

LAND OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES

New advances and opportunities in infrastructure, tourism, renewable energy, agriculture and land development continue to fulfill Ben-Gurion's dream to develop the Negev in ways he could only have imagined / Ilana Kraus

Where others saw the Negev as a worthless wasteland, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, envisioned a desert in bloom. Encompassing 60 percent of Israel's land mass but only eight percent of the country's population, it is still the region with the greatest potential for development.

Paving the way for the thrust in growth are recent infrastructure expansions and the project for relocating IDF bases to the Negev, explains Shmuel Rifman, Chairman of the Negev Development Authority and head of the Ramat Hanegev Regional Council. He stresses the importance of transportation, "particularly the fact that the Trans-Israel Highway has been extended to the entrance of Beersheva and a second railroad track is being laid. When completed, it will take 43 minutes to go from Beersheva to Tel Aviv. A train route connecting Ashkelon, Sderot, Netivot and Ofakim to Beersheva is already under construction," he adds.

Beersheva is blooming

"One sign that the Negev is a land of opportunity is the increase in property values in Beersheva," boasts Rifman. Reiterating Rifman's enthusiasm, MK Silvan Shalom, Israel's Minister for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, declared: "Something good is happening in the Negev. Real estate prices are on the rise, the demand for housing in Arad, Yeruham and Dimona is greater than the supply, and large flagship companies that understand the region's potential are coming to the Negev. It is clear that from the economic perspective, the Negev is the right place to invest in," he stated.

With large and ambitious projects on the drawing boards, Beersheva, the capital of the Negev, will become the country's fourth metropolis, promises Mayor Reuven "Rubik" Danilovich. "The face of the city is changing," he asserts, "with the building of the Nahal Beersheva Park, a sports complex and new

stadium, a high-tech park, the transfer to the south of the IDF bases, and renovations in the old city that will transform it into a tourist and economic center."

Young people are an important growth factor for the city. Of its 205,000 residents, 30,000 are students - 20,000 at Ben-Gurion University and the others at the Sami Shamoon Academic College of Engineering, the Technical College of Beersheva, the Kaye Academic College of Education and the Open University. Mayor Danilovich notes with pride the plans for making Beersheva a thriving and lively city: "We are creating a variety of events for the entire family and continuing to invest in cultural institutions, such as the Beersheva Theater, the new performing arts center, the school of drama and performing arts, the Israel Sinfonietta Beersheva, the Bat Dor School of Dance and more."

Moving IDF bases

"The transfer of the IDF bases to the south will generate enormous opportunities and create thousands of jobs for local residents and for entrepreneurs and contractors during the building stages," explains Minister Silvan Shalom. By means of the Negev Development Authority, "we will make sure that as many local people as possible are involved in building and maintaining the complex of training bases," he adds.

Work on this NIS 29 billion project is already underway. "It will bring 20,000 soldiers and 3,000 families to the Negev. This is an enormous leveraging of opportunities for the Negev," stresses Shmuel Rifman. Minister Shalom notes that a center providing information, absorption and support services will be set up in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense.

"Our job is to give all of those thousands of young families everything they need to make the move to the south. This huge project will create economic activity for 20 years to come," Shalom declares.



Ideal tourist destination

The power of the desert, with its aura of mystery and drama, wide open spaces and infinite quiet has always attracted visitors, as well as poets and artists. Over the last few years the Negev has been drawing more and more Israelis as well as tourists from abroad.

"While Europeans are mainly familiar with the Dead Sea and Eilat, Israelis associate the Negev with hot weather and reserve duty," Shmuel Rifman points out. "But the Negev is not really a desert. Mitzpe Ramon, which has become the capital of regional tourism, is 1,100 meters above sea level," he notes. In fact, the region contains a wealth of sites, where tourists can learn about geological phenomena, Nabatean culture, desert ecology and agriculture.

