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## Few Visas, Fewer Resort Workers

By DENNY LEE

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IT usually takes a crew of six for the Nantucket Bake Shop, an old-style bakery on Orange Street, to make 700 loaves of bread a day. But on a recent afternoon, there was no one mixing the flour, no one kneading the dough and no one tending the oven. In fact, the oven wasn't on.



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

VISA DEADLINE The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island opened early this year.



Rick Friedman for The New York Times

DO IT YOURSELF Melissa Mann, manager of a Nantucket inn, tidies a room. A shortage of visas has kept seasonal foreign workers away.

"We're extremely understaffed," said Jay Detmer, the owner. "Our regular bakers from Jamaica were denied visas."

Like many seasonal resort areas across the country, Nantucket increasingly depends on foreign workers to wash its dishes, bag its groceries and fill other jobs once held by American teenagers and students.

But this year, a guest-worker shortage could cripple the season there, and at many other resorts. In Colorado, the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs was denied all 250 visas it customarily receives from the federal government for housekeepers, landscapers and masseurs. In Michigan, the Yankee Rebel Tavern on Mackinac Island is trying to make do without its usual staff of 18 dishwashers from Jamaica. And in Florida, Amelia Island Plantation has no one to help manicure its golf links.

Over the last decade, resorts have come to rely on foreign workers under a visa program known as H-2B, intended to help seasonal businesses fill job vacancies. But not this year. As demand for foreign workers grew, the 66,000 visas authorized each year were used up by Jan. 3. There was an H-2B shortfall last year, when the visas were used up in March. But this year, because the cap was reached much earlier, the shortfall is far more acute.

The current labor crunch is creating particular anxiety in New England, where the tourist season is compressed between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Under the program, employers can apply for the visas only within 120 days of the time when the workers are needed. Since the federal fiscal year begins in October, that meant that winter destinations like Aspen and Palm Beach got the first chance and snapped up all 66,000 spots. By the time summer resorts emerged from hibernation, no visas were left.

"Virtually all summer resorts were prevented from getting their H-2B workers," said Shawn McBurney, vice president for governmental affairs of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, a trade group based in Washington. "Hotels might have to cancel events or close part of their properties."

Islands like Nantucket have it worse. Nantucket's mainland neighbor, Cape Cod, is also struggling with a labor crunch, and the ferry ride to Nantucket, which can take as long as two hours, makes it impractical for workers from surrounding areas to commute.

"We place ads in the local papers every year, and I don't recall getting a single response," said Paula Leary, the administrator of the Nantucket Regional Transit Authority, which operates a summer shuttle service. Nearly all of its 35 bus drivers are now foreigners, mostly from Bulgaria.

For the second year in a row, the labor shortage could mean long waits at restaurants, shorter menus, untidy hotel rooms, reduced store hours and poor service.

The shortage also means fewer foreign faces. The guest-worker program, created in 1990, had the unintended effect of transforming formerly apple-pie resorts into virtual Epcot Centers of languages and cultures. On the Jersey Shore, local teenagers have been replaced over the years by fresh-faced students from Bulgaria, Poland and Lithuania. In Aspen, chair-lift operators have names like Bjorn, Gisela and Pavel. And in Hilton Head, S.C., Southern twang has clashed with Jamaican patois and Dominican Spanglish.

The local employee pools began shrinking long before resorts dipped into foreign labor.

Time was, summer resorts could rely on a glut of college students and high school teenagers to fill in as store clerks, cashiers and other low-paid workers. During the last 15 years, however, fewer American students have been venturing into the summer workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics said that 67 percent of American 16- to 24-year-olds had summer jobs last year, compared with a high of 78 percent in 1989. Last year's figure was the lowest percentage since 1966.

And those venturing into the workplace are looking for résumé-building positions. About 82 percent of college seniors now list internships at law firms, Wall Street corporations and nonprofits on their résumés, compared with just 3 percent in 1980, according to Vault, a career research firm in New York.

"They don't want to sling pizzas or make cheese steaks," said John Mosca, the nightclub manager at Jenkinson's Boardwalk in Point Pleasant Beach, N.J. Of the 100 workers he hired this summer, 20 are from the Czech Republic, and only a dozen are American collegians. "Unless they're on scholarship, they want everything handed to them on a silver platter."

Another factor keeping American students out of the seasonal workforce is the expanding academic calendar. Many college students now return to classes in August.

Resorts, meanwhile, have lengthened their season. "We begin in May and end in October," said Patti Ann Moskwa, a bar owner on Mackinac Island. "We can't fill those positions with students."

H-2B workers, on the other hand, can stay up to 12 months and sometimes longer. "I'm here from April to December," said Carol Morris, a 39-year-old Jamaican who left behind two children to spend her ninth season on Nantucket. She makes about \$400 a week cooking and bagging groceries. But opponents of the H-2B program say workers like Ms. Morris illustrate the real reason why college students have vanished: employers want cheaper labor. Many jobs pay \$8 to \$12 an hour, with few benefits besides dorm-style housing and a uniform.

EMPLOYERS, however, counter that Americans don't want these jobs, especially since they are temporary. Moreover, they note, the law requires that they advertise the jobs locally and pay competitive wages. And they point to the visa figures as proof of the enormous demand.

The number of H-2B visas went from less than 13,000 in 1996 to more than 66,000 in 2004, prompting the Citizenship and Immigration Services, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security, to prohibit new applications for the first time in the program's 14-year history.

With the 2005 season looking ominous, resort operators and trade groups lobbied Congress to raise the cap. Instead, they got a temporary fix. The so-called Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act, which was signed by President Bush on May 11, allows employers to bring back workers from the previous three summers without violating the cap. It also divides the visas between the summer and winter seasons.

But the measure is good only for two years, and many summer employers say it is too little, too late. By the time the new paperwork is processed, which is expected to take until July, the season will already be in full swing.

"It's not worth it for me," said Magee Detmer, the manager at the Nantucket Bake Shop, which had applied for six bakers from Jamaica and received none. "I'm not paying the fees to file all over again. Besides, all my former workers made other arrangements."

To replace the bakers, Ms. Detmer taped a "Help Wanted" sign in the window. Dozens have inquired, but only one person has been hired.

Others have taken more active steps. The Chippewa Hotel on Mackinac Island dispatched recruiters to Colorado ski resorts and used an option to transfer about 25 wintertime workers with H-2B visas to summertime jobs at the hotel. Its neighbor, the Grand Hotel, opened on March 1, its earliest kickoff, in order to get foreign workers, including a large contingent of waiters from Jamaica.

Many restaurants have slashed their menus and reduced the number of seats. And inns, resorts or stores that consider hiring illegal immigrants risk fines and suspensions.

But not everyone has given up on college students. "We were able to get students this year - from Singapore and Thailand," said Jessica Drennan, the human resources manager at Jenkinson's Boardwalk, which employs 1,200 during the summer. About 30 of those students worked under a student-exchange visa known as a J-1.

Unlike Americans or Eastern Europeans, she said, the Asian students were able to start work in May. "And their work ethic is a bit better," Ms. Drennan added. "American college students take work for granted. They don't value the experience as much as international students do."