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## Eastern European workers fill N.C. tourism jobs

Tourist towns solve seasonal labor shortage by looking abroad

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**HIGHLANDS** - Nobody seems to know who first thought of the idea of importing Eastern Europeans to work in this mountain resort town.

It started about five years ago, everyone agrees, and since then, hiring foreign students has quickly caught on as this town's favorite antidote to a shortage of local labor.

Today, Ukrainians sweep the floors of the town's brick-oven pizza parlor. Bulgarians bus tables at its Italian restaurant, where the bacon-wrapped filet costs \$33 and \$200 bottles are common on its wine list. Romanians welcome the throngs of country-club members who descend on the town each summer from Atlanta, Charlotte and throughout the Southeast.

"It's just kind of a melting pot up here during the summer," says Sheila Bryson, co-owner of Bryson's Food Store, which employs about 20 foreign students as cashiers, baggers and stock clerks. "The kids are really great, and we're glad to have them. Otherwise, you'd have nobody to give you dinner."

As immigration has become a major political issue, the major employers in this town 170 miles west of Charlotte have discovered a novel way to find workers for entry-level jobs they say would otherwise go unfilled. They're looking not to Mexico, but to Eastern Europe.

The practice is becoming more popular throughout the Carolinas, especially in tourist towns where the local labor force is too small to feed, house and pamper thousands of summer visitors. In the Highlands area, for instance, the year-round population of about 3,000 cannot handle the estimated 20,000 people who come in the summer to hike, shop and escape the heat.

Hiring foreign students for seasonal employment has gone on for years in other parts of the U.S., such as ski resorts in the Rockies and coastal towns in the Northeast and Florida. But as the practice expands, it's moving into previously uncharted territory, such as the Carolinas.

Many of the students are here under a summer work-travel program the federal government started in the 1960s as a cultural exchange. Last year, about 105,000 foreign students participated across the U.S., an increase of nearly 20 percent from the previous year.

Employment of Eastern Europeans is also growing in other nearby tourist hot spots, including Hilton Head Island, S.C., and the Outer Banks. Their biggest employers tend to be country clubs, grocery stores and restaurants -- spots that teem with tourists in the summer but can sit nearly empty the rest of the year.

### Hard-to-fill jobs

From its beginnings in the 1870s, Highlands has always attracted vacationers hoping to stay cool in the summer. But it's really taken off in the last few decades, as Southern cities such as Atlanta, Charlotte and Knoxville have grown.

Houses selling for less than \$200,000 are almost unheard-of. Those selling at more than \$1 million are not. Real-estate agents say the median sales price in Highlands is around \$500,000.

While wealthy vacationers can stomach those prices, waitresses and store cashiers cannot.

"A guy that's making \$10 or \$11 an hour has a hard time living up here," says Bill Bassham, president of the Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center.

Each morning, cars stream into Highlands from bigger towns such as Franklin and Dillard, Ga., about 30 minutes away.

But even they don't have the population to fill all the jobs. So most major employers in Highlands -- the spa hotel, the country clubs, the grocery store -- have taken the rare step of providing heavily discounted employee housing, which helps draw seasonal workers north from Florida during the summer. They charge employees as little as \$200 a month.

Increasingly, though, that housing is being filled by Eastern European students.

### **Small-town opportunity**

Bulgarian Mihaela Nedelcheva, 23, says she came to the U.S. because she likes to travel. In Bulgaria, she graduated from college with a degree in international economics and plans to go back for a master's, but now, she's a cashier at Bryson's Food Store, where pay starts at \$8 an hour.

When she first arrived, Highlands seemed small.

"In the beginning, it was a shock," she said. "I was like, 'Where am I? I want to go home.' "

Since then, though, she's gotten an American boyfriend and says she looks forward to traveling to bigger cities.

Ukrainian Dmytriy Tomchuk, 23, says many Eastern Europeans want to work abroad because jobs at home are scarce. Of the top 10 countries sending students to the U.S. to work for the summer, seven are from the former Soviet bloc.

Tomchuk opted to stay and continue his studies at a nearby community college after finishing a stint working at the local grocery store and computer shop.

Ukraine, he said "is not a good place for getting experience, for young people to find opportunity."

Some of the foreign students in Highlands, though, say they wish there was more to do in a small town whose main draws are art galleries, clothing boutiques, antique stores and oriental-rug dealers.

In other parts of the country, foreign students on the program have lodged more serious complaints.

In July, The Associated Press reported that students from Uzbekistan were unhappy to be working at McDonald's restaurants on the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast, where they paid a total of \$2,000 a month for two-bedroom apartments along a debris-strewn street.

And last year, the Government Accountability Office found that the State Department, which issues visas for the foreign students, does not adequately supervise the program. That lack of oversight could result in students being exploited or could lead students to stay in the U.S. after their visas expire, the report found.

### **Bottom line**

Employers say they see few other options to hiring from overseas. The unemployment rate in Macon County, which includes Highlands, was 4.1 percent in June, among the lowest in the state. Larry Fruchtman, food and beverage director at Cullasaja Club, a nearby country club with more than 300 members, said he prefers to hire Americans first. But when he bought newspaper ads in 30 small Southeastern cities a couple years ago, just one person responded.

So he's forced to draw on industry contacts from across the country -- and hire workers from abroad.

About 15 percent of his 40 or so workers come from overseas. Those with limited English wash dishes, while better speakers work as servers.

At Ristorante Paoletti, one of Highland's high-end restaurants, general manager David Cohen said he's tried hiring American high school students to bus tables. But too often, they'd show up high or hung over, if they showed up at all, he says.

So he hires Eastern Europeans, who he says tend to work hard and have great attitudes. This summer, he has three Bulgarians busing tables.

## How It Works

The program that allows foreign students to work in the summer was created by the U.S. government in the early 1960s, as one of a series of programs designed to increase cultural exchanges.

Known as the "Summer Work/Travel Exchange Visitor Program," it relies on private-sector organizations to link U.S. employers and foreign students, who receive J-1 visas that last four months.

Typically, students pay a total of \$2,000 to \$3,000 to come to the U.S., a mix of program fees, airfare and medical-insurance premiums. They often earn that money back and then some, allowing them to travel before heading home.

### For More Information:

- [exchanges.state.gov/education/jexchanges/private/swt\\_faq.htm](http://exchanges.state.gov/education/jexchanges/private/swt_faq.htm)
- [www.ciee.org](http://www.ciee.org)

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