



Blue Ridge resort turns to Jamaicans for winter workers

03/24/2007

By N.C. AIZENMAN / Associated Press

Plagued by a chronic shortage of local workers, Wintergreen Resort has tried every tack but lassos to fill its staff: It has recruited 15-year-old high school kids. College kids. Seventy-five-year-old retirees. Foreign students in work exchange programs.

Still not enough.

This season's idea: Jamaicans.

This Blue Ridge Mountains ski resort three hours southwest of Washington — playground for the region's comfortable — used a temporary visa program to fly in 35 islanders who were so unaccustomed to winter that many didn't think to pack coats.

"Honestly, I was so clueless about this place, I brought all my impy-skimpies," said Venesha Hinds, 21, a restaurant hostess, giggling and shaking her head at the memory of the tube tops and spaghetti-strap dresses she had expected to wear on the mountain. Instead, she found herself springing for long johns even before the mercury dipped below 50 degrees.

Then there were the cultural adjustments. Jermaine Gooden, 25, a houseman, was amazed to discover that in the United States, if you stare at a person too long, "that could be sexual harassment."

Hinds has learned to never, ever utter "the f-word." No, not that one. She means the word "fat."

"We don't think of it as a big deal," she said. "In fact, some women take it as a complement. But here, call someone 'fatty' and, hoo!"

The story of how Hinds and her compatriots ended up in this unlikely corner of rural Virginia offers a window on how seasonal businesses are plugging their multiplying labor holes with temporary foreign workers, even as proposals to expand immigration remain stalled in Congress.

It highlights deep changes in how the region plays, too. Students on break used to fill seasonal jobs, but resort seasons have lengthened beyond winter breaks as baby boomers have matured into empty-nesters and their leisure time has become less tied to school schedules.

Wintergreen, an 11,000-acre mini-civilization, has responded with a \$50 million expansion over the past seven years. Already a major regional employer, the resort doubled its year-round staff to 500 and boosted additional peak hires to 700.

In a county of only 15,000 people, that would have been a tall order anytime. But the resort also faced competition from local businesses: orchards, vineyards and factories making synthetic fibers, motorcycle sidecars and other things. Throw in an explosion of development in Charlottesville to the east and Waynesboro to the north and you get an unemployment rate that rarely tops 3 percent.

Median household income in the region remains below \$48,000. So it's possible that Wintergreen could attract more locals by increasing, for instance, the \$7 an hour it pays its restaurant hostesses or the \$8.50 an hour it offers housemen. But Libby Whitley, president of MASLabor, a local agency that helps recruit foreign workers, doubts that would make a difference to locals.

"It's not the pay rate; it's the fact that this is seasonal work," she said. "When people can easily be employed year-round, why would they want employment that's short-term?"

Like hundreds of resorts, Wintergreen initially tried to solve the problem by hiring foreign college students under a cultural exchange program. This winter, 150 students were brought from South America, where summer runs from December through March. But the foreign students can work for only three months at a time. And because their permits are not linked to a particular employer, they can and often do leave at will.

So in May, Wintergreen's management decided to hire 35 more foreigners through a 10-month temporary visa for unskilled, non-agricultural workers known as the H-2B. Limited to 66,000 a year nationwide, the permits are tough to get. Employers must prove that they have tried and failed to hire U.S. workers at prevailing wages. Last year, the permits were snapped up in about 45 days.

"They get you a really dedicated worker, someone who is assigned to the job, who can't leave you," said Jeff Duncan, Wintergreen's vice president of human resources.

Whitley recommended that the resort hire Jamaicans because they are fluent in English and often have experience in their country's tourist trade.

That did not, however, mean the crew that arrived in May was prepared for what awaited it.

Relieved to get a job — any job — in the United States after waiting in line for hours at Jamaica's labor ministry, Hinds, the hostess, said she didn't bother trying to find out anything further about the place.

"I was coming here to work, not for vacation," said Hinds, who had been struggling to support her 3-year-old daughter on the \$66 a week she was making as a waitress back home. All Hinds needed to know, she said, was that at Wintergreen she could make four times that.

Not all the Jamaicans had been working menial jobs. Paul Harris, 36, a father of four, ran a computer-repair business. Gooden, with a marketing degree, worked at an advertising firm.

But the roughly \$130 a week that each was pulling in paled next to the \$400 a week Wintergreen offered them as housemen.

In Kingston, Harris couldn't afford even a generic version of the computers he fixed. "Here, I was able to buy my own Dell laptop," he said in a tone of reverence.

To keep up the Jamaicans' spirits, the management has organized field trips to such places as Lynchburg and Richmond. For a while, the Jamaicans also held "reggae nights," swaying to tropical grooves as the moonlight glistened on snowy slopes.

Then there are those who discovered an untapped talent for winter sports through the free lift passes. Gooden, who attended Ohio State University on a basketball scholarship, is trying to master 360-degree aerial turns.

But of all the Jamaicans, it is arguably Tracy Smith, 32, a waitress at the Copper Mine restaurant, who has laid the deepest roots in the Virginia soil: The former street vendor and mother of three fell in love with and married a local carpenter who has never traveled outside the United States. The restaurant's manager gave Smith away. The pastry chef baked her wedding cake.

Eventually Smith and her husband plan to move to Jamaica. "He's even more anxious to go than I am," she said with a chuckle. But for now Smith has decided to bring her daughters to Virginia and stick with her job at Wintergreen.

At least 30 of the other Jamaicans — all of whom just returned home —

plan to come back this May. Duncan said he is thrilled. As returnees, the Jamaicans' permits will be exempt from the cap on H-2B visas, he noted, so it will be easier to get them.

But more important, Duncan said, "now that they're trained, the day they walk in, they'll be ready to work."

By Wintergreen standards, they're practically old-timers.