



A 30-minute bike ride to the south brings one to an overlook of Nahal Tze'elim.

• Text and photos: SETH J. FRANTZMAN

Sunrise comes early in the desert. That's how it seems at least, though science and astronomy would tell us otherwise. Holding a cup of Turkish coffee, overlooking a wall of low hills in all directions, the braying of a donkey in the distance, while the cold air penetrates a cheap Norwegian hat, science is the least of my concerns. Joni Gritzner, the Kfar Hanokdim media relations manager, calls this the "golden hour." And he's right. The desert is bathed in a kind of opaque gold carpet. It's 6:40 a.m.

Located near Arad, Kfar Hanokdim is nearing 25 years in operation this year. Situated in a valley not far from Masada's western entrance (most people are used to driving to Masada from the Dead Sea, but it can be reached via Arad), it has the same parched desert landscape that looks like a spread of

landscape on Mars. Kfar Hanokdim itself is a kind of oasis in this area, with dozens of palm trees ringed by numerous Beduin-style tents, interlinked "lodges" and other accommodations. It has grown haphazardly over the years, and now sports an ecology desert learning center that hosts groups, as well as a rock-sculptured fountain, dozens of camels in a pasture and a small petting area with goats for children. Peacocks roam the grounds.

Guests are greeted with a choice of Beduin tea, coffee or juice. Everything here reminds one of the old Sinai camp sites once run by Beduin and frequented by Israeli tourists. It is no surprise the original developers of this place had experience traveling in Sinai.

"Our idea is a desert environment, not a Beduin experience even though we learn and have that sustainability," explains Joni.

Nevertheless Beduin craftsmanship and expertise at building goat-hair

tents are in evidence everywhere. Large tour groups can experience Beduin culture in nighttime events.

The concept seems to be to cater to a variety of groups at the same time. Those wishing to camp can book an area. Those wanting a family tent and to do their own grilling can. Others can choose a fully catered breakfast and dinner as well as a range of accommodations. Check-in is at three in the afternoon and reservations should be made online. Gritzner warns us that if someone is interested in staying over the weekend in one of the "lodges" or more sophisticated accommodations that have private bathrooms and heating, they should book well in advance, especially for the holidays.

The mixed accommodations also fit the seasons. In winter, as it is now, it gets cold at night. Staying in one of the rooms with heating is probably preferable. But in summer, the slightly more rustic accommodation, of semi-tents



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with six beds and a draw-string goat's hair flap to pull over for privacy, seems more fitting. The large area of the site gives one the feel of exploring a secret village. One path leads to a courtyard with hammocks and low couches. Another goes past shared toilets to a courtyard with four wooden towers, each with its own hammock and mat to sit on. Instant relaxation. Just bring wine, please. And wine and beer are helpfully available to order at the entrance.

Disconcerting for some will be the lack of WiFi and cellphone reception. It turns out that the distance from Arad, about a 10-minute drive, is just enough due to the mountains ringing the area, that cell reception is spotty. It's not nonexistent, but may take a short walk from your accommodation. Here is a time to cut yourself off a bit and look at the stars, which shine brightly at night.

"We are surrounded by Mount Gorni, Kenaim... and over those hills is Masada and the Dead Sea," explains Gritzner, pointing around the panorama.

In the distance to the north is Nahal Tze'elim. It is one of several wadis and dry rivers in this area. There are numerous hiking trails nearby. Kfar Hanokdim also has camel rides and mountain bike rentals. I chose the bike experience, while my wife and young son stayed behind. A 30 minute ride to the south brings one to an overlook of Tze'elim. Joni notes that the development of the bike trail is a recent addition. Given the openness of this landscape it isn't clear why one needs a trail at all. Just point in the direction you and want and ride.

The proximity to Tze'elim presents visitors with a gem. Depending on your ability, the website tiuli.com says you can do a circular 12-km. hike down the canyon and back to the rim in a day. That could also be a bit of a stretch, because you'll be descending more than 400 m. and then have to remake all

