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Backpacker hostels, now in Israel too

For years the Israeli tourism industry has paid little attention to foreign backpackers, thinking they don't invest much money in the economy. Several new hostels are seeking to change that.

By Moshe Gilad | 09:37 23.07.12 | 1

It's 3 p.m. on a particularly scorching day and two young women from Germany have just come back to The Green Backpackers hostel in Mitzpeh Ramon, a crater in the Negev Desert. Their names are Ruth and Eva, and their faces are flushed from the blazing temperatures outside.

Lee Balot, who runs the hostel, has made sure the air conditioning is on full blast and wastes no time fetching cold water and a plate of melon for the women. After they've cooled down, she asks them where they've been hiking since the morning, when she saw them leave the hostel.

Despite the heat, the two tourists went out and traveled by bus to the Ein Avdat spring, by the Dead Sea.

The women had arrived just one day earlier, but Balot nevertheless remembers their names and other details. "It's a small place," she smiles. "There aren't many other guests."

Ruth and Eva, who are touring Israel on their own, are effusive in their praise of the hostel.

"It's very well organized, which isn't all that characteristic of Israel," Ruth says. "They give backpackers excellent information, tell you where you should go and when, and these things are more important to us than how the rooms are furnished. We can do our own cooking if we want, and it's affordable."

Above all, Ruth says, the hostel succeeds at making them feel comfortable. "It's inexpensive and clean, and most important is that we don't feel alone here. It's a bit like home. There are people you can talk to."

The Green Backpackers, which opened a year ago, is part of a widespread change in the hospitality field. You could even call it a kind of revolution. There are now several dozen hostels catering specifically to independent tourists visiting Israel from abroad. This demographic, comprised mostly of young people, was ignored for years because the local tourism industry didn't see it as a source of much income.

These new roadhouses have proven the skeptics wrong. Across the country, private inns offer independent tourists warm hospitality at low prices, and their business tactics are a fresh take on what a tourists' welcome should look like.

200 guests wash the dishes

Yaron Burgin, 34, is one of the owners of the Abraham Hostel, which opened a year and a half ago in downtown Jerusalem. He is also one of the founders of Israel Hostels (ILH, the umbrella organization of private hostels in Israel). At the end of a comprehensive tour of the hostel, he shares his guiding principles with me.

"The free, independent traveler (FIT) sector is showing the largest growth in the tourism industry throughout the world, overtaking organized groups tours and the like. But even though it is acknowledged this segment comprises 40 percent of the tourists here, Israel still tends to ignore it, preferring to invest in large groups because it's easier. We want to change that."

Burgin says that their approach "has two major components – the price and the cooperative aspect. After all, it is based on models that we know from elsewhere in the world, particularly New Zealand, where they've made it so sophisticated that it's perfect. Our guests, who have already toured in other places throughout the world, are used to a certain standard, and we provide it: A bed, cleanliness, basic comforts at a fair price and, mainly, a social group and partnership as an important added value. Our guests want to meet people who are like them. They don't want just a place to sleep. They want a social experience."

"There are guests who come here, rent a double room and still don't understand the difference between a hostel and a hotel. They realize it only at breakfast time, when we ask everybody to wash their dishes before leaving. Every morning, 200 here wash their plates, and we joke that that's our greatest accomplishment. If a guest stays in his room all day, we consider that a failure on our part. It's precisely for that reason that we run an information center that provides maps and a lot of information about sites, hiking routes and events in the city."

During the tour of his hostel, Burgin shows the well-appointed computer room available to the guests, and then leads me to the communal kitchen where guests can do their own cooking, to the laundry room, the rest and relaxation area up on the roof and, finally, to the pièce de résistance – a large guest lounge with sofas, hammocks, a pool table, a television and a bar peddling drinks. Guests are sprawled about the room. Two young women are napping on the sofas.

The Abraham Hostel, located at Davidka Square, has 72 rooms and 230 beds, making it the largest private hostel in Israel today. A bed in a dormitory room costs NIS 90 (guests from abroad do not pay VAT), while a double room costs NIS 270 per night. The average age of the guests ranges between 25 and 40.

Some of the revolution in the industry rests in the fact that more than 70 percent of the reservations are that the hostel show up on the right websites.

"Once, we were mentioned in Lonely Planet, but today we are in a different place. The hostel's ranking on sites such as TripAdvisor, which rank hotels and hostels according to feedback from guests who stayed here in the past – that's the backpackers' bible, and that's the reason why our ranking on such websites is more important to our future than anything else," Burgin says.

