

## Chapter 7

# Bedouin Tourism Development Planning in the New Economy

The camel is the family's father  
—Clinton Bailey, *A Culture of Desert Survival:  
Bedouin Proverbs from Sinai and the Negev*

The bedouin of the Negev Desert have undergone considerable social and economic change since the Israeli Government forcibly began concentrating and then resettling them over the past four decades, in the process altering their lifestyle away from pastoral nomadism. During this same period of resettlement, a small but growing tourism industry has been developed in the area around the marketing of “traditional” Negev bedouin nomadic culture.

As my previous study on the topic suggests (Dinero 2002), this sector has been dominated historically by Jewish Israeli entrepreneurs, who sought to express a narrative not of post-nomadic bedouin life in Segev Shalom, the other planned towns, and the unrecognized communities—that is, as it is presently lived and experienced—but rather, of an Orientalist’s version of a glorified, romanticized past that has been largely erased by today’s political realities.

In the first decade of the 2000s, however, a counter-trend began to develop in the region. Organizations such as the NGO *Bustan* created what they called “Unplugged” tours and other related activities, which sought to show the visitor the “real” situation in the Negev, and to encourage political action on the community’s behalf. In essence, they made such issues as poverty, private suffering, and human tragedy attractions for tourist consumption. Such tours act as agents of an increasingly global trend, “voluntourism,” which seeks to inspire “well-intentioned” outsiders to learn about what is happening in a particular locale, and then, more importantly, to act on behalf of those who, presumably, are incapable of mobilizing independently because they are too small, too weak, and too dependent upon their governments for financial, political or other types of support.

More recently, bedouin entrepreneurs have been developing their own tourism-related businesses in the Negev, through which they seek to present a counter-narrative to that offered previously in other venues. Though most are quite new on the tourism scene and all are relatively small in size, these vendors are economically empowering to the individual owners, employees, and the bedouin community as a whole, allowing the bedouin to speak for themselves about who they are, and how they want outsiders to perceive the social, economic, and political forces that now formulate the circumstances comprising their post-nomadic existence.

### **The “Perpetrator” Narrative: The Noble Desert Savage**

Previously and at some length, I have detailed the use of tourism in the perpetuation of a Disneyfied, Orientalistic image of the bedouin as the “Noble Desert Savage” (Dinero 2002). In brief, this phenomenon may be situated within a form of heritage tourism that commoditizes “exotic” native culture, but is premised upon the assumption that the experiences being consumed are entirely “real” and “authentic.”

But, in truth, the experiences and images marketed through heritage tourism are decontextualized. As I have noted: “the marketing of culture through the packaging and selling of the tourist product leads to a loss of communication or understanding between the host [native] and tourist populations. Instead of destroying misconceptions between the two ... tourism perpetuates them and often creates new prejudices” (Dinero 2002: 71).

It is from this perspective then that I have argued that the packaging and marketing of Disneyfied images of native cultures has both internal social and economic costs for local populations, and has the potential simply to reinforce and to reify stereotypes while solidifying the position of native peoples into a proletariat class periphery. Moreover, heritage tourism takes on a particularly insipient nature in permanently colonized lands (the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand provide ideal examples). For here, former colonizers may foster the creation and perpetuation of images of local peoples that validate their colonization, in what Nash has called a neocolonialist tourism superstructure (1989: 43; 1996: 64). Colonizers—sometimes with native complicity, I might add—seek here to emphasize the primitive or savage nature of the remnants of the native community, in an attempt to rationalize and justify their conquest of the “wilderness,” human inhabitants included (Dinero 2002: 71).

The “Negev Bedouin,” as constructed by the Israeli tourism industry throughout the 1980s and to a far greater extent in the 1990s, was most clearly articulated in a handful of specific forums. These included the

realms of the developing Negev Desert ecotourism industry, the “Bedouin *Shuk*” (Hebrew: market), located on the Eilat Highway in Be’er Sheva, and the Joe Alon Museum of Bedouin Culture located at Kibbutz Lahav. Throughout these and related environments, a narrative was constructed, primarily by Jewish Israeli entrepreneurs—with bedouin Israeli staff in many instances along side them helping to perpetuate the story—which followed the colonizer’s justification/validation paradigm, promoting a “Noble Desert Savage”-type image (Dinero 2002: 90), which is very similar to the “Noble Savage” imagery of the American West. What distinguishes this image is its regional context, associated with, among other stereotypical nineteenth century attributes, harem girls, camels, snakecharmers, and thieves (Dinero 2002: 73).

A typical experience, for example, included on the itinerary of virtually every American Jewish youth group trip to Israel (including the United Synagogue Youth [Conservative Movement], the North American Federation of Temple Youth [Reform Movement], the National Conference of Synagogue Youth [Orthodox Movement], the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization, Young Judaea, Habonim Dror [Labor Zionist Movement], and Birthright) is to visit a “Bedouin Tent” for tourists. These venues are located throughout the Negev, although those near Eilat, itself a tourist destination, are especially popular (Illustrations 7.1, 7.2). There, these youth can ride camels, drink sweet tea, smoke water pipes, and be waited on by a veiled woman named “Fatma,” living, as it were—for a few hours at least—as if they were on the Hollywood set of a 1950s movie. The bedouin are simply part of the production, mysterious props concealed in some bizarre, surreal, staged drama in which these students are both actors (i.e., the producers) and consumers of “traditional” drink, music, stories, and the like. And if they remain long enough that “traditional bedouin food” is served, they can be assured that it is indeed kosher (i.e., that Jewish dietary laws are observed; see Dinero 2002: 88).

