

Our First Trip to Israel (and Jordan)

By Larry Martin

Part 3 – Sea of Galilee and Kibbutz Degania Bet

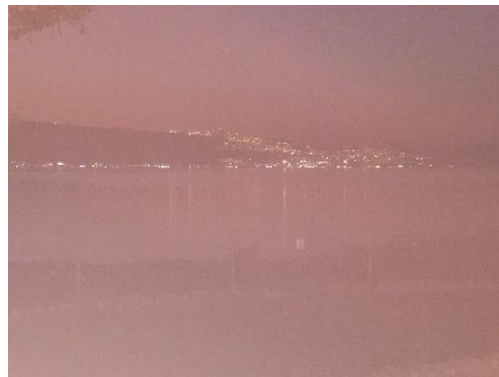
[Note: Part 3 continues an account of the trip my wife and I took to Israel, October 14-28, 2017. Pictures from the internet have a red border; all the others were taken with my iPhone. All parts of the Travelogue are online at www.lakesidepress.com/IsraelTrip.html.]



October 18, 2017

We left Qumran and arrived to the motel-style resort Ein Gev on the eastern bank of Galilee late in the afternoon, near sunset. We checked in and walked to the resort's beach area, where a few of us went swimming. The water was warm.

Across the Sea we could just make out the Israeli city of Tiberias, its lights coming on as the sun faded in the west (bottom photo).





One of the motel-style buildings at the Ein Gev resort

October 19

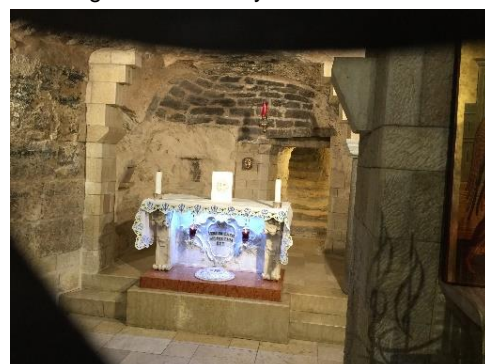
The bus left the hotel early, as our itinerary included visits to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Kibbutz Degania Bet (where we would have lunch), and the ancient ruins of Capernaum. The main focus in this part will be on Degania Bet, which we found the most interesting. In two weeks we toured several ancient ruins and churches, whereas the kibbutz was unique.

The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth stands over the cave believed to be the home of the Virgin Mary. Tradition has it that the archangel Gabriel told the young Mary, age about 14, that she would become the mother of the Son of God. She uttered her consent: “Let it be done to me according to your word,” a quote carved in Latin over the church’s entrance.



Above, entrance to church
Below, inside the main sanctuary.

Above, view of church from a distance. Below, cave where legend has it Mary received the Annunciation.



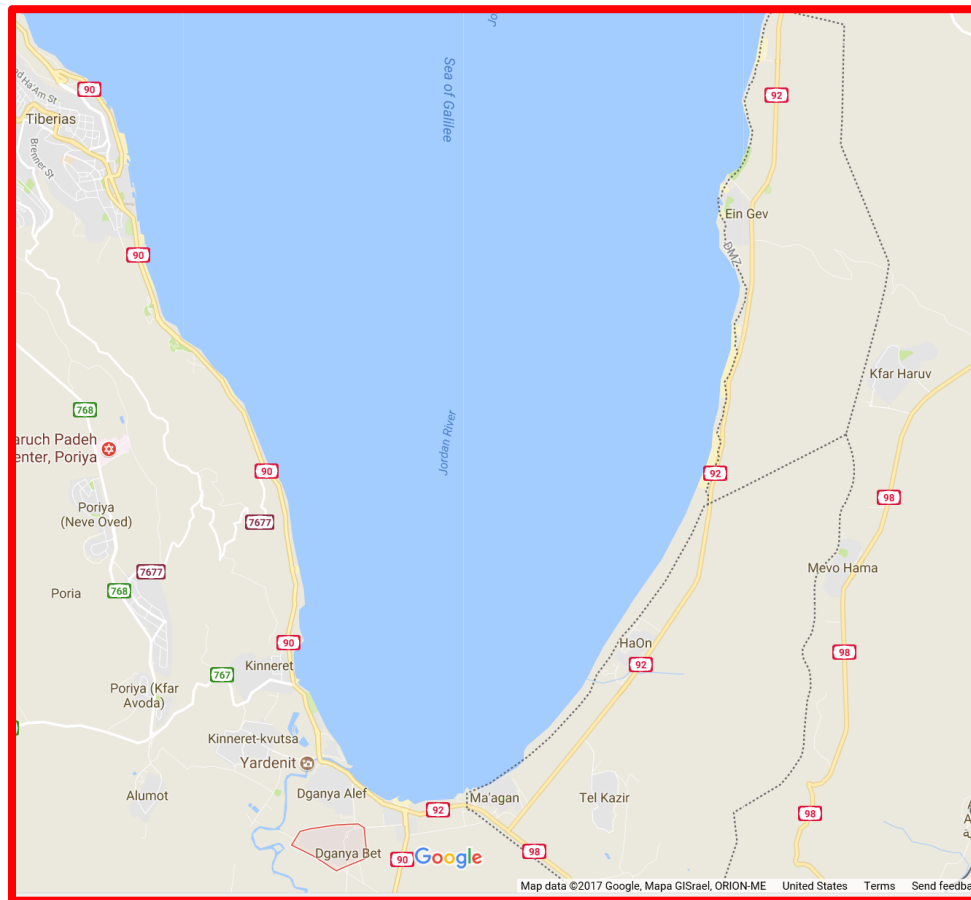
Capernaum, which was our last visit of the day, is one of those ancient ruins that you have a hard time recalling after a single visit, though you could probably spend a lifetime studying the site. Unless you know the history, most ancient ruins appear as a collection of old walls, pavements and pillars (Jordan's Petra and Israel's Masada being notable exceptions). Capernaum was the center of Jesus' activities in the Galilee for part of his life. The pictures below show an aerial view, the entrance gate, and various views of the ruins; the photo at the bottom shows the ruins of one of Capernaum's synagogues, where Jesus gave a sermon.