A quick look at TripAdvisor.com shows that the Abraham Hostel is ranked first in the category "Specialty Lodging – Jerusalem, Israel." At this writing, it has 244 reviews by guests, most of them positive.

The hostel's competition – the other entries in the same category – have higher prices, and none of them carry more than 20 reviews. At Booking.com, the Abraham Hostel is rated "good" – a score of 7.9 – from 213 reviews.

Burgin says, "In the past, the Israeli tourism industry gave up on our clientele completely because they were considered down-and-out and cheap. That's a mistake because a guest who stays with us will spend more on the whole throughout his visit than other guests. He rides the bus, rents a car, eats in restaurants, shops in the open-air market and the mall and pays entrance fees to sites. They are conscious of their budget, but what they have, they are happy to spend."

According to Burgin, the government hasn't yet caught on to the change, but they will.

"Reality will force the government ministries and the Jerusalem municipality to recognize that the market has changed," he says. "In the future, dozens of hostels like ours will be established, and more agencies will join this project. There aren't enough good beds in the lower price range, particularly in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv."

Together with his partners in the Abraham Hostel, such as Maoz Inon, who also owns the Fauzi Azar Inn in Nazareth, Burgin hopes to make good on this new model and open more hostels throughout the Middle East.

The project manager of ILH, the umbrella organization of private hostels in Israel, is Efrat Laor. The organization, which was founded in 2006, currently has 32 member hostels. The rules are clear: A hostel that is a member of the organization commits to having at least some of its beds in dormitory rooms and reasonable prices (up to NIS 100 per bed in a dormitory room). All of the owners must be individuals, and emphasis is placed on the social experience – meeting with other tourists in public areas.

Many of the entrepreneurs who are establishing hostels in Israel are young people who have toured throughout the world and are now importing the model that they saw abroad and enjoyed. Laor says that some of the new hostel owners are former owners of bed-and-breakfasts who took a hit when tourism declined. The Abraham Hostel is the largest private hostel. Green Backpackers in Mitzpeh Ramon is the smallest, with four rooms and only 16 beds in one building, and another three rooms in a nearby apartment.

According to Laor, the new hostels are mostly opening in the large cities, where there is a shortage of clean, simple lodgings at a reasonable price. "At least a small hostel in Mitzpeh Ramon, like the one that Lee Balot established, is a big gamble. It has to turn Mitzpeh Ramon into a tourist area. The owners of the hostel in Jerusalem do not have to worry about that. All they have to do is compete with other hostels."

Laor says that the Tourism Ministry does not support the private hostels yet, but she hopes that this problem, too, will soon be solved.

The hostels that are members of the ILH hardly cater to Israeli tourists at all. Burgin and Laor say that their clientele are tourists from abroad, and that marketing is directed toward them. They say that Israelis have many alternatives, including hostels run by the Israel Youth Hostel Association (IYHA), which host mainly youth groups and local tourists – a completely different atmosphere. The impression that I took away from my visits to several of the private hostels is that they prefer that the Israeli clientele do not stay there. The tourists from abroad provide enough income for now.

An aqueduct in the dining room

Eight months ago, in November 2011, a new hostel opened in Acre, a historic, mixed Arab-Jewish city near Haifa. Owned by the IYHA (a non-profit organization that operates under the sponsorship of the Education Ministry), the hostel sits in a magnificent new building at the entrance to the Old City.

On a hot morning in the middle of the week, several dozen young people, all speaking Hebrew, fill the halls. The hostel has 76 rooms and 340 beds. The prices are about NIS 130 for a bed in a dormitory room and about NIS 350 for a double room.

Kayed Kawas, the hostel's young manager, is very proud of his new building and sees it as a way to renew Acre and promote tourism there. He points to the archaeological ruins preserved at the heart of the building, which include an ancient stone aqueduct jutting into the dining room. Talk about a unique eating experience!

The hostel is nearly at full occupancy, and Kawas says that tourists in Acre thirst for quality, inexpensive lodgings. With enthusiasm, he describes the progress that has been made in the city thanks to tourism and the courses that are held for local young people in order to get them interested in the industry. The future of Acre, he says, is bright: One day it will be a place of hospitality and tourism for both Israelis and foreigners alike.

In order to illustrate how important the hostel is for his town, Kawas cites a single fact: It has 45 employees, all of them local residents. Afterward, he adds that they are members of all the religions – Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze.

Ofer Shapira, the deputy director of the IYHA and the owner of the youth hostel in Acre, says that the association is making progress in two areas: hospitality and assisting the local schools in education. "Our goals have to do with the education of young people, love of the land, love of hiking – and all of these goals are not necessarily financial in nature," he says.