Thus, the Negev bedouin are presented by tourism vendors, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, guidebooks, and others (Dinero 2002: 75–76) as inscrutable; like the camels that they ride, their lifestyle and culture is wild, raw, untamable, and part and parcel of an expansive and unknown desert wilderness that appears unwilling to succumb to the demands and expectations of development and modernity (2002: 82). From the faces hidden behind the veils to the tents in which they dwell, all is presented as hidden, mysterious, and exotic, and bordering on the edge of erotic discourse.

What is significant about this narrative, of course, is that by extension, it places the onus of economic and social development of the bedouin in the modern era squarely upon the shoulders of the community itself, which is viewed as having complete agency over the present state of affairs. Through



**Illustrations 7.1 and 7.2.** The “Bedouin Tent” Outside Eilat.  
*Source:* Photos by Steven C. Dinero.



the promotion by tour vendors of these seemingly harmless, romantic, “Lawrence of Arabia”-type images, a political point is being expressed: “If the bedouin are not developing, *if* the planned towns are failing, *if* adequate wage labor employment is a problem, *if* health, education, and welfare are all areas of struggle—well, what do you expect, anyway? Look at their culture, will you?! The State is doing the best it can!” And, of course, the added corollary to the narrative is this: “Any improvement you do see—well, you have the State to thank for it.”

Thus, it has been my contention that: “the Israeli Jewish agenda of settling the land and controlling its borderlands, when combined with the aim of developing its growing capitalist economy, are central to the construction of Bedouin society as a tourist attraction. When viewed within the context of neocolonialism, this process may be seen similarly as the final piece of a programme of resettlement and proletarianization of the Bedouin which has been taking place in the Negev now for over five decades” (Dinero 2002: 91). And yet, despite what appears to be part of a narrative of colonization and conquest, it is also my belief that the bedouin involved in Jewish tourism ventures have actively succeeded in playing a role in shaping and forming the agenda of how others perceive who and what they are, what their culture was and is becoming, and that “it would be a mistake to present the situation in the Negev today as one of total Bedouin victimization” (Dinero 2002: 90).

Still, an alternative narrative has arisen in Negev tourism since the year 2000, which is attempting to do just this. Striving to provide a corrective to the “bedouin as perpetrator” narrative, which places the blame for slow bedouin development upon such rationale as primitivism, barbarity, and various other cultural obstacles, this newly evolving narrative shifts the focus, placing the blame upon the state, and presenting the bedouin community as weak, disempowered, and impoverished victims.

### **The “Victim” Narrative: A Call for “Voluntourism” in Segev Shalom and Elsewhere**

While Karl Marx’s “Theory of Commodity Fetishism” appears to hold true in the consumption-oriented global economy, it has long been believed that there are some things that can never be bought or sold—that is, converted into commodities—and these might include poverty, suffering, pain, and the like. Recently, however, there is evidence to suggest that even these negative abstract conditions can, under certain circumstances, be marketed to those open to their consumption in the ever-expanding global tourism marketplace.

John Hutnyk, for example, in his book, *The Rumour of Calcutta*, put this concept forward in the mid 1990s by suggesting that poverty serves as a particularly attractive tourist product for “well intentioned” Western youth, who are drawn to places such as India in order that they might carry out some sort of charity aid work there as a part of their backpacking/eco-trekking agenda. It is his contention that Western tourism has grown in Calcutta in recent years not *despite* the existence of impoverishment and pain found in the city, but *because* of it.

He argues that Western travel guidebooks oriented to the young “budget traveler” play a particularly central role in the production of a version of Calcutta as a city of extremes, of social and economic stresses that feed the tourists’ appetite for the bizarre, the different, and the exotic. Moreover, he states that these young tourists themselves serve to produce/reproduce this imaged Calcutta by telling/retelling stories that reaffirm and confirm the realities of what might be called an imagined and constructed “exotscape” (Hutnyk 1996).

Over a decade later, a similar phenomenon appears to have spread, and is now at play in the slums of some of Africa’s capitals. In Nairobi’s Kibera slum, for example, journalists, curious and concerned Westerners, and others can take “pity tours” (“Slum Tourism...,” 9 February 2007), where they can participate in paid walks to observe the poorest of the poor as a leisure-time activity. At the same time, it is presumed that such “tours” can lead to *action and support* of those who are in the greatest need of assistance. Theoretically, the tours raise awareness of local concerns; tour operators return a percentage of their payment to each participant to donate to a cause they have seen on their tour, “such as a health or school project.”

It is somewhat questionable whether such tourism truly aids those in need or perhaps is designed simply to ease the consciences of those who participate (Lancaster 2007). “While all recognise the potential for good from such attention, plus the pressure it puts on the government and others to help slum-dwellers, most [Kibera slum-dwellers] said tangible benefits so far [are] few, while the embarrassment factor [grows] every day” (“Slum Tourism...,” 9 February 2007). The resentment toward such tourism based upon personal suffering is understandably palpable:

They see us like puppets, they want to come and take pictures, have a little walk, tell their friends they’ve been to the worst slum in Africa ... But nothing changes for us. If someone comes, let him do something for us. Or if they really want to know how we think and feel, come and spend a night, or walk round when it’s pouring with rain here and the paths are like rivers.

