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Cruise line jobs not what some thought

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Advertiser Staff Writer

Tabatha Turin, an 18-year-old Kahuku High School graduate, went to work aboard a Norwegian Cruise Line ship in February, enticed by advertisements offering "a competitive salary, full health plan, room and board ... and three months paid vacation a year."

She quit after her first week.

Turin found the work to be exhausting and the pay not what she had expected. She cleaned 30 cabin bathrooms twice a day, seven days a week. She arose at 4:30 a.m. and her day didn't end until 11 p.m. She cleaned while passengers were at breakfast and then again when they were at dinner. Her four-hour midday break was often spent in training.

More than half of her monthly salary was withheld pending completion of her first five-month training period. During that time she was to get no scheduled days off and would lose her entire "completion bonus" if she didn't make it through the full five months.

She slept in a cabin with five other women. Her health plan covered her while onboard, but did not cover her when she was off the boat.

"Everything you're promised, you're just not going to get," Turin said.

Norwegian hired Turin as one of the 3,000 U.S. employees it needs to run three U.S.-flag ships which will soon be cruising among the Hawaiian Islands. Norwegian agreed to hire an all U.S. crew in exchange for exclusive rights to sail within the Islands. Of the 1,400 hired since September, about 140 have quit and 140 have been fired, Norwegian said.

Finding, training and keeping U.S. employees on a ship is a daunting task. Most cruise ships rely on Filipino, Indian or other foreign workers to cook, serve, clean and entertain.

In an era where many of the unpleasant, dirty or low-paying jobs in America are being sent overseas or done by immigrant labor, Norwegian is an exception.

"What we're doing is new," said Robert Kritzman, executive vice president and managing director of NCL America, the U.S.-flag operation of Norwegian Cruise Line. "There is no U.S.-flag cruise business in existence today. We're recruiting an awful lot of people ... all new employees, and that's a pretty difficult task. And during the course of that it's likely that you will have problems and



Kahuku graduate Tabatha Turin said Norwegian Line advertisements promised three months of work followed by a one-month vacation. She said she was given a five-month contract in the first week of training.

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Typical workday at Norwegian

Tabatha Turin's description of her work schedule:

- **4:30 a.m.** — Breakfast
- **5:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.** — Be dressed and ready for work. Pick up and fold towels for cabins. Clean bathrooms of about 30 cabins.
- **1:30-5:30 p.m.** — Break. Employees in training often have one-to-two-hour meetings on safety during the break.
- **5-5:30 p.m.** — Dinner
- **5:30-10 p.m.** — Second shift of cleaning about 30 cabin bathrooms.

misunderstandings from time to time."

with supervisor, extra tasks such as paperwork.

Friction between workers

The company classifies the problems as growing pains of a new operation. Some employees say the friction comes from naive American workers — the average age is in the mid-20s — who should have known better. Others say the disputes are caused by a grueling work schedule, low pay and difficult living conditions.

Employees who were pleased with their Norwegian experience say they worked hard, made good friends and got to see new places.

Chris Lee, a Pearl City resident who spent four months with Norwegian in the Caribbean and still works for the company, said he had "a great time."

"It was really hard to leave. I made a lot of great friends on the ship," Lee said. "You just have to take that chance and step out of your comfort zone and see what the world has to offer. My life has gotten a lot bigger."

Louis Feliciano, a 24-year-old Honolulu resident and employee, trained for three months on a Norwegian ship and said it's "a really great company."

Feliciano said the company's young employees need to investigate the jobs more carefully before accepting them and be more flexible about conditions once they are hired.

"I think a lot of people didn't do their research," he said. "I was told about the hard times only after I asked. They're not going to volunteer the information. But the reality is it's not the most glamorous of lives, but it is a great job and opportunity for a lot of people."

The greatest shock to many new U.S. employees on board the cruise line is the never-ending workload.

Working 10 hours a day and seven days a week is an industry standard and provided for in the international crew collective bargaining agreement, said Norwegian's Kritzman. Not all American workers — accustomed to a 40-hour week and weekends off — are adjusting well to the Norwegian schedule.

"It was awful. It was horrible," said Brenda Jordan-Ferrari, who moved to Hawai'i from California to take a job with Norwegian and quit after the first week. "It was definitely one of the hardest weeks of my life. We worked 10 hours a day. When you're not cleaning or working, you're sleeping."

Kritzman said Norwegian expects U.S. workers to handle the heavy load because foreign workers are able to. "We have almost no turnover on our international fleet so I would venture to say without exception (workers can do it)," Kritzman said.

Anticipating turnover, Kritzman said he planned to hire 50 percent more U.S. workers than he needed. "We need to make sure we have that insurance policy, so to speak."

So Norwegian has been scouting for workers at job fairs and information booths around the Islands and in West Coast cities.

The problem for some begins when they are selected and given an offer letter.

The offer letter to Michael Fiesta, a 19-year-old 'Ewa Beach resident who started working for Norwegian

last month, said his pay would be \$1,795 per month, but added, "the salary may be different, but we will make up the difference in the form of a completion bonus."

Fiesta accepted the job, and Norwegian sent him to Miami. He was assigned to a foreign-flag ship and handed a contract that said he would be paid \$590 a month, instead of the \$1,795 in his offer letter. A copy of the contract shows there was no mention of the promised bonus.

