

# Travel nursing, anyone?

By David Morrison, RN

**IF YOU'VE BEEN WORKING** as a nurse for more than a minute, chances are you've heard the term travel nurse or worked with one. But while you may be aware of travel nursing, you may be uncertain about the pay, lifestyle, and how to go about becoming a travel nurse. This article looks at the current state of travel nursing and describes how to enter this adventurous side of nursing.

A travel nurse (commonly called a traveler) is someone who takes temporary nursing work or assignments lasting from 4 weeks to 6 months or even more. The most common duration is 13 weeks. These assignments may be local or hundreds or even thousand of miles from your home. You choose the location where you want to work and are obligated only for the term of your contract. Many travelers extend their contracts if they like the location and the facility has a continuing need for them.



## The company you keep

To obtain a travel contract, most nurses work through a travel nursing company. Although you could contract independently with a hospital, I always recommend using a travel company for at least a few assignments to familiarize yourself with the process.

Most travel companies offer:

- free private housing in the location where you'll be working; depending on the specific company, this may mean a furnished one-bedroom apartment
- travel reimbursement to and from the assignment

The author describes what it's like—and what it takes—to be a travel nurse.



- medical and dental insurance; many companies have several coverage levels, including coverage for spouses and family members
- license reimbursement; unless you live in a state with a compact license, you must have a license in each state where you work.

Some travel companies even have 401K plans. Of course, you also earn a living, making a certain hourly rate as you would in any other job. Rates can vary dramatically depending on your nursing specialty, geographic region, and current demand for nurses.

Some people think of travel nursing as a “cash cow” that provides thousands of dollars in completion bonuses and offers pay rates better than those of staff nurses. While you can earn a fair wage as a traveler, travel nursing these days is more about the adventure than making a ton of money.

Don't get me wrong. Some assignments pay quite well, and even today you could earn more than \$100K as a travel nurse. But this would likely entail working in a high-demand part of the country in a job that guarantees 48- or 60-hour workweeks. You're simply not going to make a ton of money working three 12-hour shifts a week in Hawaii.

## Adventures on the road

For me, travel nursing has always been about the adventure. My first assignment was in Hawaii, where in 3 months I went from no experience underwater to earning my certification in SCUBA diving. I also took flying lessons in Santa Monica, rock climbing and rappelling courses in Phoenix, and improvisation and acting classes in Los Angeles. And I completed enough jumps in San Diego to skydive solo.

I've hiked over an active volcano in Hawaii and explored the insides of ships sitting 100 feet below the ocean surface in the Florida Keys. I've taken amazing sunrise photos of the red rocks of the Grand Canyon peaking through a blanket of newly fallen snow. I owe





all of these experiences to more than a decade and a half in travel nursing.

### Are you cut out for traveling?

Now that I've highlighted the fun aspects of travel nursing, you might be wondering, "What's the catch?" While there's nothing nefarious about travel nursing, it does require a certain type of person—one with an outgoing personality and the ability to adapt to and assimilate quickly in new environments.

Travel companies used to require their hires to have at least 1 year of nursing experience. But in 2009, that mandate took a turn. Various websites reported a sharp decline in the number of traveler positions for that year because of the troubled economy; one site put the decline at 44%. Like any career sector that has cut its available positions by almost half, the healthcare industry responded by demanding nurses have more experience before they can be hired as travelers. While some travel companies still claim you need just 1 year of experience, many have raised their requirement to 2 years of recent nursing experience. Nurses in higher-acuity positions that require additional training, such as critical care, may be able to get an assignment at the 18-month mark. But generally, nurses who are most likely to land a first travel assignment have at least 2 years of experience.

Also, if you plan to travel for an extended time and want to work in a higher-acuity area, get that experience before embarking on a travel career. As a traveler, you'll have little to no opportunity to cross-train, because facilities are looking for nurses to staff areas where they have a need. Travelers are temporary employees, and facilities simply won't expend the resources needed to cross-train a nurse who may be at their facility for just 13 weeks.

Travelers also should be comfortable in their skills and overall nursing practice. If you can't start your own I.V. lines and still have trouble prioritizing your nursing care, "the road" is not the place to learn these skills. To meet the challenges of travel nursing, you must be proficient in your specialty. Adaptability is another key trait of the travel nurse. (See *Adaptability counts*.)

### Orientation and testing

Being a traveler is like starting a new job every 3 months or so. On most assignments, you'll go through orientation (often alongside the facility's new staff hires), plus work a shift or two with a preceptor on the unit. But you should be prepared even if the facility provides little to no orientation (although this isn't the norm).

## Adaptability counts

If all you've ever known as a nurse is a 1,000-bed hospital with residents and interns just a phone call away, you might have trouble adapting to an assignment in a 150-bed rural facility where the only in-house physician is the emergency-department doctor who's busy with his own patient load.

Many nurses are capable of self-assessing their ability to meet the demands of travel nursing. But I've recommended to some that being able to work with a local agency or "registry" is a good indicator of whether you're adaptable enough to handle patient care in a new environment. It also prepares you to interact with different people, from the nurses working beside you to the physicians and ancillary staff who make up the medical team.

Anticipate being tested during orientation. If you work in an area with cardiac monitoring, expect to take an electrocardiogram rhythm strip test. If you work in critical care, expect to be tested on relevant knowledge, most likely including advanced cardiac life support components.

In addition to written tests, you'll need to prove yourself at the start of each new assignment. At most facilities, you won't be the first traveler on your unit. But occasionally, you may enter tight-knit areas where you must quickly gain a reputation for being "that helpful new traveler."

### Socializing while on the road

In most cases, travelers work on units that are inviting and friendly. In many of the facilities where I worked, I spent most of my days off with someone from my unit. But I've also worked on units where I never saw another staff member outside the facility.

While being outgoing in the workplace is a key trait of the travel nurse, being an extrovert in your life outside the hospital is important, too. What fun would travel nursing be without the adventures you experience outside of work? Life on the road can be lonely without support or interaction with others on your days off. Many of my experiences as a traveler were solo pursuits or instances where I joined a group of strangers. But if you extend yourself even a little, many group situations will welcome you, especially if you share a common bond from the get-go. I did this by joining groups on SCUBA diving outings.

In this article, I've provided a highly condensed account of what it takes to be a travel nurse—but I hope it's enough to give you an idea of the traveler's lifestyle. I enjoy helping nurses get started in traveling, so if you have questions or need more direction, feel free to contact me directly at [david@travelnursesbible.com](mailto:david@travelnursesbible.com). ★

David Morrison is the author of *The Travel Nurse's Bible: A Guide to Everything on Travel Nursing*. He answers questions on traveling in his column "Ask a Travel Nurse" at <http://travelnursingblogs.com/ask-a-travel-nurse>.

