

Martha's Vineyard Magazine

Capturing the Character of the Island

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From Jamaica to the Vineyard

For years, Jamaicans have been an integral part of the seasonal work force of the Vineyard. Now new rules concerning H-2B visas mean many can't return to the Island.

BY SHELLEY CHRISTIANSEN

April is here, yet North Road in Chilmark has barely gotten the memo. The Menemsha Inn will open for business next weekend, but for now, the grounds remain ghostly and still, save for the dune grasses quivering in a breeze off the Sound. The breeze picks up the warm aroma of something cooking with curry.

Cheryl Shaw, Roselyn Clark, and Sonia Thompson are taking it easy on this Sunday, their day off. Since their arrival on-Island last week, the three housekeepers have been opening, cleaning, and fluffing up guest rooms and cottages – the very same rooms and cottages they shut down in October before heading home for the winter. Home is the island of Jamaica. It's also home to thousands of other "guest workers," in U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services lingo, who come to the Vineyard year after year to feed the hearty appetite of the high-season labor market.

From the bloom of spring daffodils to the fall of autumn leaves, they drive cabs, mop floors, launder sheets, whack weeds, bus tables, haul baggage, sell souvenirs, and stuff ice cream cones. A few rungs up the ladder, some work as sous chefs, front desk managers, spa therapists, bookkeepers, skilled maintenance staff, maitres d's, and concierges. Imagine the confounded visitor who gets an informed tip on New England chowder or directions to South Beach in a voice that evokes Negril.

Most Jamaicans work in the United States at the mercy of temporary, "non-immigrant," H-2B visas, which were created to support local economies with seasonal spikes in non-agricultural labor demand. That's government longhand for "resorts." The Jamaica Central Labour Organisation, for its part, actively encourages its citizens to seek job opportunities in the United States through its Overseas Employment Programme. Put the two initiatives together, and for 2007, for example, you get 14,682 Jamaicans working in the United States on H-2B visas. After Mexico, Jamaica sends more guest workers to the U.S. than any other foreign country.

These visas are good for up to six months, and guest workers must earn the same wages and benefits that locals would get. A season's worth of earnings in the states, and on the Vineyard in particular, can exceed what a Jamaican might make at home in a full year. Hence, despite round-trip air fares, visa fees, and other ancillary costs that may or may not be subsidized by their employers, Jamaicans beat a lucrative path back to Martha's Vineyard time and again.

At least they try. As overall Congressional sentiments toward immigration have toughened in recent years, so have H-2B policies. And so have the fates of most of the Vineyard's guest workers – not only from Jamaica but also from Bulgaria, Belarus, and other nations of the former Eastern Bloc. They too have swelled the Island's seasonal work force of late. Vineyard-specific numbers are hard to come by, but nearly 500 employers on Cape Cod, Nantucket, and this Island combined hire 5,000 to 7,000 H-2B workers a year. Last fall, many of those workers returned to their home countries with renewed job offers for the 2008 season confidently in hand. By spring, most of those offers had turned to dust, thanks to inaction by Capitol Hill, which caused the latest H-2B hurdle (more on this later).



photo by Peter Simon
Sonia Thompson, Roselyn Clark, and Cheryl Shaw worked the Colorado ski season instead of going home to Jamaica, so they could return to their jobs on the Vineyard this summer.

Still, some employers and employees managed to clear the hurdle, and at the brink of high season, Jamaicans began trickling, if not flooding, back to the Vineyard. Some Jamaicans just work the jobs that brought them here, while others take on as much extra work and pay as humanly possible. (Note to the confounded visitor: Your cab driver looks like your bellman because he *is* your bellman.) In winter, some ply the tourist trade in Jamaica, or given new H-2B visas, they take jobs in the winter resorts of the United States. Others take sabbaticals to make up for lost time with their families. Some Jamaicans are guest-worker rookies, so to speak. Others have been returning to the Vineyard for a decade or more. Gradually, more and more Jamaicans have become green-card holders, slipping quietly into the year-round Island melting pot as construction workers, cashiers, landscapers, food service employees, home health aides, and more. The point is: There is no quintessential Jamaican guest worker story.

But here are two of them: Cheryl, thirty-nine, a woman of abundant cheer come what may, is a seasoned veteran of “back of house” hospitality jobs. Kirkpatrick Binns, twenty-five, is a gently polished front-office man with a whole other career path in his sights.

Cheryl Shaw

I first started working in the hotel industry at the Ocean Sands, in Ocho Rios. That’s where I’m from. I worked all over the place – housekeeping, laundry, sales, the front desk. Then I saw an ad in the newspaper for the Jamaican labor office, advertising jobs in the United States. I knew I could make more money there, so I went for an interview. You didn’t have a choice about where you went in the U.S.; you just went where they sent you. My first job was in housekeeping at the Harbour View Inn on Mackinac Island in Michigan. That was in 1997. I didn’t know what to expect. I was just told it was going to be cold and to bring warm clothing.