The Kenyans are not alone in sponsoring such “slum tours.” The commoditization of poverty and suffering for tourist consumption by various entrepreneurs in the industry, Kenyans included, usually comes with a charge, and includes the following partial list (Table 7.1) of examples (“Poverty Tourism,” 4 February 2008):

**Table 7.1.** “Slum Tours” Throughout the Developing World

- Mumbai, India  
Reality Tours and Travel half day \$8, full day \$15  
*Source:* [realitytoursandtravel.com](http://realitytoursandtravel.com)
- Johannesburg, South Africa  
Imbizo Tours half day \$57, full day \$117  
*Source:* [imbizotours.co.za](http://imbizotours.co.za)
- Nairobi, Kenya  
Victoria Safaris, half day \$50, full day \$100  
*Source:* [victoriasafaris.com](http://victoriasafaris.com)
- Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Favela Tour half day \$37  
*Source:* [favelatour.com.br](http://favelatour.com.br)
- Mazatlán, Mexico  
Vineyard Ministries free  
*Source:* [vineyardmcm.org](http://vineyardmcm.org)
- Cape Town, South Africa  
Nomvuyo’s Tours half day \$97, \$48 per person for groups of three or more  
*Source:* [nomvuyos-tours.co.za](http://nomvuyos-tours.co.za)

So-called “poorism” (see Lancaster 2007) and its related trend, “vol-untourism” (see, for example, Winerman 2006), provide a context for the construction of a bedouin tourism counter-narrative that began to develop in the Negev in the early 2000s largely in response to the narrative of the Noble Desert Savage. In this narrative, the bedouin are presented as the battered, impoverished, and disempowered victims of the Jewish conquest, concentration, and resettlement of their community. Their plight is great, and therefore they are in great need of help and support from concerned observers able and willing to speak out against the injustices being foisted upon them. Such a narrative, which like any discourse may hold some elements of truth, nonetheless presents the bedouin in a manner that is in many ways emasculating and suggesting of a population “in distress”; a tension appears then both in the tourism literature and in the tour experiences

themselves between presenting the bedouin as disempowered and weak, and yet striving simultaneously to show them as a strong, proud community that is yet functional and whole.

*Bustan*, a nongovernmental organization at the forefront of seeking to speak on behalf of Negev bedouin rights, has developed a series of tours and workshops that well fit this dichotomous dynamic. On the one hand, *Bustan* is one of very few organizations willing to take the time and effort to provide outsiders with a perspective that is more informed than what might otherwise be received through the more mainstream tourism outlets. Moreover, their goal is to serve as a catalyst for action; as a result of experiencing one of their tours, it is their hope that participants will become active in the bedouin rights movement in some type of capacity. Yet, on the other hand, one must problematize the content of their presentation as well, for it too, like poorism, may have unintended consequences. The goals of *Bustan's* tours, according to the NGO website make this apparent:

Negev Unplugged Tours offer hands-on examination of sustainability and the impact of development on the Negev and its people. Through Negev Unplugged Tours we've reached at least 2,500 people in past three years. Expansion of settlement projects, a toxic waste incinerator, polluting industrial zones, an airport and other environmental hazards are spawning unchecked in densely populated regions. As a geographical and cultural periphery, this insidious development is out of the public eye. If action is not taken to combat this highly-politicized overdevelopment, the situation will grow exceedingly worse, likely instigating social, political and environmental disaster [in] the Negev.

BUSTAN believes that change is rooted in knowledge and awareness of facts created on the ground, as an antidote for the ignorance, disinformation and apathy so rampant in today's society.

BUSTAN engages diverse groups to take part in Access vs. Excess tours: human rights activists, environmentalists, authorities and policy makers, experts and academics. See background on two of BUSTAN's tours revealing the stark reality of unrecognized villages and recognized townships, Jewish settlements and industrial zones. (<http://www.bustan.org/negevunplugged>)

Devorah Brous, founder and former Director of *Bustan*, emphasizes that emotion and education play key roles in the implementation of the "Unplugged" tours. In essence, the foundation of the tour concept is the belief that tourists are in fact students, and that once a student learns something,



they will want to go out and “use” that information. I quote her at length (2 July 2007):

Most of those on the tours are Jewish. We also get human rights delegations who are not committed to any particular faith or religious background. What I think attracts the ‘typical’ participant first of all is that we use English. Our website is accessible to them. We also try to show that there are two narratives, you can’t just show the bedouin narrative. You have to allow the Jewish leadership to have their say. It doesn’t serve us to demonize them. We need to listen to them, to hear their part of the story ...

We are trying to create a format for ‘citizen diplomacy,’ to meet with decision-makers. We are trying to create a mechanism then to pressure them in the decisions they are making. We want to make them more conscious of our policies [here in Israel, and that they] are understood abroad, and also to listen to the bedouin side of things ...

So I provide access to getting inside these governmental offices, to hearing answers instead of getting ‘prepared food, already chewed.’ *So we are trying to have real experiences here, not contrived ones.* There is some self-selectivity in who participates. We are not in the mainstream. This works for us and against us. We aren’t included in a lot of NGO fairs and other activities that would better publicize and get the word out on what we are doing—we’re not that type of organization. People who get to us, who find us, usually through word of mouth, not mainstream channels. They come looking for us—we don’t go looking for them.

