

# n A I d



**Martin Bobillier's alarm goes off** at 7:50 a.m.

Which gives him just enough time to peel an orange over the trash can, throw on ski pants, and rush out the door to catch the 8 o'clock bus. It's a clear Wednesday morning in February and Bobillier's on his way to work to teach kids how to make wedge turns at Homewood, a small, family-style ski hill on the west shore of Lake Tahoe, California.

A tall, dark-haired 22-year-old engineering student from Santiago, Chile, Bobillier came to Tahoe for the winter because his cousin worked at Homewood the year before during one of Tahoe's snowiest seasons in memory, and told him it was the best experience of his life. "He showed me photos of the powder and I was like, 'I have to go to that place,'" Bobillier tells me.

So during his summer break as an engineering student at *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile*, he applied for a J-1 visa to come to Tahoe and work at a ski resort from December to early March. He's one of around 300,000 foreigners who visit the U.S. each year on J-1 visas—short-term cultural exchange work permits for students who take on jobs as au pairs, camp counselors, and at hotels, amusement parks, and national parks.

During Donald Trump's presidential campaign, he vowed to cut the J-1 visa, replacing it with a program that employs inner-city youth as part of his promise to create jobs for more Americans. As of now, nearly two years since being in the White House, Trump still hasn't made any changes to the J-1 visa. But the threat of change could be imminent.

The National Ski Areas Association estimates that around 7,000 J-1 workers are employed at ski resorts around the U.S. each winter, bussing tables, bumping chairs, checking lift tickets. What brings these young foreigners to ski towns and what is their life like here in America? And if this visa were to go away, what impact would that have on ski resorts? I showed up at Homewood's employee housing early one morning last winter to find out.

Bobillier lives with 53 other J-1s in a motel that Homewood owns and converted into temporary workforce housing after the motel closed a couple of years ago. Called the Tahoe Inn, it's a block off the north shore of Lake Tahoe, steps from the California and Nevada border. You can see the flashing lights of the casinos from the motel's parking lot. The inn is surrounded by a chain-link fence and half of it is boarded up with plywood. But in an era when finding affordable housing in ski towns feels downright impossible, it's a bed to sleep on. The cost is \$300 a month for a bunkbed in a shared room.

An old couch lingers near the entrance and empty beer boxes litter the deck. No cars are parked out front, because nobody who lives here owns one. Six students sleep in bunks in a single room and share a bathroom. There's no kitchen—just a couple of microwaves, a tiny coffee pot, and two refrigerators packed with open cans of beans, a rotisserie chicken, a gallon of milk, and mango lemonade, all with names like Sofia and Tomas scribbled on them in marker. A sticky note on the fridge reads: *Compra tu propia comida!* (Translation: Buy your own food!)

Early that Wednesday morning, the beer-pong table from last night's festivities ("Tuesday is party night," Bobillier says) is still set up in the hallway, scattered with half-drunk red plastic cups. At 8 a.m. sharp, Bobillier and three friends—all 20-somethings from Chile who work at Homewood—stand in front of the Tahoe Biltmore casino, waiting for the bus.

