

Breaking bread with the Bedouin in Israel

By Neece Regis

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DERIGAT, Israel — In February I journeyed for the first time to Israel, a part of the world that seems perpetually hot with conflict, and yet my sister Vicki's favorite place on the planet. On her previous visit to Jerusalem in 2004, with snipers on rooftops, she was unable to venture into the Arab Quarter, or walk the entire route of the Stations of the Cross.

Traveling with four other women and a guide, I experienced none of that turmoil, even feasting on hummus, falafel, cucumber-tomato salad, and hot rounds of pita at Abu Shukri in the Arab Quarter. However our Bedouin guide, Younis, wouldn't eat the bread there, or anywhere on our weeklong trip. Like a star-crossed lover pining for his beloved, he couldn't stop raving about his wife's homemade bread.

After a day in Jerusalem, we eschewed the fertile north and drove south through the Negev, all the way to Eilat on the Red Sea. And what better guide for this arid landscape than a Bedouin? According to Younis — who lists only one name on his business card — the Bedouin were living in tents as recently as 25 years ago. This 65-year-old former shepherd, who speaks at least five languages, seemed to have desert in his blood. ("I love the desert! I love the desert!" he sang, prancing up



Masada at 5 a.m. while I huffed and puffed, cursing the rocks that slid beneath my feet.)

"The desert from the outside is dead, from the inside is alive," said Younis, picking a seed off a brittle plant, and then, sprinkling water on it, yelped as it sprouted in his palm.

It was impossible not to catch his enthusiasm. Driving for hours through a landscape

more lunar than earthly, time shifted from minutes to millennial as rock formations dating to the Cretaceous period undulated across the horizon.

"Desert life is understood by hand and foot. You must walk and touch," Younis said.

Walk and touch we did, touring well-known destinations such as Makhtesh Ramon, Israel's largest nature reserve, and Solomon's Pillars, the towering sandstone cliffs in Timna Park where Egyptian copper mines date to the fifth century BC.

Occasionally we stopped at what seemed a random spot by the side of the road, then trudged behind the sure-footed Younis — following him around a corner, up a steep embankment — to an unmarked cave carved with ancient crucifixes, or small tombs cut into rock. We learned the desert is home to

Nubian ibex, leopard, sand fox, striped hyena, camel, and rock hyrax. We learned which leaves of what plants could provide a drop of water. And we heard about bread, especially his wife's bread.

"Can we try some?" we pleaded. And Younis would laugh his boyish laugh and wave his hand dismissively, as if we had asked where diamonds bloom.

On our last day, after swimming with dolphins in Eliat, we halted our northward drive to climb yet another hill. In one direction, the mineral-rich Dead Sea glistened blue beneath the cliffs of Jordan. In every other direction, dazzling light reflected mountains rising in swaths of yellow ochre and burnt sienna, with striations of dusky purple, pale green, chalk, and gray. Below, in an open plain where I expected a river, or even a trickle of wa-



PHOTOS BY NECCEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Food is an important part of a journey into Israel's Arab Quarter. The wife of a Bedouin guide makes bread (left) to go with a feast at her home (above) south of Jerusalem.

ter, there were only rocks, dust, and a sliver of asphalt highway where a lone truck was reduced to the size of a chip of paint.

One response to such an arid vista might be hopelessness. Unless, of course, your name is Younis.

"It doesn't matter if you have a new refrigerator or a new car to be the king of the world," he said, using his entire body to gesture to the horizon. "Sometimes you have nothing and you are the king of the world."

Clambering back into the van, we waited as Younis yammered on his cellphone. Turning with an impish grin, he announced we could detour — if we wished — en route to Tel Aviv. His wife was baking bread.

And that is how we ended up in a Bedouin village, west of Arad and south of Jerusalem ("Mary and Jesus rode past, one kilometer from my home"), meeting Younis's wife, daughter, and two of his 29 grandchildren. His wife, who spoke no English, proudly showed her simple kitchen

and, out in a shed, balls of dough and ovens. Taboon, a large wheel of pita-like bread, is baked in a circular cement and metal oven on top of hot rocks. Shrak, also called saj, is a thin and flexible lavash-type bread baked on a domed griddle (like an inverted wok) atop a roaring fire.

With the bread still warm, we sat in the courtyard at a low table set with yogurt, olives, oil, fresh herbs, garden tomatoes, and sweet sage tea. The simplicity and generosity of this offering got me thinking about the heartbreaking conflict in the region. I'm not so naive as to suggest that if we break bread together we will learn to love each other, hardly, but there was something so gracious — grace filled — about that afternoon meal, symbolized by the simple act of sharing bread, that it remains the highlight of my trip.

Just that. Home. Bread. Sharing. Younis finally ate — and smiled.

Neece Regis can be reached at neeceregis@gmail.com.

Experience the 1000 Islands, the remarkable International Seaway locks, museums, mansions, historic villages & world-class capital cities.

CALM WATER CRUISING

on the magnificent and historic St. Lawrence River

3 to 6 night cruises on calm inland waters aboard the 32 Stateroom CANADIAN EMPRESS. Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa & Kingston departures.

1-800-267-7868 StLawrenceCruiseLines.com



Win A Trip To Universal Orlando® Resort

Where Vacation Becomes Adventure!

With two amazing theme parks, non-stop nightlife, and world-class on-site hotels, Universal Orlando® Resort is a universe of excitement for every member of the family. Explore the magic and excitement of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter™, swing high above the city streets with Spider-Man™ now in high-def 3-D, and save the day with Shrek. Plus, this summer you can join the ranks of the mischievous minions in the new 3-D ride, Despicable Me Minion Mayhem.

ENTER TODAY TO WIN A UNIVERSAL ORLANDO® RESORT VACATION INCLUDING:

- Admission to both Universal Studios® and Universal's Islands of Adventure® theme parks
- Be among the first to experience the new Despicable Me Minion Mayhem
- Accommodations in the heart of it all at the exciting Hard Rock Hotel® at Universal Orlando®
- Tickets to Blue Man Group
- One day at Wet 'n Wild® Orlando water park

BONUS!

Go online to access SPECIAL CONTENT featuring Universal Studios and Islands of Adventure theme parks, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter™, The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man®, and Despicable Me Minion Mayhem (opens Summer 2012), including behind-the-scenes videos, images, and more!

The Boston Globe

Visit bostonglobe.com/universal and enter code "Orlando" for your chance to win!

HARRY POTTER, characters, names and related indicia are trademarks of and © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. Harry Potter Publishing Rights © J.K. Rowling.
No purchase necessary to enter or win. Must be a legal U.S. resident currently residing in the 50 United States, 21 years or older. Void where prohibited. For full Official Rules, eligibility and complete prize description go to www.bostonglobe.com/universal. Sweepstakes ends 5/25/12 at 9:00 am EST. Sponsor: The Boston Globe. TM & © 2012 Marvel & Stud. Shrek 4. © 2012 DreamWorks Animation L.L.C. Hard Rock Hotel © Hard Rock Cafe International (USA), Inc. © 2012 BNP. © 2012 Wet 'n Wild. All rights reserved. Universal elements and all related indicia TM & © 2012 Universal Studios. © 2012 Universal Orlando. All rights reserved. 251094/0412/AT