When David [Zeilinger, general manager, the Inns at Menemsha] left the hotel in Mackinac to come to Martha’s Vineyard last year, Roselyn and Sonia and I migrated with him. Altogether, about ten Jamaicans were working at the Menemsha Inn and the Beach Plum last year, in housekeeping, grounds, and in the kitchen. Most of them have been working here since the nineties. The front office jobs were filled by people from the U.S. and Scotland. It costs a little more for us to get to Martha’s Vineyard than to Michigan, but the pay here is better; Michigan is a cheaper state. And the guests here are really nice.

We work a forty-hour week. Most of us start between 6 and 9 a.m., depending on our jobs, and work until whenever the work is done – usually around 3 or 4 p.m. We don’t really get medical benefits, but if anything happens to us, Dave makes sure we’re taken care of. We live in our own rooms in a building here on the property. We share a kitchen and bathroom. Everything’s provided: furniture, bedding, television. This afternoon, we’re going to pick up a refrigerator in Oak Bluffs that we saw advertised in the Bargain Box [in *The Martha’s Vineyard Times*].

We get two days off a week. Mostly we sleep, go to the grocery store, and watch television. Sometimes we baby-sit for the guests and earn some extra money. Last year, we met some of the other Jamaicans working on the Island, in Edgartown and Oak Bluffs and down the road at the Inn at Blueberry Hill. Some of the people working here at the inns go into the towns to the movies or to party, but the three of us aren’t party types.

Mackinac Island was very small; only eight miles around. You could get everywhere by foot. Here, you have to take a bus or own a car. None of us has a car or bike, and just getting to the grocery store takes forever. One night last year, I missed the last bus back to Menemsha. I had to take the Aquinnah bus instead and walk from Chilmark.

Every year, Dave sends our visa applications to the U.S. embassy in Jamaica. Then we have to travel to the embassy in Kingston, file forms, and schedule an interview – *every year* – so they can see if we’re the “right” kind of people. You never know what they’re going to ask, but they always, always want to know how many kids you have and who’s going to take care of them while you’re away. I have a thirteen-year-old boy who’s in high school. He stays with his daddy.

We do this for the money, but we also do it for David. He has always been a good boss to us. That’s why we left Mackinac and came here to help him. He’s short, witty, and cool. He listens to us and asks our opinion. We can say, “I think we



Cheryl Shaw is one of the few who secured an H-2B visa to work on the Vineyard this summer.

should move that carpet from here to there.” And he’s not a sit-around kind of guy. On Saturday, when we’re really busy with guest turnovers, he’ll leave his office, roll up his sleeves, and help clean rooms or plunge a toilet.

We shop before we go back to Jamaica – mainly for appliances, household things, and some clothes for the kids. The kids tell us, “We want Adidas,” and so on. It’s cheaper to buy things here than in Jamaica, even when you include the shipping and handling. Shop on the Vineyard? Are you crazy? No, we go to Falmouth or Hyannis. Once you meet a Jamaican here, they’ll tell you where the bargains are and who does shipping to Jamaica.

When I go back to Jamaica, I stay at home, rest, and become a full-time mom again. Our families miss us when we’re gone, so we must give them lots of attention when we come back. Sometimes I wonder what people here think of us. *You leave your family for six months?* I’ve asked my son why he thinks Mommy’s not there with him. He says, “I understand. So I can get an education.” In Jamaica, people have to pay for education beyond primary school. It’s a nice country, but the economy is not too good. We make sacrifices coming here, to better our families’ lives.

The second thing we miss is food. We’d love to get some goat...green bananas...salt mackerel...yams. Not the yellow yams you see in Stop and Shop. We mean *Jamaican* yams!

Kirkpatrick Binns

I’m so glad someone is finally writing about the Jamaicans here. Everyone talks about the Brazilians and the Bulgarians on Martha’s Vineyard, but nobody talks about us!

I was raised in a single-parent home and had two sisters and a brother, so things didn’t come as easily to me as they should have. Not much attention was paid to public education where I grew up, but my family background and my own drive pushed me to excel. I ended up going to one of the most prominent high schools in the country, on the outskirts of Montego Bay, about fifteen miles from home.

I didn’t have the privilege of going to college right away, so I worked as an accounting clerk at the Wyndham hotel in Montego Bay. After a year, I quit to enroll in Montego Bay Community College. While I was in school full-time, I began working full-time at the Ritz-Carlton, first as a switchboard operator and then as a group reservations agent. After I finished school – I got an associate’s degree in applied science – I held other jobs at the Ritz-Carlton: front desk, concierge, guest and leisure services....This experience is what set the foundation for my ability to multi-task in my front desk jobs in Martha’s Vineyard.