In order to get a better understanding of who the participants were and how the “Unplugged” tours were carried out, I was a participant observer in just such a full-day excursion on 12 July 2007. The tour bus departed a meeting area near the Be’er Sheva bus station at about 9:00 AM, and did not return to Be’er Sheva until about 6:00 that evening. The cost was 25 NIS for food and 50 NIS for the bus, or roughly US\$18.75/person. There were twenty-five people in the group, of whom five or six were Jewish Israelis, most from north of Be’er Sheva. The rest tended to be tourists from the United States and elsewhere. Many came because they “had heard about the bedouin situation, and wanted to see it first hand.”

The tour had four stops. First, the group went to Segev Shalom. A series of speakers introduced the topic at hand, and then a speaker from “BIMKOM,” a planning organization long involved in bedouin concerns, provided the primary remarks about the resettlement initiative, the unrecognized settlements, the differences between the two areas, and similar issues. The presentation was well informed but at times exaggerated certain

ideas in order to make a point, suggesting (erroneously) in one instance, for example, that the first bedouin towns “were planned in a grid pattern with gardens.” Although “both narratives” were to be presented, no mention was made during this particular tour\* of any benefits that had been fostered by the resettlement initiative; nothing was said, for example, concerning the developmental role of the towns in life improvements and in the standard of living of many in the bedouin community, despite the fact that the meeting took place in the Segev Shalom Middle School.

From Segev Shalom, the group continued on to a private farm in the desert owned by a Jewish family practicing subsistence and organic farming. There, a discussion ensued about how and why Jews are able to live independently on the land, but Arabs are not. The Jewish farmer pointed out that he also does not own the land where the farm is located, that his presence there is tenuous at best, and that it is likely that soon he will be forced out at the state’s behest. At this point, the purpose of the visit to the farm became somewhat cloudy, and the group soon departed.

From there, the tour continued on to the *pezurah* villages of Hiram/Attir, where some houses had recently been demolished by the state as the areas are “unrecognized” by the state. Crammed into a small room, the group heard a series of recounts of how the demolition had occurred, the slander that had been used against the bedouin villagers during the act, and the outrage and pain experienced by the community. The tension in the room was palpable, as a bedouin man in his thirties holding his small child, his face reddened, explained how he had just been called up for *miloim* (Hebrew: reserve army service)—this, at the very time when his country had just betrayed him. His anger was clear, and he verbally attacked the state, the soldiers who carried out the demolition, and the entire Jewish Israeli population for supporting such a contemptible government.

As the majority of tour group members did not speak Hebrew, all of this had to be translated. The translator, a *Bustan* guide, chose his words carefully, but those in the room who understood Hebrew quickly realized that not all of this vitriol was being translated verbatim. Some of the Jewish Israelis took umbrage that the translator was glossing over the meaning rather than honestly representing what was being said. Angry outbursts were exchanged all around and many called for a more complete translation that clearly represented the man’s sentiment. Thus, his words were more appropriately and correctly translated into English.

The room still filled with murmurs about what had just been said, the group settled in for a traditional bedouin lunch. The family of the man who had just spoken served the food.

Thereafter, we took the bus to the area where the houses in question had been demolished. As the tour guide gave a vivid description of how the

demolition had occurred, the tour group members took photographs of the destroyed homes (Illustration 7.3). Several children ran about, posing in front of the detritus, as village elders sat in the shade of crushed tin and cement nearby to avoid the midday heat. The voyeuristic nature of the act was unmistakable. The bedouin guide who took us there, perhaps cognizant of the manner in which this very recent trauma had now become spectacle, placed the moment in a slightly different light, suggesting that “it’s good that the kids see that while it was the Jews who destroyed these houses, it is also Jews who now come here to support us, and to show concern.”

We again boarded the bus and continued on to the planned bedouin town of Hura for a final debriefing. A circle of chairs was formed in the Community Center, and each participant was asked to share his or her feelings and thoughts about the day. *Bustan* Director Brous facilitated the meeting.

In general, the discussion centered upon a narrative of “loss.” Many of the participants spoke about “losing culture,” although there was little talk of what the culture was that the bedouin were losing. Very few tour group members seemed to know anything about the bedouin beyond the fact that there was a conflict between them and the state. The tour appeared to reinforce the participants’ understanding of the conflict, but it was limited in teaching them anything about the bedouin community at large. Further, they were exposed to an exceptional minority group, namely, those who have recently experienced the trauma of a housing demolition. They had very little exposure to bedouin living “normal” lives.



**Illustration 7.3.** Photographing Grief, Hiram/Attir—July 2007.

*Source:* Photo by Steven C. Dinero.

For example, immediately before the debriefing, the *Rosh Ha'Moatzah* of Hura came to welcome the group to the town. He spoke for about ten minutes, and yet, he said virtually nothing about Hura itself, about the planned towns, about living there, or about its development and success—despite the fact that Hura is the most successful of the planned towns, is the wealthiest of the seven, has the highest education rate in the Negev bedouin community, the highest number of residents in the professions, and so on. Instead, in the few minutes he had to talk, he spoke solely about what had happened to the houses at Hiram/Attir.