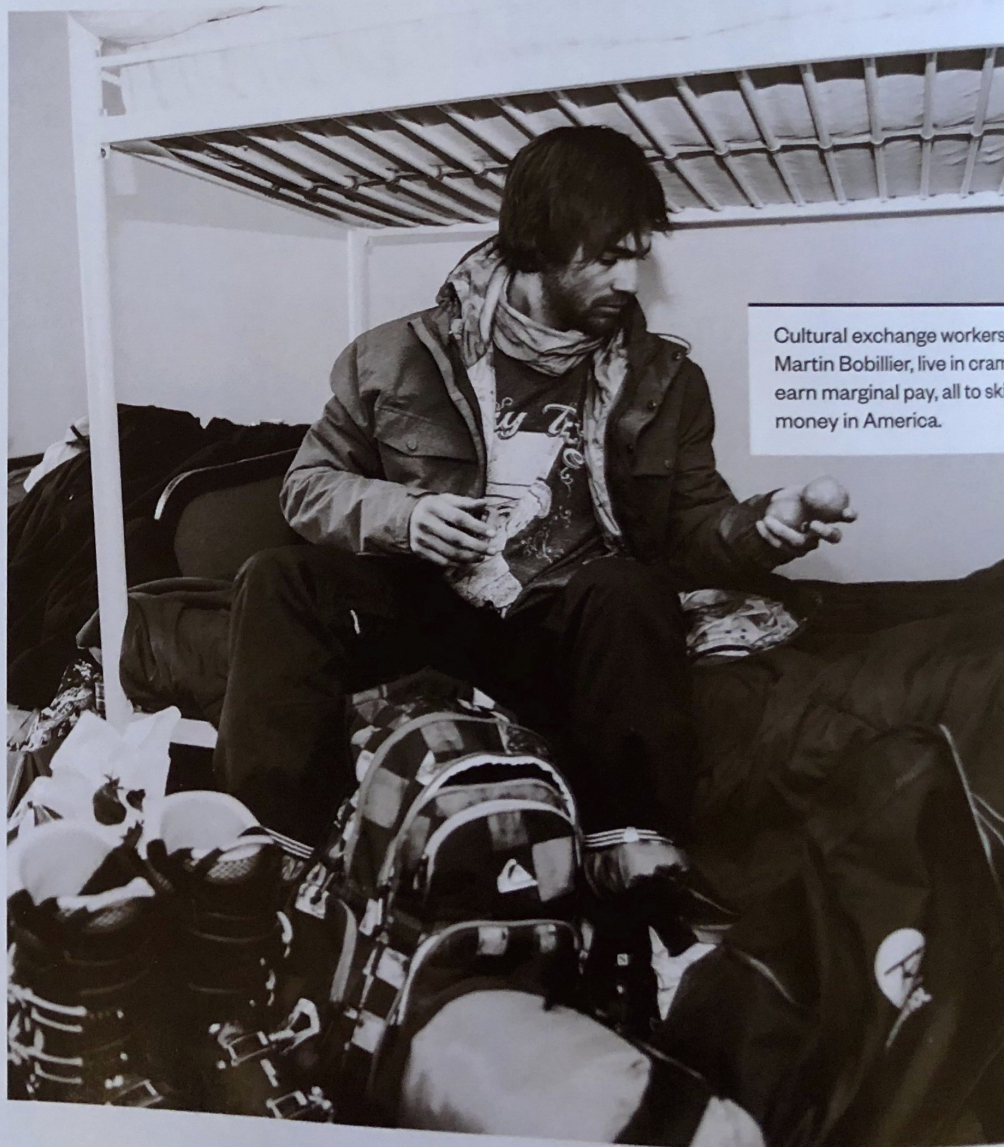
There's Josefina Tapia, 21, who has the day off and is going snowboarding with friends, and Pedro Frontaura, also 21, who grew up skiing with Bobillier at Chile's Valle Nevado. Teresita Scheuch, at 22, is the oldest of the crew. She woke up earlier than everyone this morning, cooking eggs and toast in the microwave and brewing a cup of coffee, wearing her Homewood-issued uniform for her job at the children's ski school.

Scheuch has been skiing since she was 7. She says she came to America to ski and work on her English. When I ask if she's getting what she came for, she says, "I am having fun. I am growing and learning. But when you are 19 or 20, you want to party all night long, shouting and playing beer-pong. I'm 22. Now, I want to do different things." She's already managed to visit Yosemite for a weekend and, before flying home, she's planning to drive down the California coast.

The bus arrives and everyone piles in. From the back of the bus, Bobillier tells me there are three types of J-1s who come to ski towns: those who travel to America strictly to work and send money back home to their families—skiing is not a priority; those who learn to ski while they're here—they're interested in the sport, but they've got no previous experience; and then, there are the J-1s like himself and his closest friends—"Those are the skiers who come here for the powder," he says.

Unfortunately, the powder isn't materializing during another dry winter in Tahoe. A few weeks earlier, when a January storm finally promised a few inches of snow, Bobillier started refreshing the weather apps on his phone hourly. "A storm is coming!" he announced, building hype around the Tahoe Inn. But within a few days, the predictions dwindled.

When the storm arrived, it was only a generous dusting. But Bobillier charged out anyway, frantically booting up at Homewood like it was a two-foot dump. He rode his new skis over dirt and rocks covered in a layer of paste. "I have one day of powder," he says. "I just want to go, go, go!"



Cultural exchange workers Martin Bobillier, live in cramped quarters and earn marginal pay, all to send money in America.



**They come energized, happy, and enthusiastic. For them, this is a really big deal.**

Many ski resorts say they'd grind to a halt if they couldn't hire J-1s. At Homewood, the old Tahoe Inn serves as housing for more than 50 such workers.

**Homewood is the perfect** case study for why the J-1 visa matters to ski resorts. The ski area employs between 45 and 75 J-1s each winter, which makes up roughly 15 percent of the mountain's total workforce. By midwinter, the children's ski school is comprised of 18 instructors—17 of them are J-1s. Which means if your kid takes a ski lesson at Homewood, chances are they'll learn how to pizza and French fry from a South American college student.

It's not that Homewood doesn't try to hire local American workers—their recruiters attend job fairs, post jobs online, and last fall, they created a recruiting video they shared on social media. "Homewood Mountain Resort would find it difficult to fill all of our open positions [without J-1s]," says Lisa Nigon, Homewood's marketing director. "It's hard for locals to sustain a living with the seasonal work lifestyle that comes with a lot of the ski resort positions we offer."