Mainly a fishing village, Capernaum had a population of about 1,500. It was inhabited continuously from the 2nd century B.C. to the 11th century A.D, when it was abandoned. During its existence the area also suffered a major earthquake (749 A.D). In addition to Jesus' time there, the town is cited in four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), so Capernaum has biblical and archeological interest. I can see why Road Scholar included it, but the site was not as impressive as other ruins.

KIBBUTZ DEGANIA BET

Kibbutz Degania Bet is on the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, just south of Kibbutz Degania Alef, Israel's first kibbutz. Our resort Ein Gev, on the eastern shore, is also shown on the map.



Degania Bet has historic importance and speaks to the changes in Israel now. We were guided there by a genuine kibbutznik (standing, in the picture below), who gave an introductory talk and then lead a tour of the grounds.



If you asked me what I knew about kibbutzim (plural of kibbutz) before this trip, I would have to say very little. In my mind they were associated with Israeli pioneers, and with the attributes of “communal living”, “socialism” and “agriculture and farming.” As to how many are still functioning, and how many Israelis live on them, I had no idea. Fortuitously, just one day before our trip, an article appeared in the Wall Street Journal under this headline.

The Kibbutz Movement Adapts to a Capitalist Israel

The Jewish state and its famed communal farming movement are both moving away from their socialist roots to become more entrepreneurial

October 13, 2017

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-kibbutz-movement-adapts-to-a-capitalist-israel-1507908175>

I found the article timely and informative, both for the history of kibbutzim and the current situation in Israeli society. If you want to read it and have trouble with the WSJ link, you can download it from my website.

<http://www.lakesidepress.com/WSJkibbutz.pdf>

Here is some factual information, gleaned from our guide, the WSJ article and the internet.

- A kibbutz is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture. The first kibbutz, established in 1909, was Degania Alef.
- Kibbutzim began as utopian communities, a combination of socialism and Zionism. A member of a kibbutz is called a kibbutznik (plural *kibbutzniks*).
- Today, farming has been partly supplanted by factories and high-tech enterprises.
- In 1948, when Israel declared its independence, more than 5% of the population were kibbutzniks; today, they make up less than 2% of Israel’s population of 8.3 million. There are roughly 165,000 of them, living in some 270 kibbutzim.
- Degania Bet was one of the first Kibbutzim, established in 1920. The first one, Degania Alef (established 1909) is adjacent.
- In 2016 Degania Bet had a population of 650 (per our guide, only about 150 are members; the others are employees).
- In addition to a cow dairy herd, crop fields, almond orchards, banana, date and avocado plantations, Degania Bet industrialized in the 1960s with Degania Sprayers, now a green industry; in 1984 it opened the Degania Silicone factory (see below). An additional source of income is its kibbutz cottage tourist accommodations, and it specializes in organized bicycle tours.

As our kibbutz guide introduced himself (unfortunately, I don’t remember his name) I thought, ‘well, after he’s done I’ll ask if Degania Bet is changing like the article mentioned’. That turned out to be unnecessary; he addressed the issue head on right from the beginning. I’ll paraphrase his comments.

“We’re rapidly changing here at Degania Bet. Just last week we had a vote to decide if we should adopt a full capitalist model, or leave things the way they are. The full capitalist model would involve paying people differently, depending on the work they do, rather than now, where everyone is treated equally no matter what work they do. So far, this issue is undecided.”

“...things the way they are” turns out to be far from the socialistic ideal. He told us the 150 or so members have their own bank accounts, and each member was recently enriched to the tune of \$150,000 from the sale of a kibbutz-owned factory. In preparing this section, I searched for information about the sale, and found the following Israeli news article.

Kibbutz Degania Bet's Medical Catheter Firm Sold for \$200m

Kibbutz stands to receive about \$65 million from the sale.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/1.755628>

Nov 28, 2016

Degania Medical, a medical instrument firm based at Kibbutz Degania Bet in the north, is about to be sold in its entirety to the American-British 3i investment fund, at a market value of about \$200 million, sources said on Sunday. The current owners of Degania Medical, which specializes in the sale of catheters and other silicone medical products, include the Israeli Viola fund, which has a 40% stake and Kibbutz Degania Bet itself, with a 30% share.

