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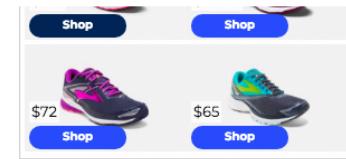


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his small, home-style resort overlooking the Kinneret.

BY EMILY HOCHBERG / FEBRUARY 11, 2010 18:26 



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It was 1961 and Yehuda Avni had recently made aliyah. An American World War II veteran, he had served time in the IDF, met his wife to be, Yona, on a kibbutz, and even made a home on a moshav and started a family. Avni, it

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■ seemed, was living his Zionist dream. Only thing was, this seemingly idyllic life was not the dream Avni wanted.

What Avni set out to do in Israel is what now sits on 120 dunams of rolling hills overlooking Lake Kinneret. In 1961 he took an open land filled with boulders, thorny bushes and weeds, and turned it into one of Israel's premier tourist destinations. He created the Vered Hagalil Guest Farm, a small, home-style resort offering luxury cabins, horseback riding and gourmet food. But it wasn't an easy road to make it into the resort it is today.

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"When we first got here it was just an open area with rocks and lots of weeds. It was in the middle of nowhere. I spent seven or eight months just walking the area, in negotiations with the government for land to create a guest farm," Avni, now 84, said. "I grew up in Chicago and when I came to Israel it was supposed to be a temporary visit, but then I ended up volunteering for the army. I was a World War II veteran and felt very comfortable on kibbutz settlements, and I liked the feel of that lifestyle. After living on a kibbutz I moved to a moshav, but I didn't want to be there forever, only doing the same things. I wanted to start something I would never be able to finish."

And Avni is living true to that desire. The guest farm, as is, stands with 21 wood- and local basalt stone-built cabins, offering scenic views of the Golan, but plans are in the works to expand with 14 new ones by this summer. About five years ago, Avni added a spa facility to the grounds, and his visions for expansion continue.

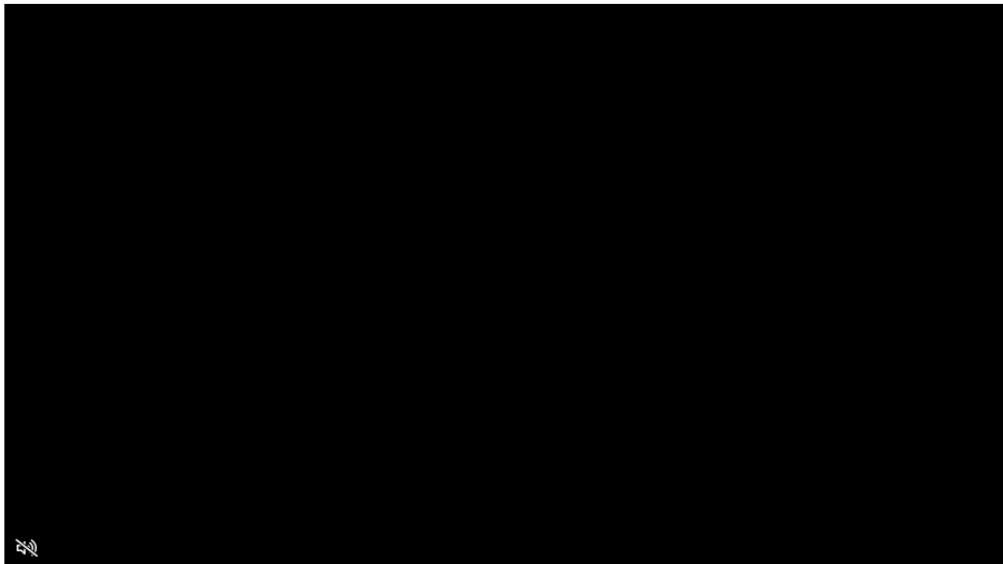
"I don't like the idea of getting much bigger," he conceded. "But my dream is not fulfilled. I want to build a good lounge, a library, or music room. The spa is only a few years old but it also needs more development. One of these days we'll have cows, raise our own vegetables and organic poultry, and open an exercise facility. It's an all-encompassing resort farm, and its existence is my Zionist dream."



Of course, one of the hotel's main draws is its horseback riding facilities. In addition to offering guests lessons and group trail rides, it runs a riding school, which is open to the public, with a special emphasis on therapeutic riding for those with disabilities. Vered Hagalil offers anywhere from one- to four-hour advanced rides down to the Kinneret, and even overnight camping trips in the summer. They're the biggest ranch of its kind in the area, boasting 40-50 horses and trained guides.

"Israel is a very historic country and I really believe that you can get a much better feel for it on horseback than by car or bus," Avni said.

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And, as it turned out, making horses the central point of Vered Hagalil was somewhat of an accident. "It's called Vered Hagalil because I raised roses [vered is Hebrew for rose] on the moshav and I wanted to raise roses here. It

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was my first cash crop. But then, when I tried to grow them here, it wasn't good weather for it so I decided to try horses." Still, Avni did succeed in planting a large variety of citrus orchards and groves on the premises. "Our orchards grow a variety of fruit and we urge all our guests to pick from them freely. Our pecan pie is made from our own pecan trees and we use a lot of our fruits for baking," he said.

In addition to the pecan pie, Avni's American roots are clearly present on the farm's kosher restaurant menu. "We were first in accomplishing many things in Israel. We were the first to serve apple pie and ice cream as well as other American staple foods like fried chicken or chili con carne," he said.

The inspiration also shone off the menu. "We were the first to introduce western style riding in 1983 when we brought in an expert. And we were the first to use and create riding trails," he said.

With the winter months now putting a chill over the Galilee hills, Avni hopes to draw in crowds looking to take advantage of the resort's advantageous location. "Next week it's supposed to snow on Mount Hermon, and our guests can get up early and be on the slopes skiing in an hour and a half, and then come back and rest next to the Kinneret. We're strategically located in between the upper and lower Galilee."

Avni's heartfelt devotion to his dream is honest and pure. In a day and age where luxury skyscraper resorts and towers are popping up all over the world, Vered Hagalil stands apart. There's no worry over competition or recession, because, to Avni, the farm doesn't register on the same level as other hotels.

"We attract all kinds of clients but it's not a pompous crowd," he said. "Our goal is to give a maximum of comfort so that every person leaves with a smile on their face and creates a relationship with us. The best publicity is their word of mouth telling others. No matter who you are, Vered Hagalil will make you feel at home."

This winter, through March 29, Vered Hagalil is offering a special couples' package, which includes lodging, either breakfast or dinner, entry to Mount Hermon and two 30-minute spa treatments. Alternatively, couples can opt for a romantic Valentine's Day package, which offers lodging, a bottle of wine and chocolates, dinner and two 45-minute treatments, valid only on February 14. Each package costs NIS 999. For more information, call (04) 693-57845.

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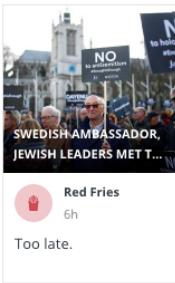
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