As the debriefing concluded, Brous noted that listening to suffering must inevitably lead to the question “What do we do now?”—that is, the tour’s orientation was clearly designed with the expectation that each participant would formulate a personal plan of action. By this point, some in the circle literally had tears in their eyes and many were choked up with emotion as they spoke. The room’s dynamic had taken on the atmosphere of a prayer meeting, as each individual in the group stood and testified about what they felt they had experienced hours earlier. “Tell others!” Brous exclaimed as each tour member spoke, “don’t just experience this one day. You must *act* upon what you have experienced.” Thus, the idea of placing well-intentioned tourists into a crucible environment, and then drawing out of them the strength to move forward and to *act*, was reinforced. By the time everyone left for the bus, all appeared to be exhausted, yet invigorated in the belief that they were now empowered to enable some sort of change.

Significantly, *Bustan* is not the only organization that is carrying out such tours, although it was the first to do so and does more of this work than any other agency. In January 2008, the United Jewish Communities—a well-established, mainstream organization comprised of Jewish professionals, nearly all of whom had been to Israel several times working in donor capacities as representatives of the Jewish Federation and other charitable sectarian and private funding agencies—participated in a “Study Trip” to teach their membership about Arab issues in Israel, including bedouin concerns. Under the auspices of the “Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues,” these seventy participants of mostly professional American Jews were not predisposed to the ideals that an “Unplugged” tour participant might possess. And yet ironically, the outcome of participation appears comparable. Jeff Klein, one of the members of the North American delegation, notes (16 January 2008):

I expected that all Arab communities would be the same. I didn’t know anything about the bedouin, though I knew people who had visited one of those ‘bedouin tents’ where they had a fun time. We spent one day in Segev Shalom and then a nearby ‘unrecognized’ settlement. Who ever heard

of that—‘unrecognized?’ We had all been [to Israel] so many times—none of us knew what this was or had ever even heard of it. [In Segev Shalom] we met with [*Rosh Ha'Moatzah*] Saeed El-Harumi, [Social Services Director] Kher El-Baz, and others. Much of the briefing centered upon the lack or inadequacy of infrastructure, health, education, and jobs. They told us about their industrial zones, and how they are not used.

I feel like I've been with the wrong tour guide for the past twenty-five years. It was really an eye-opening experience. We saw massive amounts of poverty. But on top of that they aren't given any services, any opportunity. These things aren't provided by the Government, and then their culture is also holding them back. There is such a disparity—we met some [bedouin] doing so well, yet some have not thrown off the cloak of tradition.

There is really a lot of inequality. Our news gets filtered ... you come back and you say ‘is this democracy? How do you have a democracy without equal rights?’ It's like taking a can opener and opening your head to all this. In the past, I would have never thought of telling people to give money to Arab concerns in Israel. But in partnership, this is how change can occur there. I keep saying, “so we're back—what can we do *now*?”

Such attitudes of *action* are at the very heart of the “voluntourism” experience, and yet once again the participant's response is based on perhaps forty-eight hours of exposure to the bedouin issue. This is not to say that “voluntourism” and “poorism” in the Negev bedouin environment do not serve positive roles, for clearly they do; it is surprising just how little really is known among Jewish Israelis and outsiders alike about the bedouin experience, and these sorts of ventures are designed to fill that void. At the same time, these experiences, like the examples noted above, commoditize suffering, albeit for what many might consider worthwhile goals and outcomes.

Still, the “pain and poverty” narrative is not one that many Negev bedouin willingly embrace. Rather than be viewed as sympathy cases, Negev bedouin entrepreneurs are increasingly developing their own ventures in the industry, with a narrative that seeks to blend the romantic notions of the bedouin past with some of the present-day concerns, but in a context of strength and pride, not victimization. It is to these tourism vendors that I now turn.

### **In Search of Authenticity: The Bedouin are “Doing it” for Themselves**

On 4 July 2007, *YNet.com*, one of Israel's premiere online news sources published in both Hebrew and English, proclaimed bedouin tourism's in-

dependence with a full-length, feature article. Rarely has any of the Israeli media ever given the bedouin such prominent, largely positive attention. What made the coverage all the more notable was that many of the vendors and businesses noted in the article were bedouin-owned and operated ("A Bedouin Welcome," 4 July 2007). Further, the article offered begrudging recognition that tourism offers the bedouin economic opportunities that are simply lacking in most of the other sectors of the Negev economy:

In the urban settlements there is no opportunity to continue traditional agriculture, mostly raising sheep and working the land for personal consumption. Therefore, thousands of families, who were not able to adapt to an urban lifestyle, find it difficult to sustain themselves with dignity. Unemployment is on the rise, as is crime and violence. The difficult economic situation and embitterment lead to demoralization and religious and political extremism.

The State of Israel, which concerned itself with settling the Bedouin in permanent homes, did not concern itself with helping them continue on this road. Not with appropriate infrastructure, nor with preparing the Bedouin for alternative livelihoods. The tourism branch is an example, one of many, of the unrealized potential that is hidden in Rahat and in other Bedouin villages. ("A Bedouin Welcome," 4 July 2007)

For such a small country, it may seem rather odd that places like Rahat, a city of 50,000, are still considered obscure getaways when Tel Aviv is only an hour or so away. Still, much of the Negev has long been ignored by Israelis as a desirable tourist destination, but rather, is seen as that area that is "on the way to Eilat." As the *YNet.com* article suggests, this dynamic is beginning to change, and with it, the birth of bedouin tourism, though it remains an admittedly small sector of the Negev economy, has slowly but surely arrived.

