

Cool, High, and Dry,

Dry,

Text and
Photography: Dita Kohl





Every summer, when the heat and humidity of Tel Aviv reach the point where our life becomes boxed into the confines of air-conditioned rooms, I take my family to the Negev. As we approach Beersheba, we open the car windows to let in the desert's big secret – the cool, dry air. As we ascend the Avdat Plateau, 800 meters above sea level between Sde Boker and Mitzpeh Ramon, we reach for something warm to pull over our T-shirts.

This year, we returned to Eyal Carmeli's farm, Carmei Avdat. The farm is one of seven "single settlements" in the Negev Highlands. These "settlements" are not communities of several hundred people, as is the norm in Israel, but private homesteads on small sites hidden away in little wadis. Their origins are varied – from initiatives of private individuals wishing to cultivate vineyards for winemaking, raise goats, or pursue any other agricultural industry, to an attempt by the authorities to block hundreds of Bedouin from the Gaza Strip or the southern Hebron mountains who illegally enter the desert and create shanty towns that damage the landscape.

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI)



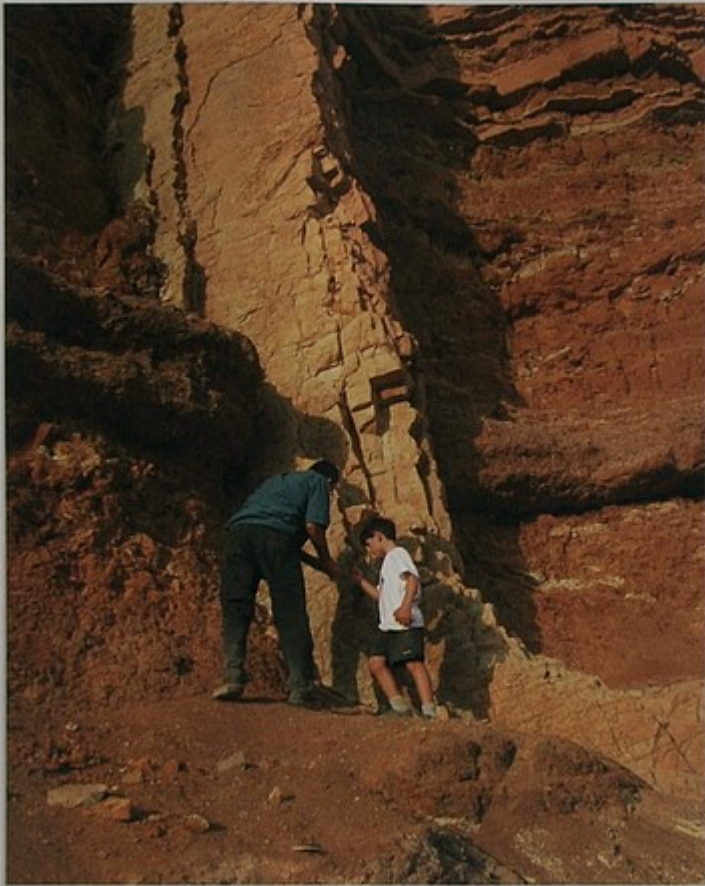
Carmei Avdat in the Negev Highlands.

is, of course, adamantly opposed to the private homesteads – its usual Pavlovian reaction to any invasion of its turf. The fact that the small homesteads were set up on the remains of Nabatean farms, recreating a way of life that was the norm in the region for centuries, is also of no interest to the SPNI. The organization petitioned Israel's Supreme Court against the settlements, to no avail.

Eyal Carmeli's farm consists of a 5-acre vineyard that was being harvested this summer for the first time, a small shed where he houses his family, and

four mud-brick two-room units, tucked away in the little ravine that runs into the desert behind the vineyard. The vineyard is actually a reconstructed Nabatean farm, with the addition of pomegranate, fig, and plum trees to fill the fruit bowls in each of the four units.

Each unit is a marvel of desert dwelling. The floors are made of small pebbles collected from the riverbeds of the Negev, the roofs are covered with palm fronds, and verandas and overhangs shade the walls. Sitting on the porch as night fell, we watched the stars light up the sky, gazed at the



Left: **The famous Makhtesh Ramon Dike – one of the vertical intrusions of lava in Nahal Ardon.**

Top right: **Descending Mt. Harut with Mt. Ardon in the background.** Above right: **Ein Akev.**



huge, nearly full, moon of the month of Av, and enjoyed the cool evening breeze.

Near the units, Eyal has dug two little “Sinai mountain pools.” These pools, found by the dozens in the mountains of Sinai and dug by the Bedouin to aid in their farming, are basically plastered pools, about a half-meter deep, filled with clear water. Eyal uses them for irrigation, but the guests are invited to take a dip – as we did, equipped with a bottle of wine to sip as we relaxed in the water.

The next day, after a good, leisurely breakfast in the shade, which we prolonged until noon, we set out for the spring of Ein Akev. The best way to get there is by jeep – unless you want to hike there in the sun, a trek that takes 45 minutes each way.

Ein Akev, in the riverbed of Nahal Akev, is fed by the high water table of the Avdat Plateau. It is one of a line of similar springs along the base of the plateau – with one major difference. From this spring, a small stream tumbles down a 10-meter waterfall into a shaded pool that is said to be over 6 meters deep.

The water is freezing cold, and it’s the perfect place to swim under a waterfall in the desert. If you’re lucky, you’ll have the pool to yourself. In summer, such luxurious solitude is possible only during the week.

Jeeps are parked a few hundred meters from the pool. Often, while the unsuspecting visitors were having fun in

the water, thieves would break into the jeeps and steal anything of value. Local residents claimed that this was the work

of Bedouin intruders. Lately, the police have tightened their vigilance and arrests have been made in the area. In the past month, there have been no break-ins in the parking lot.

After our dip, we drove to the unique valley of Makhtesh Ramon to enjoy looking at the colors of the rocks and sands and try and spot some onagers or oryxes. As the afternoon shadows began to creep up the cliffs, we climbed the conical Mount Harut to see the view, hiked a little in Nahal Ardon, and even found some onager tracks. We had the whole desert to ourselves.

At dusk, we made our way to HaHavit (The Barrel), a restaurant in Mitzpeh Ramon; the restaurant recently relocated to the top of the cliff near the Visitors’ Center. The Barrel is frequented by the locals, so it can’t cheat on the quality of the food, the beer, or the wine, and the prices are reasonable. Open until the wee hours of the morning, it has a very lively bar and every now and then features live music. It is becoming a hangout for many of the night people of Tel Aviv.

We took our beers and sat on the porch overlooking the crater cliff. The moon rose over the desert, and the air was crisp, clean, and cool. The desert in summer, I thought – may it remain a secret for many, many years to come. ■