Homewood and the dozen other ski resorts I spoke to that use J-1s all say the same thing: They try to fill seasonal positions locally, but most locals don't want jobs that last four or five months and pay minimum wage. Add a rampant housing shortage and high cost of living—basic rooms go for \$700 or more a month in places like Tahoe—and suddenly, an \$11-an-hour dishwasher job doesn't look so appealing. Plus, unemployment rates in states like Colorado and Utah—home to a large chunk of the country's biggest ski resorts—are among the lowest in the country, around 3 percent

for both states.

"People always ask, 'Why can't you recruit here?' And I say, 'We are, but we can't get enough,'" says Emily Vanderhoof, human resources director at Utah's Powder Mountain, which started hiring J-1s last winter for the first time to help remedy their employee shortage. "When you need 400 to 500 people to work for the winter, that's a large burden on hiring and recruiting. The J-1s are still just one piece of the puzzle."

Powder Mountain brought in 44 J-1s, mainly from Peru and Argentina. Still, dozens of positions were left vacant, and, by midwinter, they were still short positions like bartenders and spa coordinators. Vanderhoof plans to hire even more J-1s for this coming season.

So why not just pay more? Wouldn't it be easier to find local employees then? "We're one of the highest paying ski schools around," says Mar Lozano, former manager of the children's ski and snowboard school at Homewood. "A certified level 1 instructor is making \$17 an hour, and we still can't find people to do the job."

In 2018, Colorado-based Vail Resorts bumped its minimum wage to \$12.25 an hour for entry-level positions at all Vail-owned resorts across eight states, which was at least a dollar or two higher than the state's minimum wage. Vail, which hires hundreds of J-1s each year, also invested in technology to make it easier for people to apply for jobs and be interviewed online. Still, positions are left unfilled.

Squaw Valley, California, does extensive recruiting

ing from Sacramento to Reno, attends regional job fairs, and offers bus passes and ski passes to all employees, and still, positions remain open. So they hire 230 J-1s, the most of any resort in Tahoe. "The California minimum wage has gone up to \$11 an hour, and it's continuing to go up, but even with those increases, it hasn't increased our applicant pool," says Jennifer Scharp, Squaw's human resources director. "There are a lot of things at play: the cost of housing, the cost of fuel. Our wages are based on the cost of labor and they're competitive with the market."

Scharp says the quality of work ethic the J-1s tend to bring is hard to beat. "They come energized, happy, and enthusiastic. For them, this is a really big deal. You can feel it when you're around them," says Scharp. "They want to work as many hours as possible, earn money, and be immersed in the culture. A lot of our workforce doesn't want that."

So what would happen if President Trump delivers on his promise and these resorts could no longer hire J-1s, which make up 4 to 5 percent of resort staffing nationwide? "Inner-city kids from East St. Louis or Newark are not going to work in Steamboat or Jackson Hole for four months—they want year-round jobs, too," says Dave Byrd, director of regulatory affairs and risk for the National Ski Areas Association. "For Trump, it's rhetoric. His own hotels are using J-1s."

Plus, ski resorts face a unique problem: They need workers through the winter, and it's harder to find young people looking for short-term jobs in, say, January, in the middle of the North American school year. That's why ski resorts rely heavily on South American students, who come north during their school's summer break.

If the J-1 program is cut, resorts could face severe workforce shortages. "When we first got wind that Trump was thinking of axing the program, I had HR people calling to tell me they would quit their jobs because they wouldn't be able to find employees," says Byrd.

In 2017, NSAA and other heavyweight lobbyists got a provision added to a bill that passed the Senate that basically said Trump would have to notify Congress and allow for public comment on any changes to the program.

The State Department, which has overseen the J-1 visa since it was first implemented in 1961, still hasn't announced any official changes to the cultural exchange visa. But Byrd says they could be coming soon. (The H-2B visa, another seasonal exchange program that ski resorts relied heavily on until a few years ago, went up once Trump came to office.)

Due to a high cost of living and lack of affordable housing, the modern-day ski bum in America is increasingly arriving from a different country.





When I tell the J-1s at the Tahoe Inn that their visa is in peril and could go away, they all had no idea. Bobillier speaks first. “Trump, listen to me,” he says. “Don’t do it.”

**Before moving to Tahoe.** Bobillier says he tried to find housing while still in Chile. He called or emailed seven different rental houses. No luck. One night at the Tahoe Inn, while sitting around a room packed with clothes, ski boots, and food wrappers, I ask a few of the residents if they, too, looked for other housing before they got here. Turns out that while resorts love them for their willingness to work for low wages and eagerness on the job, potential landlords aren’t interested. “They say J-1s make party,” says a young man from Peru. Another guy adds, “They say we are a disaster.”

