

Ski-resort work-visa crisis stymies Vail, puts lives in flux around the globe

By David O. Williams

August 11, 2008 — Valerie Muspratt is 30 years old, French, and lives during the warm-weather months in the famous southern part of her country. She has been working for a decade now in the ski industry – the last three of those seasons on a work visa in Vail – and last winter she earned a base salary of about \$20 an hour. Whatever you do, though, don't call her a "ski bum."

Muspratt and the ski resorts she works for consider her a highly skilled seasonal worker worthy of returning year after year to teach people from around the globe how to ski. She is quite proud of her hard-earned skill as a certified instructor and clearly loves her work, but she won't be returning to Vail this coming ski season – mainly due to gridlock in Congress over immigration reform.

"I entirely blame the government, because they didn't listen to the concerns of the ski resorts, and that it's really not an immigration problem," Muspratt wrote in an e-mail. "The election is on the way, so 'let's not change a thing and leave our mess to the next government.'"

That may seem to some like the disgruntled opinion of a foreign worker who has enjoyed the fruits of the American economy, but the fact is that many politicians on the both sides of the aisle agree with Muspratt.

For years there has been talk of increasing the cap of 33,000 winter-season H2B visas available to the ski and tourism industries because of the high demand for workers and inability to find skilled domestic labor, and, in fact, an exemption keeping returning H-2B workers from counting against that cap used to be automatic.

Now even that exemption has been politicized by the larger immigration reform debate, even though H-2B visas go to legal workers who return to their home country after the ski season is up. The 33,000 cap was reached at the end of last month, and reportedly many Colorado ski resorts weren't even close to realizing their quotas. Vail Resorts reportedly targets around 2,000 of the visas as a share of its overall workforce of 15,000 at its five ski mountains.

"I don't think us, the foreigners, steal American jobs in the ski resorts," Muspratt said. "If we were better paid, it would still not be an attractive job for Americans who often have the goal of making more money. I hear very often this sentence, 'So, do you have a real job?'"



Valerie Muspratt, of France, has been ski instructing in Vail the past three seasons on an H-2B visa but won't be able to return this season due to the inability of Congress to deal with legal work-visa shortages because of the controversy over illegal immigration reform.
Courtesy of Valerie Muspratt

Vail officials say they're confident they will be able to fill the ranks with a variety of other recruiting tactics, including shorter term student visas, but the ski company is still focused on finding a long-term fix to the ongoing H-2B crisis.

"At this point, it looks like many of our talented international employees won't be able to join us this winter season," Vail Resorts corporate spokeswoman Kelly Ladyga said. "We will continue to work diligently to get this situation resolved for the long-term and bring these employees back the next season."

But for Muspratt and many other workers, fixing the work-visa crisis for the season after next may be too late.

"I'm very confused because I can't make plans ahead," she said. "If I get my visa for 2009-10, will I still be available to go back to Vail? If I don't get it, well, it'll be a big disappointment and I'll have to definitely change plans, I guess. Working with Vail Snowsports School is like working with your family, and it kills me not to be able to go back to say how grateful I am to everyone there."

Muspratt earned her Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) certification last season in Vail, something that's essentially useless teaching in Europe or anywhere else in the world.

Geraldine Link, director of public policy for the National Ski Areas Association, said there is still hope that some foreign workers can be salvaged for the coming ski season.

"We are continuing to lobby Congress for a returning worker exemption," Link said. "We are hoping to move it in September when Congress returns from August recess. If Congress passes a (returning worker exemption), resorts that have completed the labor certification phase of the process will be able to submit petitions to (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) for returning workers in time to get those employees before the crucial holiday period."