People tell me I have the talent to move up in a career in hospitality, but I only do this work for financial support. My goal is to be an engineer, with a focus on mechanical and production management. I’m enrolled at the University of Technology in Jamaica, and I expect to complete my bachelor’s degree this year. When I come to the Vineyard to work in the summers, I save enough money so I can focus 100 percent on school when I’m back in Jamaica. So this is an opportunity of a lifetime.

How did it come about? My friend Stacy [White] was working at a hotel in Canada a few years ago, and she happened to meet the human resources director from the Harbor View Hotel [in Edgartown] on a flight to Jamaica. They talked about hotel work and job opportunities, and when Stacy got back to Jamaica, she told me and some other friends. I e-mailed my resume to the Harbor View, and after two telephone interviews, I was accepted. Stacy got a job there herself, as wait staff in the restaurant, and her husband, Newton, got a job as a valet. Stacy is a licensed massage therapist, so she also worked on-call for one of the spas. Newton worked part-time driving cabs. They had to leave their young daughter behind in Jamaica.

The Harbor View took care of all the arrangements, although I had to purchase my own form from the U.S. embassy to get my visa. That costs \$100 every year. Besides the interview, the embassy takes your Jamaican tax registration number and enters it into the system to see if you have bad credit or if you’ve ever had trouble with the law.

I had heard of Martha’s Vineyard in a novel I once read, but I never knew it was an actual place. I thought it was just “put together” by the author. I didn’t have an image of what the Island looked like before I got here. At the Harbor View, I worked nights in security and also assisted at the front desk. It was my first time outside of Jamaica for an extended period of time.

Ninety percent of what I’ve experienced in Martha’s Vineyard is good. I love the architecture of Edgartown, and I respect the way the town wants to keep history alive. The work here is good, although there could be more of an emphasis on the way service is delivered to paying guests. I’ve heard some staff, including managers, address guests as “folks” or “guys”

rather than “sir” or “ma’am.” They should show more respect, even though guests here are not as demanding as they are at the Ritz-Carlton – even if they are among the top earners.

Transportation can be a problem here. Buses don’t run late enough or early enough for the hours some of us have to work, and taxis are expensive. Before seven in the morning, they charge you double. In Jamaica, it’s easy to get where you’re going no matter how far it is.

I didn’t feel fully challenged working nights at the Harbor View, so I searched for something else so I could keep busy and earn some extra cash. A friend of mine from the Ritz-Carlton was working at the Winnetu [Oceanside] Resort in Katama. I sensed a five-star quality there that I liked, and he helped me get a front-desk job there. I worked forty hours a week at each job.

The Harbor View does its own recruiting and paperwork, while the Winnetu and a lot of other employers hire Jamaicans through agencies. There are quite a few agencies, in the U.S. and in Jamaica, placing Jamaicans in hospitality jobs around the United States. That’s how the majority of us get here.



Dwight Gardner, a regular deejay for Jamaican nights on the Vineyard, at Outerland with Toots Hibbert of the ska and reggae band Toots and the Maytals

I didn’t go back to the Harbor View last year. I just worked full-time at the Winnetu and part-time in sales at Town Provision Company [in Edgartown]. I stayed in a staff room at the Winnetu, so I didn’t need much in the way of transportation. When I wanted to go into Edgartown, I relied on other staff people and the VTA [bus] to drop me off and pick me up later.

At times, I feel accepted in Martha’s Vineyard as part of the community. But sometimes, when I go into certain stores, restaurants, or clubs, I feel I’m not really wanted there. When I’m not working, I stay at home and watch TV or read a good book. I also go to the beach and try to see places around the Island that I can recommend to guests. My favorite beach is South Beach. It’s not like Jamaican beaches though. The color, waves, temperature, and even the sun are a bit different.

Socially, I've hung out with groups that include Jamaicans, Brazilians, Bulgarians, and others. But in general, Bulgarians are more comfortable and friendly with each other, and the same is true for Jamaicans. On Tuesday nights last year, The Wharf [Pub and Restaurant in Edgartown] was dedicated to Jamaicans and Jamaican music. On Friday nights, it was the Seafood Shanty [in Edgartown]. Sunday night was "Jamaican Night" at the Rare Duck [in Oak Bluffs]. Dwight [Gardner] and Leon [Thompson] work as reggae deejays on most of these nights. Dwight is an electrician who lives here year-round now. Leon just comes for the season and drives a cab. I went to the Stephen Marley concert at the Outerland [in Edgartown] last year, and you could count the Jamaicans who were there on one hand. Ninety percent of Jamaicans never go there, even for reggae shows. The transportation there is difficult, the tickets are expensive, and sometimes they sell out in advance.

