◀ that they could no longer count on the state's financial and ideological support. "Swinish capitalism," as Israel's President Shimon Peres once called it, took hold, and individualism came to the fore.

Many of the sons and daughters flew the communal nest and did not come back. Nimrod Irron, 45, a gregarious father-of-three and devoted Barkai kibbutznik, was one of the few from his peer group not to leave. "All these professional, skilled, educated people — there was nothing the kibbutz could offer them," he explains.

In order to stay afloat, Barkai had to adapt. A new neighbourhood was built, with large, modern bungalows offering an alternative to the boxy, austere houses that had previously been the norm.

By paying 1 million shekels (£157,000), new members were offered a lifelong loan of one of 26 new houses. While "old members" continue to adhere to the socialist ideal, giving the vast majority of their salary to the kibbutz and in turn receiving free accommodation, childcare and health, these newer members signed up for a kind of "kibbutz lite". After a tax paid to the kibbutz, they could keep their salary and instead pay for the services they used.

The cynics said that the changes meant that Barkai would no longer be a kibbutz. That seems unfair, but it has certainly met capitalism half-way. As Uri Gur-Dotan, a father of two young children, puts it: "My son still wants an iPhone. But it's easier to say no here than in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv."

Although the philosophy has been watered down, many vestiges of communal life still remain. The crèche remains a central part — both physically and spiritually — of the community. There is an on-site laundry, and a carpool offering 25 vehicles on loan, and a swimming pool that is the hub of summer social life.

On Friday night, I joined dozens of others in the communal dining hall that still offers one meal a day. We helped ourselves from stainless steel trays and sat at long, school-dinner-style tables, albeit ones with white tablecloths. Later, the party spilled out into the muggy August night for al fresco coffee and homemade cake.

Aspects such as these are big drawcards for the newcomers. Most are Israeli, although Barkai also has a heavy sprinkling of members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who arrived from abroad.

Karin Rosenbaum, 34, was initially sceptical of the idea of kibbutz life. But when she and her husband, who grew up on Barkai, returned to visit after the birth of their first child, she saw things differently: "I came to visit from Australia and I thought, 'It's heaven,'" she says. "I always missed community life. In Melbourne they just build their fences higher and higher." Her husband, Arnon, agrees. "I knew that this was a good place to raise a family. It's amazing both for us and most of all for the kids."

The appeal for those with children is easy to see. It is the summer holiday when I visit, and picture-perfect children run around in wide open spaces marked out by swaying pecan trees and tumbling bougainvillea. Their friends are never far away, and they are free to roam where they will.

Another attractive factor is the cost of living. While on-site childcare and housing are not cheap, the kibbutz is still more affordable than cities such as Tel Aviv, where property is extortionate and other costs are equally high. The typical price of a four-bedroom home in the city recently reached 2.4 million shekels (£376,000). The average Israeli salary, meanwhile, is about £17,000.

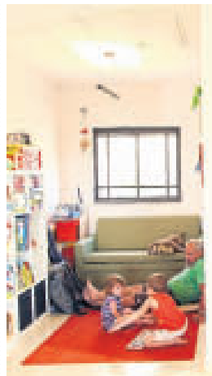
> **Before you pack it is important to mention the downsides**

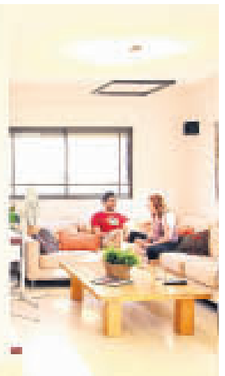
Kerry Sharron, 31, came to Barkai in 2009 for a break from life as a teacher in North London. She fell in love with a man who had grown up on the kibbutz, and became pregnant. They decided to move in, motivated primarily by the financial incentive. "In Israel it's really hard to live on one salary," she says. "In the kibbutz life is different. You don't go out to pubs and cafés. My free time is spent here."

