

Travel and Adventure: Workin' where you wander

by Ruth A. Hill

Wanted: fun-loving folks for full- and part-time positions in retirement resort and RV park. Fixer-upper projects, landscaping, light carpentry, repairs and lawn care are part of the job in a laid-back, family-oriented environment. Work 10 hours a week each for a couple, or 20 hours for an individual, in return for a site with full hookups.

ON THE JOB - A group of happy workampers at Dollywood, a family theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. Workampers fill positions ranging from caretakers to managers, and everything in between. CNS photo courtesy of Dollywood. **GIVING THEIR TIME** - John and Grace Schaefer are volunteer interpreters at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument in Coolidge, Ariz. They give 90-minute presentations for guided tours. CNS photo by Lee Smith. **COVER STORY** - Workamper News is the go-to portal for workamping opportunities. This magazine cover features workampers from the Alaska Ivory store in Skagway, Alaska. CNS photo by Lee Smith. Wanna travel? Need a job to support your wanderlust? Consider workamping. Lots of seniors are doing just that. And some younger people - such as those who've decided to kick the old work routine but need to support themselves while they travel America on their own terms - are joining them.

Jack and Celesta Lotsey decided about a dozen years ago to pick up and travel, with only the baggage they could carry in their RV. Found working in a gift shop in Durango, Colo., the Lotseys spent half of last year's high-tourist season in Durango retailing, with time off to see the territory that surrounds the Four Corners region. When the day's work was done, the couple returned to their RV park. Like many workampers, they roll south for the winter. Yuma, Ariz., has been their anchor for the past several seasons.

"We own no property other than our motor home," said Jack. "We are full-timers."

What the Lotseys mean by their self-imposed moniker is that they've adopted a travel lifestyle that is gaining in popularity among retirees and younger ages. By definition, the magazine flag-bearer for those so engaged - Workamper News - describes these folks as adventuresome individuals, couples and families who combine part-time or full-time work with RV camping. Many labor to supplement retirement income. Others work to support a full-time or sometime RV lifestyle. A few are families who home school the kids wherever they drop anchor.

The big motivator for most? Travel and adventure.

Workampers realize additional benefits besides travel as they get comfortable with the process, according to Steve Anderson, publisher of Workamper News.

"Initially, the biggest motivator is a desire for travel, but many fall in love with the lifestyle. You hear them go on and on about the friendships they've made along the way, relationships they would never have had living back in a Pennsylvania stick house."

It's also a way to keep living costs in check, added Anderson. Though many jobs pay little more than minimum wage, campers get free campsites with all utility hookups for their work. And in these days of rising fuel costs, some employers provide gas bonuses to lure people to them. Nobody becomes a workamper to get rich, he said. Otherwise, why wouldn't they hang onto their traditional careers? What they do get is a lot of freedom and the means to see anyplace they want to in the U.S.

Jobs are plentiful at campgrounds, resorts, national and state parks, marinas, forests, amusement and theme parks, lodges, ski resorts, youth camps, RV parks, guest ranches, racetracks and other places where tourists congregate. The best time to look for them is early each year at job fairs and Web sites. Positions range from caretakers to managers, with everything imaginable in between - activity directors, tour guides, musicians, chuck wagon cooks, camp hosts, golf course attendants, maintenance workers and show actors. Walt Disney World and Princess Tours are among the large and small employers who seek and value workampers for their usual maturity, work ethic and dependability. Sometimes no experience is necessary.

According to Jaimie Bruzenak, a longtime workamper and author of "Support Your RV Lifestyle! An Insider's Guide to Working on the Road," successful workamping is defined by one's personal goals.

"There are workamping jobs of every description," she said, "from secretarial up to professional positions. Flexibility is probably the key, because most jobs are seasonal and anything can happen. You need

to be able to shift gears, go with the flow and be ready to give up being the boss. Sometimes that is difficult if that's been your role. In exchange, you get to see this country, make new friends and have some perks along the way. Besides campsites, my husband and I have gotten other free things such as glacier sightseeing tours in Alaska, golf privileges and free show tickets in Branson."

Some workampers choose not to camp. They live in housing provided by their employers, such as private cabins or employee dormitories in Yellowstone National Park.

Xanterra Parks and Resorts - a concessioner that operates lodges, restaurants and other concessions in Yellowstone and other national and state parks - offers seasonal workers options other than campsites and cash. Chuck Howe, recruiting manager for Xanterra, said some workampers occasionally want to take a break from their RV living, so they domicile in dorms or cabins for hourly wages and a full meal plan.

"You get room and board, plus all your meals with this plan. Those who can work a longer season or a short early fall season have the best shot at such jobs in Yellowstone," said Howe.

Whatever the sleep space, the workamping lifestyle requires dexterity in managing relationships, said Celesta, who is in her 70s. She believes her vagabond journey brings her closer to her grown children because everyone really appreciates the occasions when they can get together. Yet when someone is ill, it's not always easy to be there for them.

"I have a longtime girlfriend who is quite ill and I can't just run over and see her," said Celesta. "I don't like to fly, so when people are sick you can't be with them."

The payoffs of workamping keep the couple going, however. Traveling the U.S. is an awesome experience, she said, and most of the people they've met along the way are great. "They restore my faith in human nature," she said.

Besides, she added, with the flex of workamping, you can opt out at any time, take off a season and look forward to kicking back next winter with no work calls at all.

WHERE THE JOBS ARE

Job hunting for workampers and wannabees is easy at annual employer job fairs in states such as Arizona, Texas and Florida. Print and Web resources include:

Workamper News: Workamping's most popular magazine has an interactive Web site, www.workamper.com. It is the go-to portal for job fairs, educational seminars and job postings from employers. Singles seeking workamper partners and a daily hotline for immediate job openings are also here. Subscriptions to the magazine and additional services begin at \$25 a year.

Escapees RV Club: At www.escapees.com, 34,000 members find support services like mail forwarding, voice messaging services, e-mail and discounts on other services. Membership is \$60 per year, plus a \$10 enrollment fee. Call 888-757-2582 for an information kit.

Coolworks: At www.coolworks.com, paid and volunteer job opportunities are geographically categorized. Special sections include volunteer, "make a difference" and "older and bolder" opportunities.

The Caretaker Gazette: House-sitting and other caretaker jobs, some of which include an RV site, are at www.caretaker.org. Includes some international opportunities.

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