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JOURNEYS | ISRAEL

Massage, Not Work, on the Kibbutz in Israel

By SARAH WILDMAN

“WHY don’t you try Kibbutz Haon?” a friend asked as we sat in her apartment in Herzliyah, poring over a map of northern [Israel](#).

My partner, Ian, and I were looking for someplace more authentic to stay, someplace more Israel and less Hilton. We certainly didn’t want to spend a small fortune. It didn’t help that it was April, the week before [Passover](#), and most hotels were booked up.

And so, at our friend’s suggestion, we found ourselves in a two-room cottage with a small porch, a tiny blue cotton couch, an old-school television set and a large functional bathroom at Kibbutz Haon, steps from the Sea of Galilee. We were the lone guests in a glorious pocket of calm. The kibbutz was scrubbed fresh; the guests due in had not yet arrived. We wandered around like children past the ostrich farm and groves of fruit trees. That night I went to the little kibbutz disco and danced with teens to a local D.J.

We were taking part in an oxymoron: the newfound capitalist success of the kibbutz hotel movement. Across the country, kibbutzim have increasingly encouraged visitors to be paying guests rather than volunteers — travelers like us who indulge in comparatively hedonistic pursuits like lolling by pools, alternative health remedies or using a kibbutz as a base to stroll the countryside. These visitors won’t be waking at dawn, getting a little hat and a blue work shirt, or rubbing their hands raw washing dishes. But renters of kibbutz lodging rooms make as great a contribution to the success of modern-day kibbutzim as volunteers do. In fact, some would argue, more so.

Kibbutzim, the socialist collective farms created by early Zionist pioneers primarily from [Europe](#) and [Russia](#), are an enduring symbol of Israel. Hewing to socialist dogma, the kibbutzniks created agricultural marvels out of desert soil. To work on a kibbutz was to be a part of the dream; if you were to visit a kibbutz in the ’50s, ’60s or ’70s, you were there to work — ironing, washing, picking oranges, peeling potatoes in the kitchen or, if you had some Hebrew, helping out in the gan, the collective kindergarten. Children and parents slept in separate houses; raising children was one of many rotating jobs.

For residents, everything was taken care of, from birth, to aging, to education, to food. But they would not have owned a car, were not fully free to choose what to study, and received only the amount of money the kibbutz distributed.

So while it was a tremendous success at first, by the mid 1980s the kibbutz system was in trouble.

“There was a major crisis in the kibbutzim that started in 1985; we lost 50,000 people from 1985 to 2004,” said Aviv Leshem, a representative of the Kibbutz Movement, which represents kibbutzim all over Israel. “It was an economic crisis. The kibbutzim debt was very, very high, some 70 billion shekels to Israeli banks, and also a lot of

young families and young kibbutz members didn't want to continue to live in this way of life."

With the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, and subsequent periods of violence, the numbers of visitors and volunteers to Israel dropped dramatically. But, with a couple of years of relative peace and a few capitalist changes, kibbutzim have become a draw again both for Israelis sick of city life, for volunteers from around the world and for tourists.

"Guests have more freedom here than they have, let's say, in Tiberias, where they have to be careful," said Nurit Katziri, the manager of "country lodging" at Kibbutz Shaar Hagolan.

Founded in 1937 at the foot of the Golan Heights, Shaar Hagolan stopped taking volunteers 20 years ago. With only 55 guest rooms, it is a working kibbutz with 700 residents. Its primary industry is plastics, though there are also banana and avocado groves. Guests become, for a short time, a non-working part of kibbutz life.

"It is very personal here," Ms. Katziri said. "They can borrow our [bikes](#), nothing is locked; guests feel very at home."

Shaar Hagolan encourages tours of the agricultural lands, and everyone eats together in the dining room. Off site, tourists can [raft](#) on the [Jordan](#) and see the meeting point of three countries: [Syria](#), Israel and Jordan.

Not all kibbutzim are so focused on activities and the kibbutz experience. In the Carmel Mountains, Kibbutz Dalia's *zimmerim* ("rooms") near Haifa are nine wood cabins — sleekly designed spaces for those who want more "country chic" and less "communal." Bathrooms have whirlpools, and living spaces have flat-screen televisions. At Kfar Giladi, near Tel Chai in the northern Galilee, the feel is of a modern hotel with a big swimming pool, tennis courts and a health club.

SOME kibbutzim have integrated projects for visitors that can be as short as a few days, or extend for several months. Kibbutz Lotan, in the desert about 30 miles from the southern tourist city of Eilat, offers alternative medicine, meditation and "holistic workshops" — as well as cranial sacral massage, tai chi, shiatsu, watsu (water massage) and yoga.

But its biggest focus is ecology. Calling itself a "leader in alternative/natural construction," the kibbutz invites tours of its mud buildings, recycled-tire playgrounds and organic farm. Workshops held throughout the year offer courses in mud-building. A 10-week "green apprenticeship," according to its Web site, "offers a highly practically-based immersion into the processes and challenges involved with the design, building and running of sustainable communities, linking together ecological, social, economical and spiritual aspects into a unified whole."

But it, like many other kibbutzim, also gives into pure touristic hedonism, with desert trips on camel or by jeep. Marx — let alone Ben-Gurion — wouldn't know what hit him.

CAPITALIZING ON SOCIALISM

Many kibbutzim are listed at www.kibbutz.co.il. Rates, often given in dollars, usually include breakfast.

At Kibbutz Haon (www.net-travel.org/kibbutz/kibbutzhotels/haon.htm) rates start at \$144. A [spa](#) faces the Sea of

Galilee.

Kibbutz Shaar Hagolan (972-4-667-7544; www.elmulgolan.co.il) has double rooms from \$94. There is an enormous pool and a museum of prehistoric artifacts.

Kibbutz Dalia (972-4-989-7777; www.dalia.org.il for general information, and www.zimmer.co.il for guest information, using link on left of page) has doubles from 500 shekels, which is about \$146 at 3.42 shekels to the dollar.

At Kibbutz Lotan (972-8-635-6935; www.kibbutzlotan.com) rates begin at 340 shekels for two.

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