She says the change of lifestyle was transformative. "In London I felt like an isolated nomad," she says. "You just work all the hours that God sends. No one knows you, you feel that if something happened to you no one would notice. Here, people look out for me."

The impact of the recent influx has been revolutionary. Fifteen years ago, the average age had risen to 56. Today it is nearer to 40. Since 2007, the number of children has increased by 50 per cent. The new members have also brought a fresh lease of life, contributing energy and enthusiasm to what was previously a slightly weary population. They organise events and volunteer on the dizzying array of committees that help plan and decide on all aspects of how the community should be run.

Before you pack your bags, it is important to mention the downsides. The atmosphere is akin to a 1950s English village, complete with the tittle tattle and lack of privacy that entails. One member speaks of a strong sense of conformity that frowns upon those who question the kibbutz way of doing things, be it childrearing or your choice of car. In some ways the population is incredibly cosmopolitan, with members drawn from across the globe. But it also exists in a bubble that feels sheltered from the outside world.





FRONT COVER: DAVID RUBINGER/CORBIS, BELOW: TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER CHEN LEOPOLD, HULTON/GETTY

Clockwise from left: Women hand-plough fields on a traditional kibbutz, which centred on farming; Children are taken care of at the kibbutz childcare centre, to allow their parents to return to work quickly; The Gur-Dotan family left behind city life to enter the kibbutz, and enjoy their new house and yard

Drugs, sex . . . and picking avocados

For many Britons of a certain age, the word "kibbutz" is synonymous with drugs, sex and long days spent picking avocados under the sun.

In the late Sixties, the communal farms started recruiting foreign teenagers to work in return for board, lodging and some pocket money.

According to Daniel Gavron, a historian who has written extensively about kibbutzim, half a million volunteers went to Israel between 1967 and 1985. As many as 90 per cent of them were non-Jewish.

Among the British kibbutz alumni is the director Mike Leigh, who went as a 17-year-old in 1960. He has said that his collaborative approach to working can be attributed to the spirit of communal living. "The way I work, which involves sharing and being open, to a great extent derives specifically from the open, healthy democratic and creative environment of the kibbutz," he has said.

The actor Bob Hoskins spent six months on Kibbutz Yagur near Haifa, northern Israel, in 1967, and volunteered at Kibbutz Zikim the same year. He summed up his experience as having "planted bananas, picked bananas, packed bananas". In later years they were followed by Simon Le Bon (1978) and Sacha Baron Cohen (1989), pictured left. The flow of volunteers dried up in the Nineties, as kibbutzim cut costs, moved away from farming and recruited workers from the Far East.

Today, only 27 kibbutzim take volunteers, hosting 1,200 young people between them each year. There is a shortage of spaces. Many kibbutzim cannot afford to offer living quarters, food and wages for hordes of volunteers.

Israel, however, is keen to recruit more volunteers. In 2008, an advertising campaign promoted the benefits of kibbutz life to a new generation of environmentally aware young things.

Aya Sagi, director of volunteering at the Kibbutz Movement, the largest kibbutz organisation in Israel, has persuaded five more communities to accept volunteers in recent years. "They offer a unique lifestyle," she says. "It's still the cheapest way to get to know another country."

The most fundamental issue facing Barkai is tensions between the two categories of member. The newcomers feel they bear the financial burden for old-style members who do not realise how good they have it. The older generation are wary of some of the younger ones and their values. They see a growing gap between the rich and the poor on the kibbutz and fear for its future in the next set of hands.

There are yet more changes in the pipeline, which will see the transfer of property ownership from the kibbutz to individual members, and further discrepancies in earnings.

Tzvi Suitz, 73, is from Detroit and still clings to the ideals he arrived with in 1963. He thinks that Barkai is making a mistake. "The kibbutz is saying, 'Work for capitalism'," he says. "And look what's happening in capitalism in this country and all over the world." His daughter Alona Rakia, 33, sees it differently, arguing that the changes were essential for the community to survive.

