

School Books And Gas Masks

It is quite surreal to watch schoolchildren carry their gas masks as they head to class; swinging them in little brown boxes like a packed lunch. So it was during my time on Kibbutz Gevim in Israel's Negev Desert region, about an hour from Tel Aviv, that I had this observation.

It was 1991 and Operation Desert Storm was in full swing.

Most of the kibbutz volunteers had left the country, but I decided to stay. Not out of bravado, or a hankering for danger, but just because of the fact that it was my second visit to the kibbutz and I had friends living there that I wanted to support.

A kibbutz is a commune that is owned by the members who live there. Everyone works for no wages in different jobs—such as the dining room, fields or chicken sheds—but food, housing and the other necessities are provided for free. Most of them accept foreign volunteers such as myself who enjoy the same benefits.

It was the best experience of my life and I wasn't ready to depart because of Saddam.

The minute that Iraq invaded Kuwait, the Israelis knew that they would be involved one way or the other. The country was on perpetual alert from attack, but now it had been officially put on notice and the whole world was watching what would happen. After all, it was an open secret that Israel had nuclear capacity... but the question was whether it would be provoked enough to make a definitive strike.

Army officials began visiting the kibbutz and handing out our gas masks. The brown boxes also contained a syringe of antidote that you had to plunge into your leg if affected by nerve gas. We had demonstrations on the lawn like other societies have family barbecues.

Because of the close proximity of Iraq, in the event of a Scud missile launch we had around two minutes to get the gas masks on and into the bomb shelters.

My bomb shelter was my bedroom in the volunteer accommodation block. It was a sturdy stone building, with just one window and a door. We covered these in plastic sheets and had a bucket of water and a towel standing by to plug the gap at the bottom.

I remember with clarity the first night the kibbutz air raid siren went off. It was 2 a.m. and the loud wailing woke me up. The two-minute countdown was on.

As is normal in most cases for volunteers, I shared a room with two others. One was an English guy call Adam, and an Israeli member whose name I can't recall. He translated the Hebrew instructions for us that were being broadcast over the national radio station.

Put on the gas mask... tear the breathing strip off the mouth filter... tighten the straps... check each other's masks for gaps.

Adam had forgotten to tear off his breathing strip and for some reason I found it funny that he was struggling for air. It's weird the things you find amusing when you're petrified; must be an adrenaline thing.

We sealed and taped the window and door, plugged the gap with the wet towel and sat there waiting. Adam and I took a photo of each other in case things went bad.

So now it was just the tense wait. Listening to the air raid sirens and a radio station in a foreign language that's broadcasting the same emergency instructions over and over again.

An hour later the all-clear was given and we were allowed to leave the bomb shelter. Scud missiles had hit Tel Aviv that night. There was one casualty—an old man had died from a heart attack.

There was another attack a few nights later. I was on the phone with my dad in England when the air raid sirens sounded. He was understandably quite upset when I

said that it was time to get my gas mask and head for the shelter. That's not the news most parents expect to hear when their kids travel overseas looking for adventure.

It was amazing to be in a country that was making the news every day; seeing with my own eyes what the rest of the world was watching via CNN or the BBC World Service. I was a part of history.

That week I took a bus ride into Tel Aviv. Out of habit I still tend to sit at the rear of buses now after living in Israel for two years. Most suicide bombers detonate their explosives the minute they board the bus; you might survive at the back.

The bus passed the outskirts of the city and I noticed the Patriot missiles set up to try and intercept the Scuds. Most of the time they were unsuccessful, but I'm sure the technology has improved since 1991.

As instructed by the Israeli authorities, I carried my gas mask box with me when leaving the kibbutz. There were rumours that a day attack was feasible, so it was essential to be prepared. Most people in the streets carried them over their shoulder like a bag, or clutched them in their hands like the schoolchildren I saw.

The military presence is everywhere in Israel—soldiers travelling to their bases, hitching lifts at the side of the road. A lot of citizens also carry a holstered gun. It takes a lot of getting used to at first, but soon becomes just another routine aspect of daily life. Just like reporting unattended packages and listening for the cry of "Allah Akbar"... normally the last words shouted by a suicide bomber. You don't want to hear that phrase anywhere near you on a bus or in the market.

Still, the street cafes and restaurants, gathering places in the shade of trees and awnings are very busy. The chatter of Hebrew just about wins over the cacophony of traffic. Drivers tend to use their horns a lot in the Middle East; something that Tel Aviv and Cairo have in common. Foreign backpackers being the other link.