One of the bedouin tourism sites highlighted in the article is *Ohel Ha'Shalom* ("The Peace Tent"), owned and operated by Ibrahim El-Afenish in Rahat (<http://www.ohelhashalom.co.il>). The tent opened in early 2006 and is a family business comprised of El-Afenish's wife, his children, and himself. The tent/restaurant is expansive, clean, and beautifully designed. And yet, the site is off the beaten track just outside Rahat, and signage directing one to the location is small and obscured. Unless one is actively looking for the "Peace Tent," it seems unlikely that anyone would accidentally stumble upon it. No Jewish youth groups make their way to "The Peace Tent," according the proprietor. This is not surprising, as it is actually located *within* an Arab town, an environment that is off-limits for many such tours.

El-Afenish estimates that, initially, the majority of the tourists who visited, perhaps 80 percent, were in fact Israeli Jews. Very few were foreign tourists. Still, he contends, the purpose of his business, beyond the obvious economic incentive, is to tell the story of his people, in effect providing a corrective to the aforementioned “perpetrator” and “victim” narratives:

I bought this tent for the business. It's *real*, you don't see these around any more. There are very few around, and very few businesses like mine. We teach about bedouin culture here. Our *rababa* player is the best in the Negev. We serve tea, coffee, pita, *labaneh*. We teach them about *how we are now*, the transition that's taken place. We have people in the professions now. We talk about the advancement of bedouin women, how the girls are educated, and some even have businesses. In Rahat, for example, there is a florist, and she has 7 girls working for her. There are hair salons for brides. There are DJs and photographers. You can't compare it to years ago.

We haven't had many tourists since we first opened—maybe 300. They come from all over the country, the center, the north. Teachers, retirees. What do they know of us before they come? That we are thieves and robbers! That's all that is communicated here, and so when they arrive here they know little else about us, about who we really are.

But today there are not many tourists coming at all. Maybe 10 percent of my business is tourists now. This American singer [Peter Yarrow from Peter, Paul and Mary] came a few months ago and sang here and the children really enjoyed that. But most of my business now is with the people from the city (Rahat) who come here for their weddings. (El-Afenish, 5 July 2007)

Just east of Rahat on Route 40N (the road connecting Be'er Sheva with Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), “Abu Youssef” is the proprietor and owner of the “Bedouin Hospitality Tent and Restaurant.” The site has been there since 2000 and is staffed by two additional assistants. Abu-Youssef estimates that 5 percent of his customers are foreign tourists, 80 percent are Jewish Israelis, and 15 percent are local Arabs, that is, bedouin. The emphasis of the place is the production of homemade foods that are natural, with no preservatives added, and with no artificial ingredients. His motto is to prepare and serve food “like it once was.” In essence, the restaurant is very similar to a small health food emporium, and yet it is located in the northern Negev Desert. Notes Abu-Youssef over a lunch of freshly baked pita sandwiches soaked in olive oil that he just made moments earlier on his gas-powered *saj* (Arabic: stove for making pita):

We [are] located in a strategic place. There are tourists coming from the Dead Sea, from Eilat, and from Sde Boqer. We are in the middle. People who come here want to see something *authentic*. The Jews who stop in are interested in the natural foods, the non-packaged foods that aren't made by Strauss [a major food manufacturer in Israel]. They are looking for something special. So it's not just the foreign tourists who come here. People might stop in for olive oil, but then they see the cheese or something else. Or they stop to eat in the restaurant but then buy something packaged. So they stop for one thing, but they leave buying more.