> **My son still wants an iPhone. But it's easier to say no here**

Much as I enjoyed my time at Barkai, I left wondering if such a set up could ever work in the UK. There are certainly plenty of Britons sympathetic to the new recruits' disillusionment with urban life. But unlike most British experiments in communal living, which exist on the fringes, kibbutzim have the advantage of holding a place in the history and modern-day consciousness of Israel.

The future of Barkai and its peers will remain uncertain, both financially and ideologically. Perhaps the last word should go to Dvora, the wife of Tzvi, who likes to balance out his pessimism with a more hopeful outlook on life. "The kibbutz down the line will be what people want it to be," she says with a shrug of the shoulders. "That's what kibbutz is. It's not written in the stars."

Disability on display

Have you ever noticed that not all shop mannequins are created equal? Channel 4 Paralympics presenter **Sophie Morgan** – paralysed after a car crash – did. She explains why she went on to design the Mannequal

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, DAVID BEBBER

If you walk down Oxford Street in Central London today you'll see something amazing in the adidas shop. The mannequins are wearing Stella McCartney's Team GB kit and sitting in wheelchairs. Fashion is renowned for its size-zero exclusivity, so to have these in a display to sell clothes is a huge step. It is the culmination of many years of work on my part, which began nine years ago. It was the day I received my A-level results. After a celebratory party I was in a car accident and woke up in hospital with a fractured skull, broken jaws, nose and cheekbones, and a broken spine. I was paraplegic, paralysed from the chest down.

The accident was a catalyst. Life suddenly accelerated into something completely unexpected. I was planning to study law but had a massive change of perspective and went to art school. I was later invited to be on a BBC TV show, *Britain's Missing Top Model*, which aimed to find the first disabled model in the UK. There was a group of eight of us with varying disabilities, and we competed against each other to get a modelling contract. I came second and I came away from it really excited to see what the legacy would be. Unfortunately it didn't live up to expectations — the fashion industry just didn't want to use any of us.

Fourteen per cent of the British population is registered as disabled, and we shop as much as anybody else. There have never been mannequins that represent any kind of disability. Why are an entire group of people in this country not welcomed into the places they shop and where they spend their hard-earned money?

One day I was wandering around Oxford Street, wondering how I could help change this, and I realised that a lot of the mannequins in the window displays were sitting on boxes. I couldn't realistically design a mannequin that would represent every single disability, but the wheelchair is the internationally recognised symbol. I went away and drew and thought and planned for a long time, and eventually designed the Mannequal. The really important thing for me was that I didn't want it to detract from the clothing, so it's sleek and comes in different colours that fit aesthetically into a display.

Debenhams picked it up and used it in its window, but after that I approached shop after shop and it proved to be a really hard sell. Everything changed when I was asked to be a model for McCartney and adidas, and it decided to use the Mannequal in its flagship store window. Now Asda is also going to trial it, and Oasis is really keen.

To be perfectly honest, disability feels really bloody hot right now! I'm going around and people are looking at me like I'm a movie star, wondering whether I'm a Paralympian — it feels like this massive sea-change. We're going to ride the wave of it. The public are now realising that disability is just a part of life — it doesn't need to be hidden away anymore.

mannequal.com

As told to Daisy Greenwell

THE TIMES Traveller

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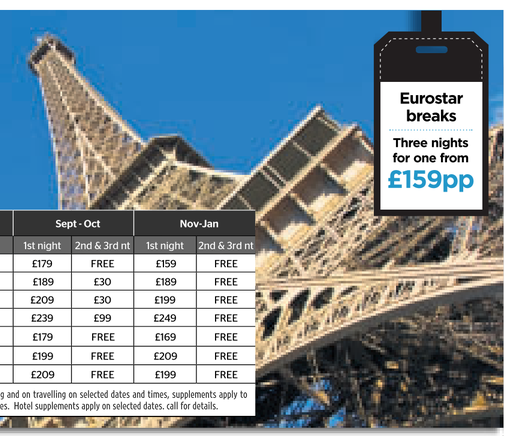

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