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About 1,300 words

ALPINE WINTER JOBS

by

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"Discreetly hidden from the vigilant view of the ski restaurant owner, I stand awe-stricken in my little niche on the terrace. Drinking in the pure, crisp air, I enjoy a tremendous 220-degree panorama of the sparkling-white Tyrolian Alps. As the sun sets, the snow-covered peaks seem to glow blue in the rising moonlight."

This paragraph, taken from my diary when I worked in the Alps, is slightly modified, but the sense is accurate. Many were the days and evenings when I would slip out onto the terrace of our gondola-station restaurant at 1600 meters to absorb the incredible view. If I was off-duty I would stand sometimes for a half-hour; if on-duty, I would use my discretion.

Working for the winter in the Alps can bring dream-like moments, but the daily routine is often much more difficult to bear. And especially for males, the job search can be difficult. The rewards, though, are obvious.

There is work out there, but you must start early and be willing to do just about anything. Since Europe still is rather gender-segregated, men and women should, at times, look for different jobs. For women, there are positions as chamber maids, waitresses and babysitters. For men there are chair lift monitors, dishwashers, ski waxers, and snow shovelers. The restaurant industry hires both men and women as bartenders, (look for "The Londoner" pubs in Austria, and other English-style bars elsewhere), kitchen help, and servers.

Good skiers can find irregular employment as ski instructors, mostly privately with people met at local bars or on the slopes. It is hard to get on with the local ski-schools.

I almost had a part-time job with an Innsbruck travel agent, who was looking for an English speaker to orient newly arriving American package-tour skiers. Unfortunately, her contract with the States fell through.

Having said all this, be advised that anything can happen. Since most of the businesses that hire seasonal help are small and family run, you may benefit or suffer from the whims of the owners. Anyone can get a job doing anything -- it just depends on luck (or lack thereof) and lots and lots of perseverance. Make sure you have enough money to finance your search, too, as prices in these areas are high.

WHERE TO BEGIN

The Alpine region stretches from eastern France through the heart of Switzerland and into Austria and ex-Yugoslavia, skirting southern Germany and northern Italy as well. If you have any language skills, go first to where you can apply them. If you are looking for anything you can find, consult your guidebook or tourist offices for information on local ski areas, and go there. Some offices may even offer tips or have inside information on jobs, though it is rare.

As ever, the youth hostel grapevine will be a good source of information. Always keep your ears open for useful scraps of intelligence. Ask at the post offices and banks while you are there. It can't hurt, and they usually know all the local gossip.

In France, try around Chamonix and Grenoble. In Germany, look in the general area around Garmisch-Partenkirchen, while for Italy you can hug the northern borders with France, Switzerland and Austria. And as for the latter two countries, it is hard to go anywhere there without bumping into the Alps, so just keep your eyes open.

If you just want to find work anywhere, there are other smaller ski areas in many countries. Best bet would be to try upper Norway or Sweden. Long nights, plenty cold -- be prepared.

Time of year is also a consideration. With typical efficiency, the Swiss have the winter season positions finalized by mid-summer, if not well before. Most of the workers there return season after season, and jobs can be hard to find. The Swiss will also almost always demand a work permit, which you might not have, but which they can sometimes arrange if they like you.

Most other countries are getting tough on the work permit thing, too, and "black work" seems less and less common. Of course, if suddenly the snow comes and workers are needed immediately, permit considerations go out the window.

Keep trying. In September the Austrian "Landesarbeitsamt" (employment office) publishes a list of winter season positions open throughout the country in hotels, restaurants and ski areas. This is a supplemental section to the regular job listing booklet, and it is extremely helpful. Just walk into any local office and pick one up. (It is officially called the "Sonderteil -- Saisonstellen im Hotel- und Gastgewerbe" or "Special section -- seasonal positions in the hotel and hospitality industry".)

Most businesses have their hiring settled by late summer or early fall, but keep trying. I started hunting in October in Switzerland and finally found a job in Austria a month later. A family had just leased the "Bergrestaurant Hahnenkamm" in Kitzbuhel, and was scrambling to find workers. If you miss out completely, try again in early January as a chunk of the work force may disappear after the holidays.

A note on sexist reality; pretty women usually find a job relatively easily -- blonde Swedes and Australians seem particularly favored. That's just the way it is. (If you do not fit this category, latch onto a cute Aussie or Swede and go job hunting together.) Not to be discouraging, but it seems jobs are harder to come by these days than they used to be. Be prepared, keep looking and don't give up too soon.

DAY TO DAY

You normally will be expected to work hard. The season lasts only a few months and this is where many businesses make a bulk of their budget for the year. Don't expect too many free days, especially if you are working for a family-run establishment. This changes from region to region. We had only one free day a month, but most workers had at least three or four.

Room and board should be part of the deal, (I had a very cozy private room overlooking the terrace and mountains.) as well as some type of wage, usually paid at the end of each month. An average wage will be between \$10 and \$25 a day, but this varies, depending on exchange rates and business flow. The wage you establish before you begin should not be lowered, though. For ski instructors, it will vary wildly. You may also get your own local ski pass, or access to one.

Seasons lately have been up and down in the Alps. Since most ski areas rely on Mother Nature and not machines to provide the snow, a good season is never a certainty. If you really need the work, look for restaurants at the higher elevations (2,000+ meters), where you almost certainly will have plenty of snow.

Especially at the higher elevations, though, you will want to pack in a supply of books, paper and envelopes (or aerogrammes), favorite snacks, toothpaste, etc. It may be seldom that you get down the mountains for supplies.

The season usually lasts from December into April, although some places will start letting staff go in March. Many workers bolt straight for the beaches of Greece and Turkey (where they stay until next season).

The experiences of travelers run the spectrum, from glorious to abysmal, but you should at least make a few friends, experience a wild party or two and enjoy some beautiful scenery. On the learning end,

you will see the local culture from the inside without any tourist trappings. It is a great feeling when the locals begin to confide in or complain to you about "those rowdy foreigners" on a ski holiday -- just don't let the boss catch you dallying on the sun terrace.

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