

The New York Times

BUSINESS

Deep Into the Season, Jobs Go Begging

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER
July 20, 2008

MONTAUK



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times
Krystel Andres, from the Philippines,
at Gurney's at Montauk Manor.

EARLIER this month, on her first day as a beach waitress at Gurney's Inn Resort, Spa and Conference Center here, Krystel Andres, a 20-year-old college intern from the Philippines, literally got her feet wet. As she took food and drink orders from guests sunbathing on lounges facing the ocean, waves splashed over her sneakers.

Seemingly unflappable, Ms. Andres smiled, removed her wet shoes and socks, and ambled back to the Beach Barge, an outdoor restaurant, to fill their orders. "I have no choice but to work barefoot," she said.

Starting a job on a crowded 1,000-foot beach during the week after the Fourth of July was a "trial by fire," said Paul Monte, general manager and chief executive officer of the resort.

Usually, employees at the summer resort arrive before the season swings into high gear and train for two weeks, he said. Things are different this year; half an hour after Ms. Andres arrived at work she was handing out menus, punching orders into the computer and serving chicken fingers.

The summer may be nearly half gone, but some of the help is still arriving.

Gurney's has a year-round staff of 200 that usually swells to 325 at the height of the season. This year, Mr. Monte has been making do with "a little under 300," he said, and business is strong.

Since H-2B visas were denied for the 60 to 90 of his temporary foreign workers who usually return each summer to make beds, clean the pool and trim the privets when the federal government reached its annual cap of 66,000 in early January, and Congress did not pass an exemption for returning workers, Mr. Monte has had to scramble to keep the resort running seamlessly this summer.

"It has certainly been a challenge," he said. Mr. Monte filled much of the gap with foreign students, mainly from Ireland and Eastern Europe, who qualify for four months of employment under a J-1 work-travel visa. A dozen H-2B workers on extension from jobs in Florida are also working at the hotel.

Additionally, he initiated an internship program with 13 hospitality students, including Ms. Andres, from Enderun Colleges, a hotel management school in the Philippines. The students, who have J-1 visas, work for pay and receive college credit for the next 5 to 12 months, rotating through positions at the resort's spa, restaurant and front desk.

Mr. Monte said the new initiative "was born out of the fact that the H-2B program collapsed," though the students' arrival was also delayed until after the July 4 weekend by red tape. They will be filtering in through the end of the month.

Mr. Monte, who is president of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce, estimated that 90 percent of the 800 to 1,000 petitions East End employers filed with state and federal agencies for temporary foreign workers this season were denied.

Seasonal employers on the East End depend on the H-2B visa program to make up for what they cite as a scarcity of domestic labor.

While the annual cap for new workers nationwide was 66,000, for the past three years an exemption for returning workers allowed roughly double that number to enter the country. Since the exemption bill expired in September, however, Congress has not renewed it, said Timothy Bishop, congressman from New York.

Alan Steil, an owner of the Montauk Bake Shoppe, said that after the five qualified pastry workers from Jamaica he has hired for the last five years were denied H-2B visas for this season, he had to scrap lunch and started closing the bakery earlier.

Students on J-1 visas work the cash register "but they are not trained pastry people," he said. Advertising on [Craigslist](#) and at culinary schools didn't help. "Once they find out they have to come to Montauk and it is only seasonal and housing is difficult out here, nobody is interested," Mr. Steil said.

He and his wife and sons "are scrambling like a bunch of idiots," he said, and after 14 years, he is thinking about selling the business.

Carolina Swanson, director of human resources for the Dune Management Company, which manages 11 resort properties in the Hamptons, usually employs about 90 H-2B workers, who return to the East End from Jamaica and the Dominican Republic each summer. Instead, this summer she had to train 15 H-2B recruits who received visa extensions after working in factories in Alabama and Florida.

"It has been a little bit difficult," Ms. Swanson said.

Additionally, the management company hired about 75 foreign students, largely from Ukraine, Russia and Brazil, on J-1 work-travel visas to work the front desk, in housekeeping and as pool attendants.

It is not a panacea, Ms. Swanson said. The H-2B visa workers are adults with families to support. The students “are here for the experience and to have a good time,” she said; sometimes they want to work four days instead of five and leave before Labor Day, creating “a problem the last week of August.”

Jay Schneiderman, a Suffolk County legislator who owns the Breakers Motel in Montauk, called the “collapse” of the H-2B program “a real tragedy.” He said he and his sister had gotten so frustrated with the lack of help that they hired a management company this season.

The situation is further complicated by the lack of affordable housing nearby for employees making \$10 an hour, Mr. Schneiderman said: “If you don’t provide housing for workers you don’t have a chance anymore.”

John Tortorella, owner of the Southampton-based swimming pool company that bears his name, got 65 of the 80 H-2B visa workers he applied for. (“We just got lucky,” he said. “This is like Russian roulette.”) Delayed by red tape, however, the workers arrived on April 15 instead of the first week of March, throwing his service department off schedule.

“We are still digging our way out,” said Mr. Tortorella, whose company builds pools and cleans and maintains 800 to 900 pools a week on the East End.

Janice Nessel, general manager of Montauk Manor, a 140-room resort condominium and hotel, received the seven H-2B visa workers she applied for, but hedging her bets, also recruited a handful of students from local high schools to beef up her staff.

The students started in mid-April. “They needed money for proms and ended up staying for the season,” Ms. Nessel said, pleased that they promised to also work over Columbus Day weekend, Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks.

One of her workers, Brianna Neumann, 16, of Largo, Fla., sat by the pool, earning \$10 per hour as a lifeguard. “This is a great summer job,” she said.

By coming to Montauk, and staying with an aunt, she could earn more than the \$6.50 per hour she could make in Florida, Brianna said. She is saving to buy a \$4,000 1975 Volkswagen Beetle.

But she wouldn’t be able to finish the season. School starts on Aug. 20.

Ms. Nessel wasn’t worried. “For the last 10 days or two weeks, someone picks up an extra shift,” she said, even if she does it herself.

“I have made beds. I have lifeguarded, cleaned toilets. I do laundry if I have to,” Ms. Nessel said. “It is a short season, and you have to make do.”

E-mail: lijournal@nytimes.com