"The contract didn't say nothing about the bonus," said Fiesta, who quit a few weeks after his training started because of the pay dispute and flew back to Hawai'i on a \$1,000 ticket purchased by his father. "I felt like I was getting ripped off."

Bonus system dispute

Norwegian says it has since altered the wording of the contract to allow for a bonus. The company also noted that some workers get tips from a tip pool. In most cases the tip amount would be deducted from employees' "completion bonus," so their total pay would not change, Kritzman said.

Robert Albrets, 23, had a similar complaint. He started working for Norwegian in February, but he quit two weeks after taking the job. He said he was promised \$2,027 per month, but later learned he would get less than \$1,000 in cash each month and the rest as a bonus. "I don't really trust them to pay me," said Albrets, who is now applying to become a police officer.

Norwegian said in many cases it doesn't put in offer letters how much employees will get in cash and how much as a bonus because it would be impractical.

"I think it just makes for a complicated offer letter," said Kritzman. "And most of those amounts are variable for employees."

Several new hires also complained they did not know how long they would be on the ship until they showed up for training in Miami or other ports.

Turin, the Kahuku grad, said after speaking to a Norwegian recruiter, she expected she would work three months and then be off for a one-month vacation just as the ads said. But during her first week of training she was handed a five-month contract to sign and told that more than half of her pay would come in the form of a completion bonus, meaning she wouldn't get it if she didn't finish the first five months.

The company said employees are warned verbally that their first contracts may be longer than three months.

"Out of 1,424 people I can't tell you that every single one of them had it explained, but there are at least two occasions where the procedure and the process is for it to be explained to them," Kritzman said.

Norwegian said it decided to withhold a portion of the pay for U.S. employees while training on foreign-flag ships so their wages — which are paid in cash on board the vessel — would be in line with what foreign laborers get.

"We did not want to be paying people two different salaries for doing the same job on the ship," Kritzman said.

The international crew's lower pay can breed resentment.

"A majority of them don't like Americans," said Justin Layco, 20, an 'Aiea resident who quit Norwegian in February. "You could tell by the way they talked."

Any enterprise blending foreign and American workers is likely to run into some difficulties.

"I could perfectly see why they're having problems," said Lawrence Boyd, a labor economist at the University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu. "You're getting a different crew and you're getting different cultural and service norms."

Schedule changes possible

Norwegian hopes many of the problems — including the bonus system and the work schedule — will be resolved once the U.S.-flag ships with an all U.S. crew begin sailing in Hawai'i.

"I think that's just one of those products of trying to merge two different businesses and the transition from one to another, a startup operation with a U.S. flag," Kritzman said. The company is considering putting U.S. employees on a six-day per week schedule and letting them spend one day a week on their home island, but that plan is not definite, Kritzman said.

The first of the U.S.-flag ships is scheduled to begin cruising in Hawai'i on July 4. That will be followed by a second ship in 2005 and a third by 2007. The Norwegian Star, the one ship now cruising in Hawai'i, is a foreign-flag vessel and as such is required to leave U.S. waters on each of its seven-day cruises. It makes a stop in Fanning Island to meet that requirement, but it has been skipping the Fanning stop recently because of engine problems. The Star, as with other foreign-flag ships, is not bound by U.S. labor laws.

Norwegian gained the right to operate interisland cruises without leaving U.S. waters through a federal exemption pushed by Sen. Dan Inouye.

Because of Inouye's role, at least two of the employee complaints against Norwegian have been directed to the senator, including one from Jordan-Ferrari, the woman who moved from California to join Norwegian and quit after one week.

Jordan-Ferrari's aunt, Paula Myers, who lives in Honolulu, asked Inouye for help with her niece's case.

In a letter to Inouye, she says Jordan-Ferrari was told she would work for three months at a salary of about \$2,800 a month. She quit when Norwegian asked her to sign a contract for five months at \$980 a month with the rest coming in the form of a contract completion bonus.

Myers asked Inouye, "In light of the disruption to her life because of false promises made by NCL, does she have any recourse?"

Inouye's office said such complaints are forwarded to the company to resolve.

Jennifer Goto Sabas, chief-of-staff in Hawai'i for Inouye, added, "We need to continue to support (Norwegian's) efforts. There are going to be difficulties, and maybe the company needs to communicate that better," but Norwegian has successfully hired many employees.

Lee, the Pearl City resident who said he enjoyed his experience working for Norwegian, says others might feel the same way he does if they stuck with the job longer.

"It was a rude awakening, but once you absorb and just kind of blend and don't fight the system, basically you'll be able to get in there, and it'll be a good working experience in the long run," Lee said. "A lot of my friends were looking for instant gratification, and that's not going to happen."

"We get the misconception that it's going to be sunshine and margaritas all the time," Lee said. "But it is a

rough job."

Justin Layco, a 20-year-old from 'Aiea, didn't give the Norwegian job much of a chance. "On the third day on the ship, that's when they told me (what) was going to be a three-month contract ... turned out to be six months. I quit the next day."

Layco has gone back to his old job as a busboy and cook at Sizzler. "The pay is way better, plus it's less hours also. And I get two days off."

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