The Viola fund purchased its share of the company five years ago at a market value of about \$35 million. The balance of the company is currently owned by the IGI fund and by Degania Medical's founders and its CEOs over the years.

The sale of the company caused a stir among the members of Kibbutz Degania Bet, a collective community founded in 1920. Its early members included Levy Eshkol, who became Israel's third prime minister. Representatives of 3i, the purchaser of Degania Medical, have provided the kibbutzniks with an assurance that the company's production facilities in Israel would remain in operation for the long term and that there would be no layoffs of staff. The kibbutz stands to receive about 250 million shekels (\$64.6 million) from the sale.

The terms of the purchase agreement call for most of the purchase price to be paid by the end of this year, with the balance due in mid-2017, contingent on the company's financial results. The company, which was founded in 1984 as Degania Silicone, has annual sales of \$90 million and an operating profit of about 25% of sales. After the Viola fund got into the business, the scope of its business expanded through the purchase of manufacturing facilities in Israel and abroad.

Most American stockholders can only dream of such a windfall. Certainly not what I imagined for any kibbutznik. We learned the kibbutzniks all live in single-family homes or apartments on the grounds (owned by the kibbutz), and, if they wish, can own cars. "But," our guide said, "there's no reason to own your own car. We have a fleet of cars they can use anytime they want. Still, a very few do have their own cars."

We asked: "What happens when members can no longer work? Who cares for the elderly or infirm?"

"As long as they don't have to be hospitalized, we do," he said. "We hire aides who come live with our infirm members, expenses paid by the kibbutz. Right now we have twelve people with full-time aides." The aides, we learned, are from other countries like the Philippines, who moved to Israel for the work.

After more Q and A he took us on a walking tour. First stop was the Degania museum, originally the house of Israel's third Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol (1895-1969; PM from 1963-1969). Eshkol was one of Degania's founders and kept a home here until his death. On the next page is our guide outside (top left) and inside (top right) the museum. Though small, the museum is chock full of old pictures of Degania, and other memorabilia. Shown also are photos I took of two pictures on the wall: In 1900, before Degania was begun, and today.



Next we walked by the houses and apartments where the kibbutzniks live. The place was remindful of a mid-level Florida resort, nothing fancy but very pleasant and clean. As stated in the list of facts, they also offer lodging for tourists.



Then we passed a small, strange-looking structure, shown below. “What is this?” we asked.



“Entrance to a bomb shelter,” he said. “We used it during the Syrian missile attacks. Haven’t needed it for a while, but it’s always available.”

Our most interesting encounter, as we walked to the cafeteria for lunch, were two elderly gentleman, one using a walker and the other driving a golf cart. They are two of the twelve kibbutzniks with full-time aides (one is shown behind the man on left, the other in the forefront of the golf cart). It was totally unplanned to run into them. We chatted briefly, and learned the aides have been with these men for several years. In just a few minutes we got the impression the two men are very happy with their situation at Degania Bet.



I have no idea how much the women are paid, and didn't ask. But other questions arose in my mind. If it's 12 twelve elderly people and 12 full-aides now (out of a population of about 150), what happens when it's 20 elderly and 20 aides? Or 30 or 40? How is this sustainable? Clearly, it seems, this situation must be one factor in the kibbutzim's shift to a more capitalistic model.

We continued on to the cafeteria. Jonathan said the food would be simple fare, but it was good and no one left hungry. This is a view of the cafeteria, with our table in the forefront.



After this brief visit to my one and only kibbutz, I do have a better understanding, but probably more questions than answers. We did not see the dairy herds, the crop fields or orchards, nor did we have a chance to talk to any other members or employees. Our total visit, including lunch, was about 3 hours.

Since only 2% of Israelis live on a kibbutz, kibbutzim are not a big factor in the economy. But more importantly, I think, they are also not a big factor in the social fabric of Israel, as they may have been in

the years just before and after statehood, the 1940s and 50s. It is clear that Israel's capitalistic, high tech model is changing kibbutzim, and not the other way around.

I also got the distinct impression from our Degania guide that he is wary of the changes, that he would prefer the early idealism on the kibbutz he grew up on, but that economic realism cannot be denied. It is, I think, literally "we change or the kibbutz dies." He understands this.

My own view is that facing realism – seeing things as they are and not as you might wish they were, and acting on what you see – has saved Israel as a nation. Realism is: the holocaust, halted only by Germany's utter defeat, but which would be emulated today by other nations if given a chance; a local Palestinian population whose leaders encourage terrorism and only wish you dead; a world economy that is based on trade and innovation, not on protectionism and stagnation; a socialist ideal that doesn't work if you want to grow and prosper as a nation.

Acknowledging realism has saved Israel to this point, and looks like it will also save the kibbutzim.

Next: Part 4 - Entering Jordan, overnight in Amman, and on our way to Petra