There's no experience quite so liberating as heading off overseas and not being quite sure about where you'll be sleeping that night. I've laid my head down in numerous hostels, on beaches, behind a rock on a cold Jerusalem pavement and wedged between two Swedish volunteers on the summit of Mount Sinai. It's amazing the locations you can get some sleep if tired enough, and without a pillow and blanket. Israel is a backpacker's nirvana—work can always be found (legally or black market), there's cheap places to stay and the Greek Islands are a ferry ride away. Because of this a lot of people work on a kibbutz for a few months as an easy option and scrape together the necessary funds to continue their journey.

Most new kibbutz volunteers start on the mundane jobs in the dining room, or working the dishwasher twice a day. Once the dues have been paid, or when "new blood" arrives, then you have a chance of moving up the pecking order... maybe to the factory, in the fields or maintaining the children's petting zoo.

After a year of working in various positions I was promoted to the coveted role of kibbutz gardener. The kibbutz was my new kingdom—one that I patrolled daily on my tractor looking for grass to cut and trees to trim.

The boss let me set my own hours and pretty much left me to it. That was an added bonus during the dry summer months when I could take a welcome dip in the kibbutz swimming pool during coffee breaks.

I had picked up some Hebrew by that stage and could understand a regular conversation between kibbutz members. Often I could throw in my own views—very simple at that—but at least I felt part of the insular society.

By its very nature of being surrounded by tall fences, barbed wire and security guard patrols, the kibbutz often seems like an open prison. Even though a volunteer is free to come and go as they please, your excursions rely on public transport timetables and whether a member can give you a safe lift to the nearest bus stop.

Hitchhiking is an option... but can be a bit risky, especially near the Gaza area in which my kibbutz was located. I remember working in the fields early one sunny morning and watching the smoke rise up from burning tires in the distance.

You tend to find a lot of people with problems on a kibbutz, or misfits that can't find happiness in regular society. They are running away from something and treat their time there as an escape; it's easy to disappear for months on end, losing contact with friends and family back home. One day tends to roll into the next; week after week, and before you know it a few months have passed.

It can drain you to get stuck into the sleep... work... eat... more sleep routine on a kibbutz, so volunteers find their own forms of amusement. Invariably this involves alcohol, sometimes drugs, but mainly the company of each other. You live with these people 24 hours a day and it breeds familiarity. There's a lot of screwing, drinking games and card-playing: similar to university life except that you leave with unique memories and a sun tan instead of \$40,000 tuition debt.

Although the majority of kibbutz members are friendly, a great deal of them view volunteers as a transient form of extremely cheap labour. This is not such a bad thing; both sides know what the arrangement is and where they stand. After all, you are a "volunteer" and no one is forcing you to stay.

It all sounds grim, but it's not. You get out what you put in, so making the effort to learn a few words of Hebrew—"hello," "please," "thanks"—are a promising start, and arriving at the kibbutz gates with an open attitude will get you a long way.

That's when you meet the ubiquitous volunteer leader. Sometimes a volunteer themselves, normally a member, this person is someone you have to get on your side. They can open doors to the best jobs, an extra pair of working boots (very handy when you clean the cowsheds or chickens) or a few free bottles of beer in the pub. It can be a thankless role too as they bear the brunt of the volunteers' complaints when things go wrong.

The volunteer leader is the human face of the kibbutz experience; someone to rant at, laugh with or belittle, depending on what the mood of the day is and whether you are still stuck on the dishwasher, or peeling endless sacks of potatoes.

They are also the person that can facilitate you being "adopted" by a kibbutz family. This means that you can drop in at their homes, have dinner with them and sit at their table during the Friday night Shabbat meal. It's the closest thing to having a relative on the kibbutz.

Saturday is the only day off so volunteers make the most of the kibbutz pub after the Shabbat meal; after all, drinks are dirt-cheap and there's nothing else to do. This is one of the benefits of making friends with the younger members at times like this—often they will invite you to jump in a car with them and head to the nightclubs and bars in the surrounding towns, or closest city. The locals always know where the action is.

These bars are melting pots of Israelis and foreign travellers from clusters of other kibbutzim in the area. It's not unusual to see the same faces week after week, and these social events are great opportunities to get the gossip about conditions on their kibbutzim and whether you want to switch.

But then if you do change, as always, you start at the bottom of the pile on the dishwasher. Sometimes the grass isn't greener on the other side of the electrified fence.

Kibbutz life takes a lot of getting used to. It's a love-hate relationship; a chance to see if you can go back to basics, leave behind the cellphone, Internet and vacuous celebrities on daytime talk shows. Nothing builds character quicker than growing your own food and surviving on a green oasis in a desert landscape.

I miss watching the sunrise over the cornfields... the smell of fresh falafel... Tel Aviv's noisy buzz. Treasured memories.

