," said Nick Sinopoli, an employee at Squaw Valley.

With workers representing 14 different countries coming to Northstar this year, locals are bound to encounter a new word, phrase or just a new way of saying an old one at the lift lines, over a beer or on the side of the road as visiting foreigners make their daily trek to the mountains.