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January 23, 2012

Travel Hiring Is on the Rise

By HARRIET EDLESON

As the economy has begun to improve from its darkest days in late 2008 and 2009, hiring in the travel and tourism industry has become one of the bright spots.

The industry — which includes hotels, rental cars, airlines and entertainment — shed jobs quickly as the economy spiraled downward. But in the last year or so, travel businesses have begun to hire again, albeit slowly and cautiously.

“Clearly, the travel and tourism industry suffered pretty heavily during the downturn,” said Adrian Cooper, chief executive of Oxford Economics, a London-based economic forecasting consultant with offices in New York. “Now we’re seeing an improvement in jobs in travel and tourism. It’s one of the healthiest sectors in the United States, and down the supply chain. There is still some ways to go, getting back to the peak in 2007.”

But, he added, “we see it outpace other sectors.”

One beneficiary has been Maria Sutherland, a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, who has lost two jobs in the retail fashion business in the last two years. “I needed something where I was going to be secure,” Ms. Sutherland, 23, said.

So in September, after losing her second job when a retail store closed, she applied for the job of “insider” at the W Hotel in Union Square, to help guests secure hard-to-get restaurant reservations or theater tickets. In early December, she got good news. “I was ecstatic,” she said.

In the first half of 2011, the travel industry added 16,000 jobs a month, on average, though that slowed to an average 2,000 new jobs a month from July to November, said David Huether, senior vice president for economics and research for the U.S. Travel Association. Total employment reached a low of 7.3 million jobs in December 2009, and since then the travel and tourism industry has gained 224,000 jobs.

Two factors drive travel jobs, Mr. Huether said. International travelers to the United States support one of every eight travel jobs, while domestic travel supports the rest.

Even with the early signs of a recovery in the industry, said Henry H. Harteveltdt, co-founder of Atmosphere Research Group, an airline and travel industry analyst based in San Francisco, “it’s been a very tentative recovery marked by a lot of financial and organizational discipline” by employers.

As to the travelers themselves, “travel is very opportunistic,” he said. “It’s discretionary. ‘I am going to keep a very tight grip on my wallet,’ is what people are saying.”

Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University, offered a similar assessment of the hotel industry. “It’s a recovery but not an impressive recovery,” he said.

Putting the situation in perspective, occupancy for 2009 was 54.6 percent, according to Smith Travel Research, almost the lowest since the Depression. (The lowest was 53.4 percent in 1971.) Occupancy for 2011 was 59.8 percent and is projected to climb to 61 percent in 2012, Smith Travel Research said. Employment in the airline industry suffered, too, in the weak economy. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics, part of the Transportation Department, calculated 28 consecutive months of decreases in full-time employment for airlines, leading up to November 2010. Finally, in December 2010,

employment began to improve.

Cruise capacity has also been growing, and is projected to grow 5 percent from 2011 to 2012, Mr. Harteveltdt said.

The health of the travel industry affects related businesses, Mr. Cooper of Oxford Economics said, noting that the “supply chain to the travel industry is quite long.” Demand for air travel, for instance, affects not only airlines but also plane and parts construction and jet fuel.

Wages vary but even at entry level tend to be higher than minimum wage. Randy Pullen, president of Wage Watch, based in Scottsdale, Ariz., said there were “not many of those” minimum-wage jobs in the travel and hospitality industry. Even housekeepers, he said, make more than minimum wage, and tend to make more in cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Washington and Seattle. In Arizona, they may make \$10 plus tips, whereas in New York, it is \$10 to \$12. A bellman can make minimum wage plus tips for a total of \$35,000, Mr. Pullen said.

Hotels have also been able to take advantage of the downturn, said Joseph McInerney, president and chief executive of the American Hotel and Lodging Association, by hiring people with a higher level of education and sophistication, like those with bachelor’s degrees from Cornell School of Hotel Administration or Florida International’s hospitality and tourism school.

The prognosis for 2012 is “very positive,” Mr. McInerney said. Job seekers may not be able to get their dream job initially but can work their way up, he said.

Sharae Martin, 21, started work last Thursday at the new Greater Cleveland Aquarium. “It’s very exciting to me because to me it feels like I am getting my independence back,” Ms. Martin said.

She said she was looking for a job in customer service when she heard that the new aquarium was hiring.

Though her goal is to become a pharmacist, for now she is happy to be working. “Now that I have a job,

I'm secure," she said. "I feel very good about my position in life right now."



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