Lori Skinner, an American woman in her 50s who drove a shuttle bus for Homewood, lived at the Tahoe Inn as a dorm supervisor until this past season. “We have a housing shortage, and some people are homeless the first few weeks they get here,” she says.

Due to low snowfall this season, job hours have been limited. A sign on a corkboard at the Tahoe Inn lists job openings at a nearby casino: graveyard cocktail server, housekeeper, slot machine technician. “A lot of the kids work at two or three ski resorts or pick up a second job at a restaurant,” says Skinner. “They’ve all had to get a couple of jobs to make sure they can get enough hours to pay rent.”

But the relationships these young people build while they’re here is real and long-lasting. (Skinner loved her J-1s from the 2016 winter so much that she flew to Peru to visit them and meet their families.)

A 2017 report, commissioned by a coalition of organizations lobbying the State Department to keep the J-1 visa, estimated that J-1 visa holders in the summer-work travel program contribute over \$500 million to the American economy each year through things like housing, travel, and entertainment. These young people are earning \$10 an hour and dumping that money right back into the U.S. economy. The report concluded that of those visiting students, 97 percent said they were



Top: Teresita Scheuch, from Chile, works at Homewood to ski and keep up on her English.

Bottom: ¿Como se dice, “French fry?”

**"I have time to explore, but don't have enough money," Bobillier tells me. "You are happy, but you are broke. But that is the ski life."**



If you are in your early 20s and working at a ski resort, you will play beer-pong and make friends for life, no matter what language you speak.

satisfied with the program and 76 percent said they had a higher regard for America after their visit.

But another report, conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2014, tells a different story. That study, which interviewed hundreds of J-1s working in the South, mainly in the hospitality industry, found them living in overcrowded dwellings, suffering abysmal working conditions with long hours and little pay, and not being delivered what the glossy brochures promised: a cultural exchange experience in America.

"Workers were told they'd have this fun summer, great cultural exchange, and a chance to improve their English. But in reality, they're working as housekeepers, busboys, janitors. They're not having a good time," says Meredith Stewart, a senior staff attorney at the Southern Poverty Law Center and the author of that 2014 report. "They're working these grueling low-wage jobs that leave them with no time or money to explore the cultural opportunities of the United States."

Plus, there are the fees these students pay just to get here: thousands of dollars to a recruiter in their home country, fees to a U.S. sponsor, and travel costs. Employers are the ones benefitting from the program, Stewart says, since they're not paying federal employment taxes.

Stewart's report doesn't suggest eliminating

the J-1 visa—it recommends more regulation. "Our organization fully supports cultural exchange and the interchange of ideas between people of other countries, which is the original idea of this visa," she says. "But it needs a serious overhaul to operate as it's intended. There should be a cap, set in place by Congress, on the number of summer work travel students brought here so it can be more regulated."

Back at the Tahoe Inn, the living conditions are a little bleak, but it doesn't feel like anyone is suffering. They're making fast friends, planning trips to San Francisco, and checking out new ski areas. Bobillier, Frontaura, and Scheuch went on their first backcountry hut trip with Homewood ski patrollers who invited them along. Some work out at a gym, they all go to parties at houses around Lake Tahoe, and a good chunk of them will return next year to do it all again.

"I have time to explore, but I don't have enough money," Bobillier tells me. "You are happy, but you are broke. But that is the ski life."

**Finally, less than a week** before Bobillier and the rest of the Tahoe Inn J-1s are set to return to their native countries, it snows. A proper Tahoe storm with a full day of white-out conditions, followed by a morning of brilliant blue skies and 11 inches

of new snow.

I head to Squaw Valley to meet Bobillier, Frontaura, and their friend Luc Romersa, a Chilean they know from home who works as a liftie. They have the day off from work and scored half-priced \$65 lift tickets. It takes them an hour and a half to go the 26 miles via bus, double the time it normally takes due to powder-day traffic. But once we're all on the Headwall chair, riding toward knee-deep fresh on Hogsback, everyone relaxes.

Romersa plays music from a speaker blasting from his jacket. Frontaura pulls a ham sandwich out of his backpack, and they're all spotting chutney they want to ski from the chair. When ski patrol drops the rope for the bootpack to Palisades, they hike up, admiring the view over Lake Tahoe and into the vast wilderness of the Sierra.

The three of them peer into Main Chute, a steep narrow straightline that looks firm and dicey, then decide they'd rather opt for soft turns. "We're here for powder," Bobillier says, a reminder of why he came to America in the first place. So we drop into upper Sun Bowl, a gentler slope that's untracked and glorious. They rip a few turns and then excitedly talk to each other in Spanish. That night, beers back at the Tahoe Inn, I ask Bobillier if this was the best day of his life. He laughs, then says "One of the best, without a doubt." \*