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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLESpecial to The New York Times
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Israel Hopes to House Negev Bedouins, a People of Space and Sky

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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BEERSHEBA, Israel, May 13—In the Negev wilderness of southern Israel, where the turn of a new road can reveal a scene of black-robed Arabs tending sheep in the barren hills straight out of the Old Testament, the Israeli Government is building a modern village for Bedouins. About five miles from the Negev city of Beersheba a freshly asphalted road leads to Tel Sheva, a small, permanent settlement for the nomads of the desert.

Housing for Bedouins is something like refrigerators for Eskimos, and no one is at all sure if the experiment is going to work.

The Bedouin tribes, moving from one meager grazing spot to another in this landscape of harsh grandeur for thousands of years, have provided literature with some of its most sublime clichés—ships in the desert and Arabs folding their tents and silently stealing away. Along the road to Tel Sheva, the dark winter tents, still in use in May, cluster in traditional temporary encampments.

Change Even in Desert

But even the Bedouins are changing. Nearly half of the 30,000 believed to have been in the Negev before 1948—it is hard to find out who, if anyone, has taken a census of nomads—left after the state of Israel was established.

Of those who remained, some have become near-permanent employes of the new towns the Israelis have established in the south. They go to work daily from their camps, which are untouched by chance.

These are the Bedouin "sophisticates." They are skilled mechanics and good workers, and have advanced to pinup girls and omnipresent radios, which provide Arab music that is as constant as the sun. It is these people whom the Israeli Government would like to settle in higher-standard permanent quarters, increasing their reliability as a work force and simplifying the provision of health, educational and other services.

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Scene in Tel Sheva, small, modern settlement Israeli Government is building for Bedouins

There are a few small settlements of this type in Galilee, in the north. But their success has been moderate, even with the lure of heavy government subsidy, minimum rents and steady hot water. It is not easy to urbanize a Bedouin.

Tel Sheva is ambitiously planned for an eventual total of 400 to 500 families. Construction is almost complete on the first unit, which would accommodate 30 or 40 families.

There are 22 small, rectangular houses of stuccoed concrete, actually double dwellings, walled into a compound and grouped around an unfinished square, open, market structure and coffeehouse, in traditional Arab fashion. The unit would be repeated, as a module, to make the village grow.

Sixteen Bedouins now live in the 22 houses. Each house consists of three rooms with shower and toilet, connected by a small open court. Solar-heat cans on the roofs, seen throughout Israel, provide the hot water.

There seems to be no stampede to fill the houses. For one thing, different tribes cannot share them. The sheik, who has given the project his blessing, retains his tent right next to the houses, partly for status and partly as a potential tourist attraction. The tribe's dust-colored sheep graze in the dust-colored landscape beyond the buildings.

A Gift for Gifts

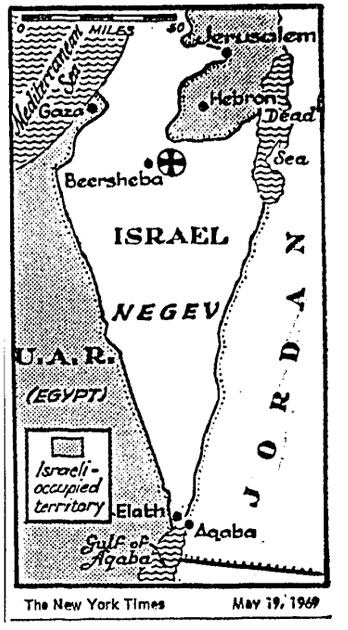
The visitor is surrounded by a rush of soft-eyed children, who seem unaffected by the hot water, speaking Hebrew and Arabic. They extract ballpoint pens with practiced charm.

Inside a typical house, two cultures meet. Furniture is sparse. In one room there is a bed, as well as quilts on the floor for those who prefer the Bedouin way of sleeping.

In a second room, bright rolls of quilts and blankets are piled high on a painted chest. A young man lounges on a bed, radio playing. The pinup girls are blondes. A bare electric light bulb hangs from each ceiling.

In the late-afternoon desert light, the clustered cubes and flat wall planes of the houses turn into sun-gold abstract sculpture that would delight Euclid or Le Corbusier. Whether they will delight Bedouins is a more serious matter.

The market's unfinished arcade is topped by diamond-faceted roofs of elegant geometry. Isolated and surronnded by construction debris, this is still a clearly handsome complex.



Tel Sheva is an architectural and social experiment, an exercise in desert urbanism. No matter how good the design, only the social results will count. And no one here will predict success or failure.

In Beersheba, the Bedouins have refused to use an attractively designed area that the Israelis provided for their centuries-old market.

They are said to consider the rooms of the new houses too small and confined compared with the spread of their "palatial" tents. It is a matter of tradition and values. The question is whether hot water and electricity equal freedom of movement and the space of the open sky.