

In Negev, camels still accompany Bedouins' shifts

By HILLEL KUTTLER

AS A TOUR BUS PARKED in Israel's setting sun, Bedouin boys speedily galloped by on donkeys. Moments later, two Swedish visitors from that bus found themselves slowly rising in the air atop a camel that—growling with a sound like water being sucked down a bathtub drain—lifted its hind legs and then its front. In chain-reaction fashion, 19 more camels rose with their human cargo and, leashed together in groups of five, ambled across the road and into the rocky Negev desert. The camel-handlers were Bedouin men gripping leashes behind their backs as if out for a standard stroll, which they were.

Thus began a recent weekend at Kfar Hanokdim (Shepherds' Village), a charming vacation spot near the Dead Sea-area town of Arad that offers visitors a glimpse at life in the desert and at the Bedouins, its best-known residents.

Much is changing for Bedouins. Eternal desert nomads, Bedouins—at least those in Israel—are setting down roots in their own settlements and in smaller clusters, the latter distinctive for ramshackle tin huts and ever-present sheep and goats. Some live in majority-Jewish communities.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel's Bedouin population in 2017 was 305,300, with 250,000 in the Negev. They live in 15 Bedouin-

majority towns and one city—all in the triangle roughly bounded by Beer Sheva, Arad, and Dimona—with two more towns planned. Some small Bedouin settlements are deemed illegal by the government and face dismantling.

Education is more highly emphasized, with girls especially going on to university study and careers in teaching and health care. Among men, shepherding has been swapped for construction and agriculture jobs, with some becoming teachers, lawyers, and accountants. A Bedouin teacher and activist from the Negev, Saeed Alkharumi, serves in Knesset representing the Joint List confederation.

"The Bedouins are in a transition from their culture to a different one," said Eli Atsmon, a consultant to area Bedouins on infrastructure-development issues.

The shift also affects some traditions and historical memory. Atsmon, a Morocco-born Jew, mentioned being called by Bedouin who ask about their own roots and who seek to ascertain where an ancestor's land was located.

A promising sign, Atsmon said, is that Bedouins now vote independently, rather than at the instruction of tribal leaders.

"For me, it's an exciting experience, because I see how they're moving from a primitive life to modernity," he said. "I believe they have to integrate in the country's life. Otherwise, it's bad for them and bad for [Israel]."

The shifts have been "a mixed bag, but there are signs of improvement," said Clinton Bailey, a retired professor specializing in Israel's Bedouin people.

"Basically, they're a pragmatic people," Bailey said.

Family honor and patriarchy remain bedrock principles, and "honor killings" of women accused of bringing shame continue. On the day of her wedding in mid-November, a woman in the Bedouin town of Tel Sheva was shot dead in a presumed honor killing. Polygamy is still common. Soad Abuajaj, 53, who lives in Kseife, said that she is the first of her husband's two wives. Men are permitted up to four wives simultaneously, she said.

Upon enrolling at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev at age 39 in 2004 to study health and genetics, Abuajaj said, she was one of the "few Bedouin women" there. (Students' demographic information is not recorded, a university spokesman said.) Her husband initially opposed her decision, but eventually agreed.

Abuajaj sought a career in the community, "to try to change things," she said, so she worked at Kseife's community center, advising girls and families on nutrition, prenatal care, women's health, and the perils of marrying within families. She lost her job when budgets dried up, and since 2016 has worked part-time at Kfar Hanokdim, giving tourists a taste of Bedouin life.

On this afternoon inside a vast Bedouin-style tent, Abuajaj sat beside a *finjan* (coffee urn) simmering on a fire. The Swedish college students, fresh off their camel ride, rested on mattresses, listened intently as Abuajaj related her life's journey. Another employee distributed paper cups of hot, sweet tea and mud-strong coffee. When all questions were answered, one student hugged Abuajaj.

"I like telling them my story, since I created a change. Some people say it gives them inspiration," she said later. "I tell women not to despair, to be strong, to be confident, that things will get better."

An educational effort down the road projects optimism, too.

Desert Stars High School, near the Bedouin city of Rahat (pop. 67,000), emphasizes leadership, responsibility, and citizenship as much as academic attainment, said its principal, Ahlam Ell Sana.

The 200-student Bedouin school recently launched a one-year, post-graduation program at a boarding school on a Negev kibbutz, where students take additional classes and work with mentors.

The school and the program, she said, help "to develop a new generation of Bedouin." ■

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Bedouin men lead tourists on a camel ride near Arad, Israel. Photo credit: Hillel Kuttler.