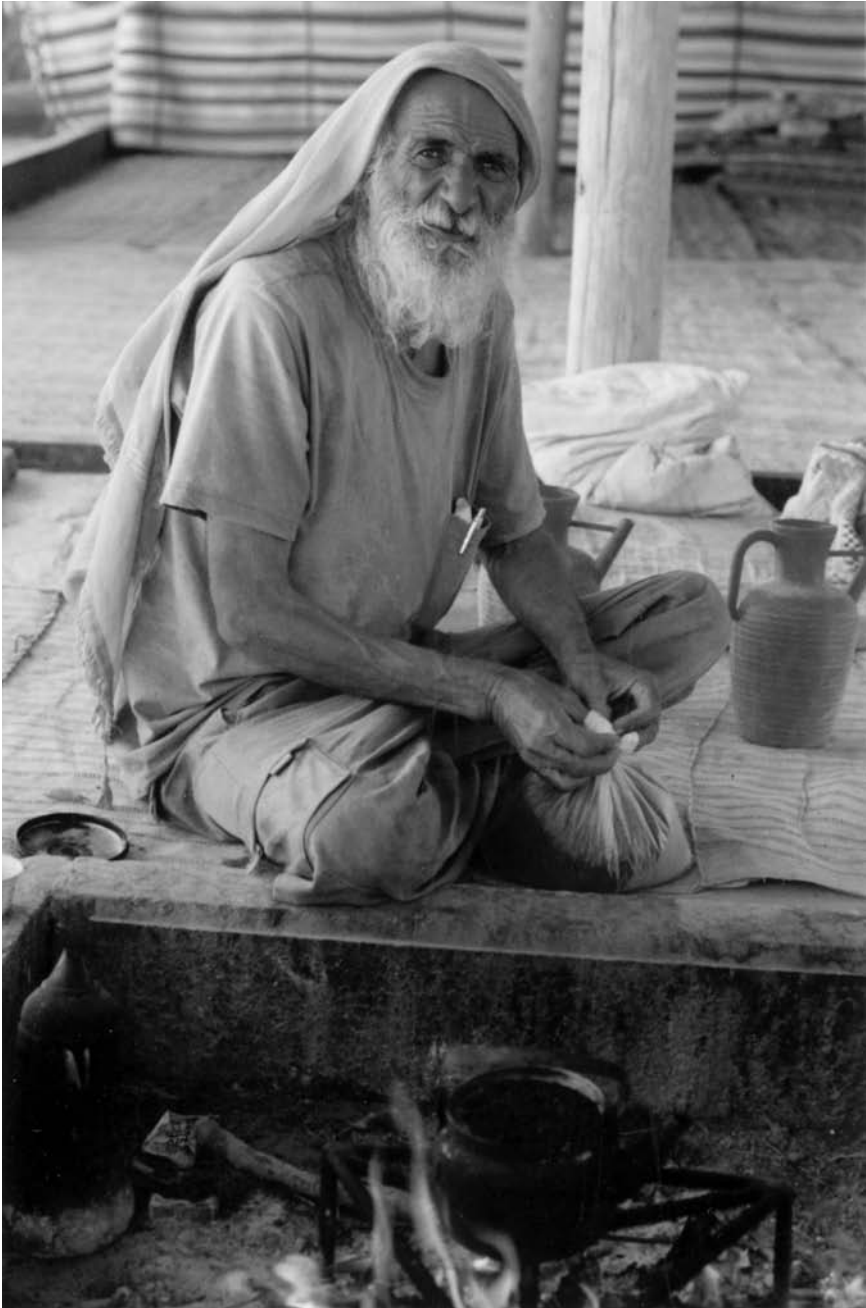
We try to present something *authentic* about ourselves. We created this little library here in the corner for people to read about us [bedouin] while they eat, so they can learn about us. If someone comes here and the food is good and it's clean, the service is good, we smile—they will come back. They will tell others about us too. There is a story here. It's not just the food here though this is important. There aren't many *authentic* places like this that have what we have. The place itself is part of the story, to sit here, to drink the coffee or the tea, it's all *authentic*. The taste of the food is all a part of it. The trees out front, the olives, all of this is part of what we are.

Much of what I sell here comes from my land. I know that the water is clean, the land is good. How could I live crammed into a 500 m<sup>2</sup> house and be able to grow these products? So yes, there is a connection between what I have here and my land and my culture as a bedouin. (Abu-Youssef, 4 July 2007)

A third and final example of bedouin tourism entrepreneurship is “Suleiman’s Shiq,” owned and operated by Suleiman El-Hrenik (Illustration 7.4) in the small, unrecognized *pezurah* village of El-If’dai, a community with fewer than 200 residents, which is about twenty minutes north of Mitzpe Ramon. The residents of the village are all members of the Azazmeh tribe and, in theory at least, should relocate to Segev Shalom. Pressures are increasingly coming to bear on the community to resettle in town.

Suleiman has run his tourist *shiq* since the early 1990s (Illustration 7.5). He estimates that he hosts approximately fifty tourists each year, most Jewish Israelis, though he notes with pride that some over the years have been from the US, many having first visited Petra in Jordan. The tent is large enough to hold “up to one hundred visitors at once,” however. Though he recently put in a small paved parking area and a flush toilet outhouse, “Suleiman’s Shiq” is, perhaps, as “authentic” as Negev bedouin tourism can get. So too is his life experience as a Negev bedouin, and his perspective on the





**Illustration 7.4.** Suleiman El-Hrenik Making Tea for the Author—2007.  
*Source:* Photo by Steven C. Dinero.

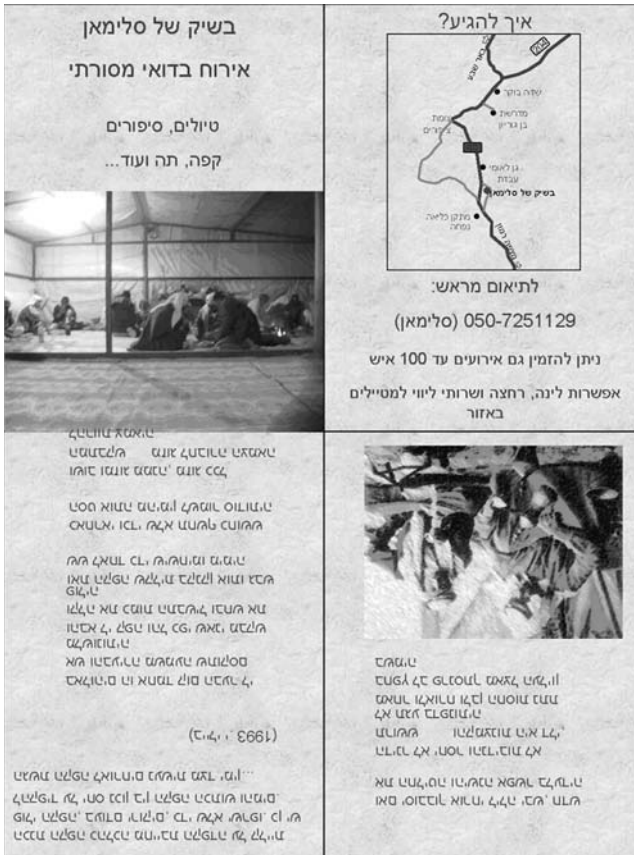
present-day circumstances of what it means to live in twenty-first century Israel. As such, I quote him at length, translated but purposely left without edits that would remove the redundancy and cadence of the narrative:

We are the original bedouin. We have sheep, goats, camels, everything here. We make pita on the *saj*. We have tea, coffee, *lebaneh*, humus, and bread that we cook right in the fire. We slaughter a sheep for our guests right here. It is a family business—I run it. We take the people out to see the [local] area. They can sleep here in the guest side of the tent if they wish. We have a kitchen here, and I have set up bathrooms for them. Everything is all set up to receive them. They can come here and see how everything is open. This is how we live, not in a stone house [in town]. That's no way to live, we can't live like that.

Everyone is welcome here to learn about us. We want [the tourists] to understand that we want to live here freely. They are welcome to come—*ahalan w'sahalan* [Arabic: Come in, welcome]—and see how we live. This is how we live, how we always have lived—not in a stone house. My [real] job is working with my animals. But we can't live here freely, [because] the Government won't let us live. They want us to live in a stone house and we don't want these things. We're bedouin, we don't want to live in a stone house. If we did, then we would leave here. *But we're bedouin, this is how we live.* In Mitzpe [Ramon] and other places they can live in stone houses, but that's not for me.

The Government wants to change our lives. I can't live in a stone house, a house that's closed in! That's not the life of a bedouin! We [bedouin] do everything in this country, we are guards, we serve in the army. We just want to be left alone. But they want to destroy our houses. There is a demolition order on my son's house right now! If they destroy our homes, where will we go, what will we do? I am a bedouin! I have chickens, camels, goats, sheep! I can not live in a city! If they destroy my home, what will I have?! We are bedouin, not Arabs! The Arabs live right next to each other, on top of each other. We can't live like that. We just want to live out here and be free!

I was in the Yom Kippur War, in the Tank Corps, under [former Prime Minister] Ariel Sharon. There were seven Azazmeh in the unit, myself, Sheikh Ouda—you know him?—and five others. We were there, in Egypt, fighting in Sinai, in '73. Yes, I was there, look at this beard [he says showing the grey]! And now look at me! Look at this situation! Everything here is a *belagan* [Hebrew: chaos, turmoil]. This country treats me like this. It makes trouble for me and my family all the time, wanting to destroy our



**Illustration 7.5.**  
Hebrew Tourist  
Brochure:  
“Suleiman’s Shiq.”

homes, wanting to destroy our lives. This country is shit! (El-Hrenik, 9 July 2007)

### Conclusions

Suleiman El-Hrenik’s words and deeds embody the pursuit of authenticity for which the bedouin tourism industry in the Negev Desert hungers. El-Hrenik is not the “Noble Desert Savage,” nor is he a “Noble Victim.” Rather, he is a proud and active participant in his own fate, and he is using tourism to communicate his perspective to anyone who will listen. And yet his story—what may arguably be one of the most “genuine” and “authentic” that can be heard amid the cacophony of voices in the tourism industry today—is barely heard, as he keeps his enterprise small and unabashedly

low-key, and is located literally and figuratively on the periphery, far-removed from the beaten path.

It is, of course, a perverse irony that voices such as that of El-Hrenik are often drowned out, and that the Disneyfied images of bedouinism overshadow realities that for many may simply be too ugly or difficult to face. But this process is common and global; as my colleagues and I have found elsewhere (Dinero et al. 2006), these images in time threaten to overtake the real, replace the real, *become* the real.

Hobbs (1996) noted that though tourism is increasingly embraced among the Sinai bedouin and is seen as a positive force, both socially and economically, in the region, tension has developed between bedouin entrepreneurs and their Egyptian, non-bedouin, competitors:

Already there is an explosion of ersatz *bedouin*-tent restaurants run by Egyptians in the desert northwest of the Sharm ash-Shaykh tourist resorts. The Muzayna complained that these restaurants were false, because the people who were hosting tourists in them were not *bedouin* and because the facilities included not only wool tents but also brick and cement gateways, outbuildings, and parking areas that were unnecessary, unsightly, and unnatural.

Similarly in the Negev, the Bedouin Heritage Centre in Rahat never did attract an adequate market and as a result, failed; the Joe Alon Centre at Kibbutz Lahav, on the other hand, continues to draw thousands of visitors annually from Israel and abroad (Dinero 2002: 86).

Still tourism, particularly ecotourism (Dinero 2002: 75), is an economic sector with a great deal of promise in the Negev, as it has shown particular expansion since the early 1990s. As hubs of this expansion, the planned bedouin towns, it is contended by most regional planners and government officials, offer particular possibilities and opportunities. Many see Segev Shalom as one of, if not the major bedouin economic centers in the Negev by 2020. This development cannot be founded solely upon tourism alone, of course, but must be nurtured and concretized internally and externally through both planned and market forces. It is to this confluence of conditions, and to the future possibilities that Segev Shalom might theoretically enjoy in this newly evolving Negev economy, which will be addressed in the eighth and final chapter that follows.

#### NOTE

\*Due to some last-minute cancellations, no government officials offered their perspective during this particular tour.