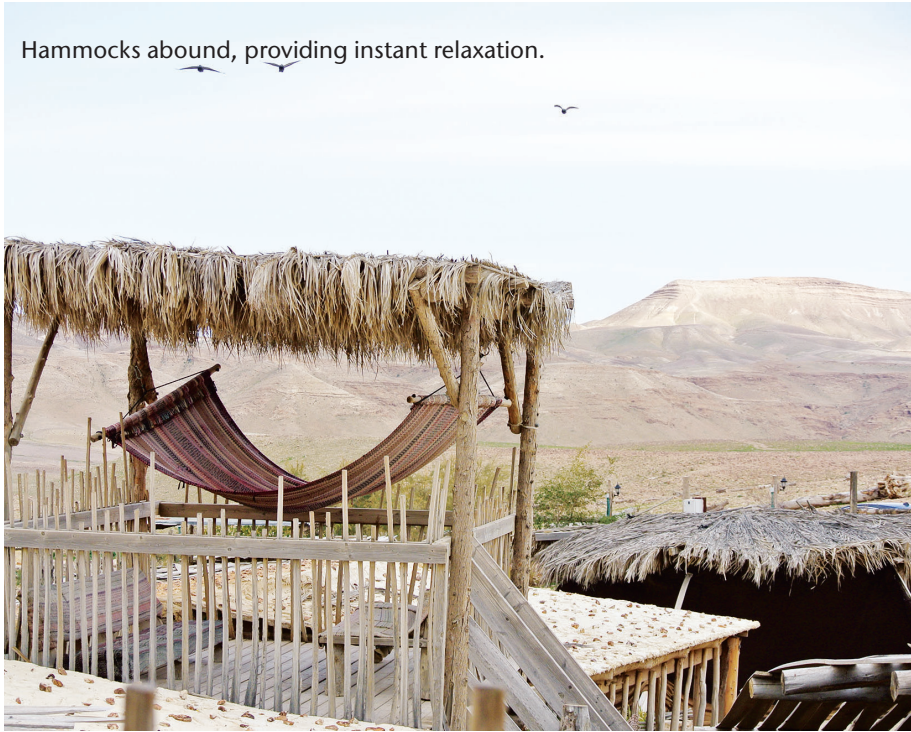
that to get back. Drop a car at the bottom and drive back is a possibility. Better yet, just drive from Kfar Hanokdim down the dirt track and hike 45 minutes down to Tzfira pool, which is situated in a beautiful canyon, play in the pool and come back. After the bike ride with Gritzner out to see the approaches to Tze'elim, we settled into a quick ride back. The sun was beginning to set. The group of young Israelis in the room next to us had broken open a bottle of Jack Daniels and were lounging on the hammocks.

Dinner and breakfast were ample portions of comfort food. Meat patties, salmon, Moroccan fish, a vat of rice, salads and a lamb stew provided enough for a small army. The food is kosher. Most of those in attendance were Israeli families. Like the young and friendly staff, this place has a youthful vigor to it. Breakfast was a similar spread with herring, cheeses, boiled egg and yogurts. Beduin tea in copious amounts came from a plastic urn.

Kfar Hanokdim, despite its feeling of being cut off from the tech overdose of city life, has its own downloadable app. The app has a game where one can learn details about the site on a sort of scavenger hunt. They have also mapped some of the trails nearby with points of interest along the way. According to Gritzner they are getting good feedback on the app, and hope to release it in English soon.

Like many of the pleasant accommodations in the Negev such as the Desert Olive Farm and Khan Be'erotayim, Kfar Hanokdim provides the Negev at its best. Blending the desert environment perfectly with a range of accommodations, it has the necessities for a family or hiking, as well as a relaxing pleasant environment to experience the desert the way it should be. Under the stars. Coffee or wine in hand.

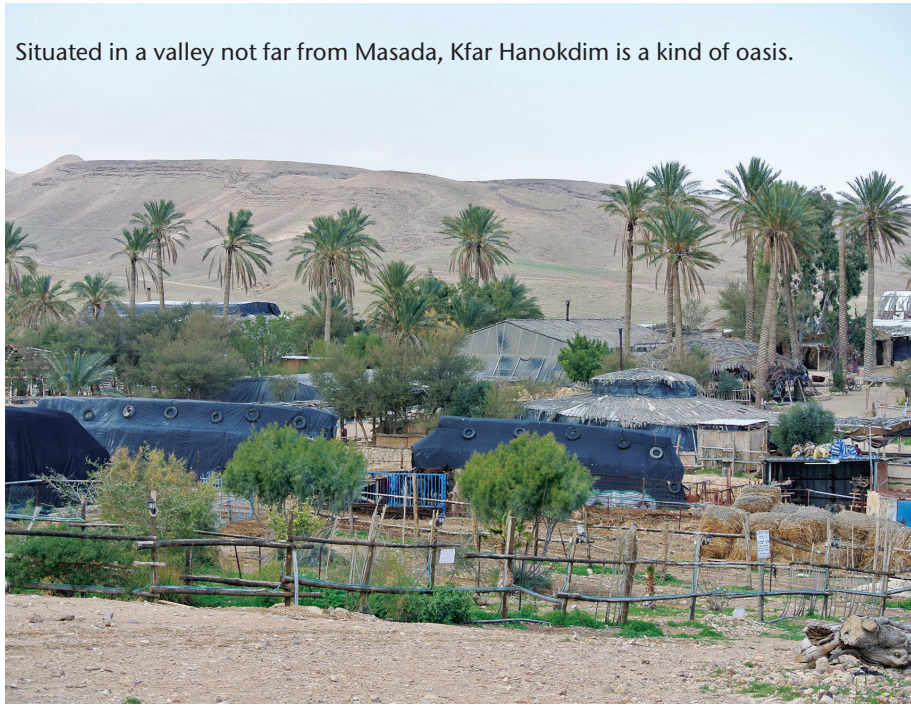
*The writer was a guest of Kfar Hanokdim.*



Hammocks abound, providing instant relaxation.



Joni Gritzner of Kfar Hanokdim feels at home in the desert.



Situated in a valley not far from Masada, Kfar Hanokdim is a kind of oasis.



Plenty on display at the reception area.