Whether on mountain bike or atop a camel, on foot, or in a jeep, tourists are rewarded with unspoiled scenery, broad vistas and surprising discoveries. The Spice Route, for example, a relatively new tourist favorite, follows the trade route of the Nabateans, who established cities at Shivta, Mamshit and Avdat, a UNESCO world heritage site. This route linked the Nabatean capital of Petra with these cities and the Mediterranean coast.

"We hope," says Rifman, "that with warmer relations between Jordan and Israel, tourists will be able to travel the route of the Nabateans from Petra to the Negev sites." In addition, specially designated 4X4 routes and many bicycle trails of varying degrees of difficulty have been marked out throughout the region, with new ones inaugurated this past year.

The Negev boasts thousands of guest facilities, from hotels and luxurious B&B's, to



Photos courtesy of the Negev Development Authority

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simple kibbutz guest houses, field schools and youth hostels. For those who want to be closer to nature, there are desert caravansaries, huts and camping areas located close to tourist sites and nature reserves. Over the next few years, five hotels and guest houses will be built by local and outside entrepreneurs. The Bereshit (Genesis) Hotel overlooking the Ramon Crater is already under construction, while plans are moving forward for new accommodations in Shaharut, Tzukim, Mitzpe Ramon and Ramat Hanegev.

The protected areas of the Negev, its unusual natural phenomena and unspoiled scenery are a magnet for ecological tourism. The craters are like open geology texts, and the springs of Avdat and Ein Gedi never cease to amaze with their waterfalls and desert flora and fauna. Some facilities even provide workshops designed to “recharge the batteries” of those who have come to the desert to flee the stress of the city.

Agricultural high-tech

Tourism and agricultural advancements, some based on ancient usage, go hand in hand in the Negev. Tourists can see how agricultural high-tech in the Habasor and Arava regions has led to the development of unique varieties of fruit and vegetables, such as hanging strawberries, pitaya, hydro-

ponic lettuce and dates, which are marketed throughout the world.

Advanced irrigation systems and the use of vast reservoirs of underground brackish water have also revolutionized regional agriculture. The salty water is used as is for growing crops such as olives and tomatoes, and desalinated to irrigate kibbutz gardens. It also feeds the Neve Midbar Spa.

In the Negev Highlands area, 25 farms have been set up that combine agriculture and tourist services, such as gourmet restaurants and specialty shops selling regional wines, cheeses, spices and olive products.

The Negev has never stopped developing new opportunities in agriculture. “The world is getting ‘hungrier’ and the Negev in particular not only produces 80 percent of the country’s agricultural products, but also exports,” Rifman asserts. “Israel exports farming technology as well - advances that boost yields without increasing water and land requirements.”

Rifman reveals that Israel’s President, Shimon Peres, suggested cooperating with Russia to create a “granary for the world.” “They have the land and water, and we would supply the knowhow,” Rifman explains. “In Israel, for example, 100,000 cows produce twice as much milk as 4 million in Ethiopia. The dry climate,” he continues, “is actually more suitable for raising these animals because the bacteria that thrive in humid areas

do not exist here.”

Another important opportunity, which only the Negev can provide, is the development of alternative forms of energy, particularly solar energy. Rifman underscores that the region offers large, uninhabited expanses, almost year-round sunlight and much cleaner air than elsewhere, which means that the sun’s rays are not obscured by pollution.

“The Negev will become a producer of clean electricity,” he predicts, “the most significant in Israel, and maybe eventually the world. A 280MW solar power station is being constructed in the area of Ashalim and other projects in the Negev and Arava are in various stages of development,” Rifman confirms.

As Ben-Gurion envisioned, and people like Beersheva Mayor Danilovitch, Shmuel Rifman and Minister Silvan Shalom believe wholeheartedly, the Negev continues to be the land of the future.

Another area of potential development is enhanced commercial relations with Egypt by means of the border crossing at Nitzana, where goods are currently being transferred at a rate of 150 trucks per day. This could eventually lead to increased trade between Israel and Africa as well. After all, visions have often become reality in the Negev. ■

For more information about the Negev region, please go to www.negev.co.il.