People ask why so many Jamaicans come to Martha's Vineyard. We're just like people who come here to work from other foreign countries. We come because the money is good, because we can spread our wings, and because we get international experience that can help us with our goals. I'm not 100 percent sure I can go without working while I'm in school this year. Inflation in Jamaica is getting worse. I might come back to the Vineyard for a year or two after I graduate. But if I'm recruited by a firm in my field, I would most definitely go with that.

The main drawback of being here is being away from family. You miss birthdays, weddings, baptisms – things you won't get to experience again. But you must set priorities. Although family is most important, you must set priorities based on your goals. It pays off in the end.

Not this year

For better or worse, Kirkpatrick will probably make it to all the Jamaican birthdays, weddings, and baptisms this year.

Starting in 2005, under pressure from Congress, the government began enforcing the cap on the number of H-2B visas – 33,000 for summer-season economies and 33,000 for winter, for an annual total of 66,000. These were the original quotas set when H-2B law came into being in 1991 – and when the nation's seasonal labor shortages were not as extreme as they are now. Just as summer 2005 threatened to let loose, Congressional leaders from aggrieved states, led by Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, won a last-minute exemption to the cap for H-2B workers returning to jobs with past employers. Vineyard employers were exultant. But it was a short-lived triumph; the exemption for returnees expired in September 2007. And despite tenacious grass-roots efforts for an extension, championed by Cape and Islands Representative Bill Delahunt, for one, Capitol Hill still hasn't budged (at press time). For 2008, the U.S. has issued only about half the number of H-2B visas it issued in 2007.

The kicker is, employers aren't permitted to apply for H-2B visas for any guest workers, old or new, any sooner than 120 days before they put them on payroll. Which means, if a Vineyard innkeeper didn't need to staff up this year prior to May 15, she couldn't apply for H-2Bs any earlier than January 15. And that would have been two weeks after the nationwide cap had been reached, on January 2. According to the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, employers of the Cape and Islands wound up with a total of 15 H-2B visas – *fifteen* – down from 5,000-plus the year before.

"We're screwed," says Peter Martell, owner of the Wesley Hotel in Oak Bluffs. "Do you want a job?"

"A lot of employers in this district have been in a panic this year," says Delahunt chief of staff Mark Forest. "But many of them came up with alternate efforts and plans to get their businesses staffed." They did more summer job fairs. They continued to hire college kids from Scotland, among other countries, who can work in the U.S. for up to four months on J-1 "cultural exchange" visas. But before the end of August, well in advance of the end of the season, American and foreign collegians alike will be doffing their work uniforms to head back to their campuses.

Some on this Island quietly wonder if businesses aren't putting enough emphasis on employing Vineyarders and other Americans in the first place. "I've actually heard from a couple of Chamber members who wish we would put *less* time and energy into getting workers from foreign countries," says Nancy Gardella, executive director of the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce. "But the fact is, our local work force is tapped out. We have a shortage of affordable housing for blue collar workers and a lot of older residents who lack either the ability or the desire to do heavy-duty work."

"I've *tried* to hire locally," says Peter Martell. "Believe me." Nancy notes that businesses generally prefer to rehire experienced staff no matter where they're from. They're already trained, and they need less supervision. There's less of an investment involved.

Dave Zeilinger of the Inns at Menemsha could vie for an H-2B creativity award. Eyeing the impending crisis in his crystal ball last fall, Dave got to talking with ski resorts in Colorado: Did they employ H-2B guest workers? Yes. Would they hire

some of his people for the winter? Sure, if Dave would agree to do the same for *their* people this summer. So not long after Cheryl, Roselyn, and Sonia went home to Jamaica in October, they turned around and headed for Steamboat Springs armed with new winter-season visas. Cheryl was a head cook for a mountain-base restaurant. Sonia and Roselyn were hotel housekeepers. In April, after Dave got their visas extended through December, they headed straight back to Menemsha from Colorado, without returning to Jamaica in between. Complex as it is, this H-2B recycling scheme is thoroughly legit. On an individual basis, many guest workers play the H-2B shuffle year after year. The catch is, don't set foot outside America at the wrong stage in the process. You might not get back in. Dave regrets he couldn't bring back all of his core staff. Some have been with him as long as twelve to fourteen years. They've developed strong personal relationships, he says. "I feel like such a heel. Over the winter, I kept telling staff people back in Jamaica that I *thought* everything was going to be okay this year. Then I would hang up the phone and recruit Jamaicans in Colorado, just in case. But even if something had worked out in Congress at the last minute, it would have taken forever to get the people in Jamaica through immigration at that point. I'm afraid for many of them. Afraid they'll run out of money. Unemployment in Jamaica is very high. According to hearsay, it's 40 percent." Employers may despair, but many guest workers seem to brave each season's storms as stoically as the dune grasses of Menemsha do. "We just laugh through all the changes," says Cheryl.