

# BEERSHEBA



## *NEGEV BOOM TOWN COMES OF AGE AS ISRAEL'S CAPITAL OF OPPORTUNITY*

**W**hen Philadelphia native Ethelea Katzenell settled in Beersheba in 1972, the southern Israeli city consisted of a modest grid of streets and a handful of neighborhoods. A job awaited her as a librarian in Beersheba's brand-new university.

On a more recent sunny winter's day, Katzenell stepped outside the original library building, its white peaks symbolizing the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. She pointed to what constituted the rest of the campus then.

It was a bush—that's it. Katzenell recalled the grounds being so desolate that camels wandered right up to the front door, the library so incomplete that employees had to use a hospital's restrooms across the street.

Now, that hospital, Soroka University Medical Center, is one of Israel's great institutions, as

is Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where Katzenell still works. Today's BGU is bursting at the seams, and the construction proceeding across the 2½-square-mile campus is trying to keep pace with an expected 25 percent increase in enrollment to 25,000 students. BGU is even expanding beyond its fences onto a plot that will double the university's size.

The school's growth is a microcosm of today's Beersheba, which is experiencing a construction and attitudinal revolution that's reshaping the city. Cranes swing in one neighborhood after another, transportation systems are burgeoning, morning commuters no longer head only outbound, cultural centers rise and the military is erecting nearby a new town from scratch.

The total investment in capital projects is \$9.3 billion, says Fani Bahous, director of business



Courtesy of the Abraham's Well International Visitors' Center

## By Hillel Kuttler

promotion for Ye'adim, a city-run business-development company.

"I feel like we're starting to live—that I'm in an area that's nice to live in," Aviad Belilah, 38, a taxi driver raised in Beersheba, tells a passenger. "It's not like before, when it was a sleepy city, when it'd be just work and home, and there was no life, as there is in Tel Aviv."

Belilah and other residents credit Mayor Ruvik Danilovitch, 44, for injecting an energy that has shaken Beersheba out of a century-long lethargy and fused it onto modern Israel. Danilovitch's success is so striking that he won re-election to a second term in 2013 with 92 percent of the vote.

"Beersheba, in my eyes, is the real Israeli city," says Sondra Lev-HaAri, a retired dietician who's lived in the area since 1976 and is the sister of B'nai B'rith International Executive Vice Presi-

dent Daniel S. Mariaschin. "Beersheba has really blossomed into what Ben-Gurion imagined," she added, referring to Israel's first prime minister, who settled on a Negev kibbutz, Sde Boker, to help attract pioneers to the area.

All was not rosy last summer, however. Dozens of Hamas-launched rockets from Gaza, struck Beersheba before and during Operation Protective Edge, Israel's response to the attacks. The rocket attacks shut down the university for nearly all of July and August. Exams were canceled, and as many as 2,000 students, faculty and staff were deployed as reservists in and around Gaza.

Long known as the capital of the Negev, Beersheba is rebranding itself as Israel's capital of opportunity.

While Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are hardly in danger of ceding their roles as Israel's governmental and commercial hubs, respectively, Beersheba is becoming a far more substantial city. This is occurring on multiple geographic and municipal fronts simultaneously.

On the city's eastern edge, the 100-acre Gav-Yam Negev Advanced Technologies Park is rising. Tenants occupying the initial, 200,000-square-foot building, which opened in July 2013, include such international and Israeli giants as IBM, Lockheed Martin, Hewlett Packard, Oracle, Elbit Systems, Cisco, EMC International and Deutsche Telekom—the only research center the German firm has established abroad. The second (containing 120,000 square feet of office space) opened in January of this year in what will be a 20-building complex.

An initiative called CyberSpark, announced last year by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will harness some of those firms' cybersecurity expertise—and that of BGU academicians and national government agencies. CyberSpark's coordinating office is in Beersheba.

"In L.A. you have Silicon Valley. In Berlin, Silicon Allee. In Beersheba, you will have Silicon Wadi," says Professor Dan Blumberg, head of the homeland security institute at BGU.

At Beersheba's western end, plain white lettering adorns a red façade fronting David Tuviyahu Street. "Grand Canyon," it reads. Though hardly evocative of the iconic American national park,

The Abraham's Well International Visitors' Center, located in Beersheba, uses different technologies to tell the story of the prophet Abraham—including a 3D presentation.



Courtesy of Beersheba's Old City and Tourism Administration



Courtesy of the Negev Museum of Art



Courtesy of Beersheba's Old City and Tourism Administration

Top: The amphitheater of Beersheba River Park can seat up to 4,000 people.

Middle: The Negev Museum of Art, once home to the Turkish governor during the Ottoman Empire, was renovated in 2004 to become, mostly, a museum of Israeli modern art.

Bottom: The Pipes Bridge spans the Beersheba River.

the Israeli version does suggest heft. The Grand Canyon, a play on the Hebrew “kenion,” for “shopping mall,” opened in April 2013 and is, indeed, vast; its 1.5 million square feet and 250 stores make it the largest shopping mall in Israel.