The association owns about 20 hostels with 6,000 beds countrywide. Shapira says that running a hostel in a town such as Shlomi, where a mere 6,000 residents live a stone's throw from the Lebanese border, is not done for financial reasons.

"We are proud of the fact that we succeeded in bringing 50,000 guests to Shlomi. That stems from our ability, as an association, to motivate people. That is a national goal, and promoting the periphery is a subject of supreme importance," Shapira says.

According to Shapira, Acre and the new hostel that Kawas are a fantastic example of promoting Israel's peripheral towns and cities. He says that 70 percent of the IYHA's guests are Israelis. The rest come from abroad, but many of them do not come here as independent tourists, landing in Israel instead as part of groups such as Birthright.

The prices do not differ much from those of private hostels – NIS 120 (including VAT) for a bed in a dormitory room, and about NIS 400 for a bed in a double room, including breakfast. Shapira says prices are on the high side, in comparison to other destinations abroad, because of unavailable expenses like taxes and security.

The ILH, Shapira says, isn't competition. They're a great organization. "They're lovely people who went with the concept for a defined niche of tourists. There are significant differences between us. For example, that they do not keep kosher, while all our hostels do. That is an important thing for Israeli guests and for some guests from abroad. They operate in a niche that has a place in Israel, but it is only one of five or six niches that we deal with and cater to."

Shapira says that while there is a shortage of beds in the large cities, his organization caters mainly to new destinations such as Peki'in, Shlomi, Mitzpeh Ramon and Acre, places that are ready for a debut on the tourist map.

The hostel as matchmaker

Liat Czerwonogora runs the Hayarkon 48 Hostel in Tel Aviv, a bustling, bright-yellow building located one block from the Mediterranean Sea. "Today, we are completely full," she says when I call her, asking to see a room. "We don't have a single empty bed. We're close to the sea and downtown, and because of it we attract a lot of young people, particularly during the summer. Our average guest is 22 years old, which explains the style of the place."

Hayarkon 48 has 37 rooms and 120 beds. The price range is between NIS 98 for a bed in a dorm room and NIS 385 for a double room with a private bathroom. "The difference between us and the IYHA hostel at Bnei Dan, near the bridge in the north of the city, is that our guests want a social atmosphere," says Czerwonogora. "They want to meet people who are like them. When you go to a place where there are mostly groups, you have almost no chance of meeting people and talking with them."

Group members are busy getting to know the other members of their own group. Our guests come here by themselves or in couples, and they are thirsty for a social life. That's our biggest advantage, and we put a lot into parties and events on the roof. We already have quite a few couples who met here at the hostel."

A Brit, a Pole, and two Germans walk into a hostel...

Back at The Green Backpackers in Mitzpeh Ramon, Lee Balot is counting off the day's guests for me. At first, it sounds like the beginning of a joke.

"Now we have an English guest, a Polish guest, the two German women you met already and maybe a Japanese guest will be coming," she says. But they haven't walked into a bar – they've walked into their home away from home.

"Although we have guests, it's not every day that we manage to fill up the place. A bed in a dorm room costs NIS 75, and a double room costs

NIS 265. The prices don't include food, because we want to encourage them to go to the grocery store, to go into the neighborhood, to get to know the possibilities in Mitzpeh Ramon."

What Balot would love to see is more development in the area, with tourists and the community forming a cooperative relationship. She wants new bus stops that take visitors directly to hiking spots, and the option for day bus passes for those who wish to spend a full day touring.

"Our clientele spends a lot of money on ancillary services in the area, but nobody sees it. A tourist who goes to the fancy Beresheet Hotel at the lip of the makhtesh [crater] pays NIS 1,200 per night, but never leaves the hotel or contributes anything to Mitzpeh Ramon. The money doesn't stay in the city. Fewer than a third of this hotel's employees are local residents. The hotel's laundry isn't even done here. Maybe that's funny, but for us in the hostel, there are guests who bring a lot of money into the city, and no one takes us into account. They eat in restaurants, go to the jazz bar, drink beer, shop in the grocery store, and ride the buses."

Balot says that it is hard to live in Mitzpeh Ramon and even harder to run a hostel and bring in tourists, but she is optimistic and dreams of the day when there will be 50 beds in the hostel, with three attached housing units for room rentals. She dreams of investments in infrastructure rather than in fancy hotels.

"Part of the reason why we call this place Green Backpackers is Ben-Gurion's original surname: Grün [Green]. After all, he was the one who said, 'The Negev is where the people of Israel will be tested,' and we are fulfilling that dream."