

Vail looks to Caribbean for workers

Limits on visas have town trying new avenues for hiring

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[Vail, CO Colorado](#)

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VAIL, Colorado — Vail is looking to the tropics to fill its needs for wintertime workers.

Town of Vail human-resource staffers will travel to Puerto Rico in the next couple of weeks to test the waters for recruiting there. The move comes amid fears that new visa rules could make it harder for Vail to get winter workers from other countries, especially Australia.

The town now employs about 35 Australian bus drivers and parking-booth attendants on H2B visas.

But exemptions for returning workers recently expired, and the town may not get all the H2B visas it needs under a nationwide cap of 66,000 visas a year.

“If we get capped out we’ll be in a difficult situation,” said John Power, human resources director for the town of Vail. “We’re using this (recruiting in Puerto Rico) as a backup plan.”

Graeme Rowe, an Australian bus driver with the town of Vail who comes here each year on an H2B visa, said he knows there’s a chance he won’t be able to return next year because of the cap.

“Yes, it is a concern we talk amongst ourselves about,” Rowe said. “Does it create uncertainty and frustration? Very much so.”

Rowe, a retiree, helps the town recruit other Australians each year. For Rowe and other Aussies, working in Vail lets them travel, ski and meet lots of people.

But over the last decade, it’s become a bit harder to recruit Australians to come to Vail, Rowe said.

The Department of Homeland Security has added new hurdles such as mandatory interviews, there’s greater competition from other resorts like Whistler, and the weak U.S. dollar has made it less attractive to come over to the states, he said.

Aspen Skiing Co., which didn’t get as many H2B visas as it wanted last year because of the cap, looked to Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, for workers.

Many town of Vail bus drivers work here for the season on H2B visas. The town fears that new rules might prevent the number of workers it can get on H2B visas. The town is considering looking for workers from Puerto Rico starting next year.



Daily file photo

It ended up getting about a dozen employees from there, said spokesman Jeff Hanle. It may be looking to Puerto Rico one more time, but the company sees more promise in 12-month, student J-1 visas, Hanle said.

“It wasn’t a gold mine by any means,” Hanle said. “It was stop-gap measure that helped in the short term.”

Unlike U.S. citizens such as Puerto Ricans, H2B visa holders’ residency in the states is tied to them holding the job, Hanle noted.

“If they’re coming from Puerto Rico and decide they don’t like the cold, they can just leave,” Hanle said.

And some of those Caribbean natives apparently didn’t like the Aspen winter, Hanle said.

But will they like Vail? Power said, at this point, he’s not sure.

“I’d say your guess is as good as ours,” he said.

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