Along five miles of the Beersheba River that flow through the city’s southern sector, a 1,300-acre development is taking shape, melding the recreational, historic and natural. There, a 4,000-seat amphitheater and a sports and fitness compound have opened, and a man-made body of water will constitute the country’s largest lake after the Sea of Galilee.

Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, on a freshly paved, dark desert highway south of the city, a new town rises. Its nickname, Ir Habahadim (Training-base City), refers to the multiple army headquarters that are relocating from ultra-congested Tel Aviv; its official name is the Ariel Sharon IDF Combined Instructional Center.

The base is a harbinger of even greater things to come for Beersheba and the region. The relocation of 10,000 soldiers is expected to have enormous ripple effects, extending to nearby Negev towns like Yeroham, Ofakim and Dimona.

“It’s good for Beersheba, it’s good for Yeroham, it’s good for the whole area,” Jeff Green, BGU’s chief financial and information officer, says of Ir Habahadim.

“Who needs permanent housing? Officers. They come with higher salaries and they expect a higher quality of life,” Green says. “Everything rises with the higher population orientation. It means that Yeroham will add more culture. The level of the schools and the quality of education will go up. The army has tremendous resources, and they take care of their officers. They’re going to all be looking to buy nice houses.”

As with Katzenell and Lev-HaAri, Beersheba is the only Israeli home Green has known. From 1988 to 1990, Green worked in B’nai B’rith International’s Washington, D.C., headquarters, not far from where he grew up. He moved to Israel, entered a master’s program at BGU and stayed in Beersheba when he landed a job at the university.

The city’s sense of remoteness from the bulk of Israel’s population, which is concentrated on the coastal plain near Tel Aviv and east to Jerusalem, is palpable even today. That is changing, though. Many Israelis in those metropolises and other points north, Green says, incorrectly think of Beersheba as lying in Israel’s south, when it’s really near dead-center on the vertical axis.

Beersheba is just 60 miles or so from both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and it will feel even closer. Planned high-speed rail lines will rush trains to and from Tel Aviv in 40 minutes, 15 minutes faster than now. (Trains do not run at all to Jerusalem, although an enormous station is under construction in Israel’s capital.) Those lines are seen as crucial to drawing commuters to jobs in the hi-tech park and further, connecting Beersheba and its 195,000 residents with Tel Aviv, which is home to 403,000

people in fewer square miles. Trains, running in each direction, already are key to drawing Tel Aviv students and professors who commute to classes at BGU, which has its own rail station.

Many of those work and study commuters might decide to stay. A 2013 Israeli newspaper article that charted various cities put the average price of a new four-room apartment in Beersheba at \$257,000, compared to \$324,000 in Israel overall and \$361,111 in Tel Aviv.

Amos Shavit is considering just such a move. Shavit, who runs the city government's communications, public relations and marketing department, commutes more than an hour by car from his rented apartment in Modiin—itsself a booming city situated midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"To buy [a home] in Modiin is very expensive. I work here, and I see the potential for myself, my wife and our kids," Shavit says one morning, as three middle-school children visited his city hall office to learn how municipalities function. "There's good education, good momentum. And when a place has good momentum, you want to be a part of it."

Alysia Sagi-Dolev also is drawn to Beersheba with different financial motivations. She is the founder and chief executive officer of Qylur Security Systems, based in Palo Alto, Calif. Sagi-Dolev grew up just west of Beersheba, at the Hatzetim Air Force Base, where her father was serving.

The company now has a small office in the Tel Aviv-area town of Beerot Yitzhak, and as its Israeli operation grows, Sagi-Dolev plans to open a larger one in Beersheba's hi-tech park. She hopes to ultimately employ more than 100 people there for a Qylur spin-off company and an academy specializing in artificial intelligence.

"I immediately understood how this clever combination can drive huge high-quality hi-tech growth," Sagi-Dolev explains. "I believe that if correctly and professionally managed and if enough big and small innovative companies come there, this could easily be an oasis of technology on a global scale. There is no reason why not."

Meanwhile, Beersheba's downtown is developing apace. A new soccer stadium and basketball arena are being built on the north side. The Ottoman-era section, known as the Old City, is undergoing a \$15 million cultural-tourism facelift that

includes a new science park with an interactive museum housing a scale-model of a nuclear reactor. The abandoned Turkish railway station was renovated as a museum, complete with a period steam engine that was imported and restored. A tourist center was built at Abraham's Well, where the Jewish patriarch and Avimelech, the king of Gerar, reached a pact that gave the city its name. There are new fountains, many illuminated at night. Meanwhile, streets are being reconstructed and new parking lots built at an accelerating pace.

All of which leave Katzenell even more in love with her adopted hometown.

"I have seen this wonderful metropolis grow over 40 years. There are now 15 or 16 neighborhoods, the boulevards are large and the horizons are open," Katzenell says of Beersheba's evolution.

A visitor remarked on Katzenell's necklace. Its charm spelled "chai," the Jewish word for life. It was shaped to resemble a camel.

"For me, my camel is my 'chai'—the ultimate symbol of survival in the desert," says Katzenell. "The city and I and the university all grew up together. Everything I've invested here has come to fruition." 📍



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