

Interview with Ahuva Zaid, President of regional Skål

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Having heard that the local branch of the international Skål Club recently met on a yacht belonging to a Jordanian tour company and that its president is an Eilat businesswoman, Ms. Ahuva Zaid, Eilat Today was curious to find out more about all this. What is Skål, anyway? Why does it have a woman president when few if any tourism entities in Eilat do have women in high posts? Why were they meeting on a *Jordanian* yacht, or even a yacht at all instead of a nice boring conference room somewhere?

Ahuva Zaid graciously agreed to be interviewed and apologised that it could not be set sooner than it was (20.7.08). Besides being the owner-manager of businesses and the president of an active voluntary club that meets monthly, she is also the single-parent mother of a daughter who recently turned 18. Ahuva had gone out of town to support her child through the initial shock of conscription, with all its bureaucracy and hassles, and far from home. The proud mother shone through as she told me that her daughter, Yarden, was one out of only ten young women throughout the country chosen to be part of an elite Navy combat unit, Snapir.

The first question I asked Ahuva, even before the interview, was basically what is Skål and how is it different from other clubs one hears about? The website she gave me (www.skål.org) explained it clearly: It is an international organisation of tourism business leaders who wish to promote global tourism and friendship. Their motto is 'doing business among friends'. Thus, the members promote tourism by associating with each other professionally. Skål's socialising is for a purpose: to set up business connections and joint undertakings. Its activity, rather than charity work or fund-raising projects, is mutual promotion of tourism businesses so as to benefit the community as a whole. Skål members are active in tourism both through their club activities and through joining tourism subcommittees in their areas.

My next question was about Skål's membership. I had envisioned the club as a bunch of older gentlemen sitting around raising toasts and telling stories. Nothing could be further from the truth. The members of the club are neither advanced in age, - Ahuva said

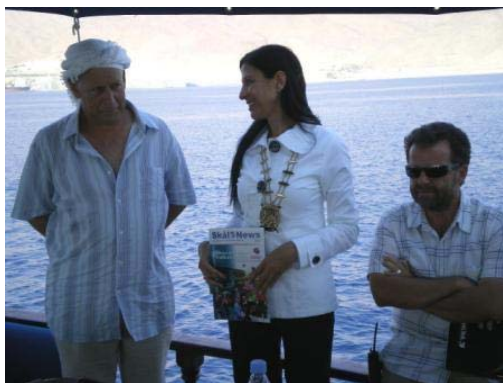
An additional reason that time is of the essence, Ahuva feels, is that Aqaba has huge development plans and, if the flow of international tourists between the borders of the two countries is not soon implemented and made a 'matter of course', later on Aqaba will feel less reason to do so on its part. "The *businesses* in Aqaba are eager to cooperate," Ahuva emphasises. "The 28 advertisement spots on the Aqaba side of the map sold like hotcakes. Having officialdom balk at doing its part is as frustrating to the Jordanian businesspeople as is to the Eilati ones."

Asked about her personal background, business or otherwise, Ahuva told me that she started out her business career by owning a dive operation in the Cayman Islands with a dive club and two boats. "Fish Eye" became the first such operation in the world to have a designated specialty, which was underwater photography. Ahuva was considered a unique businessperson there because of her ideas, her youth, her being Israeli, and being female. She came to Eilat 19 years ago, and a year later bore her daughter who she has raised alone. When asked if it wasn't difficult to create and run businesses while raising a child with no help at all, Ahuva replied with satisfaction that she never missed a single lunch with her daughter. "It's like a business, you make a schedule and keep to it so that you can get done the things that you need or want to do." The character of Eilat being such that she could successfully combine hands-on parenting with running a business was a major reason she chose to stay here, she said. That, and her strong interest in tourism.



she's probably the oldest one there - nor all of the male gender. In fact, not only the club's president, but also its vice-president, is female. And - the latter, Ms. Nadia Shalabi, is Egyptian!

We are privilege to something unique: The local branch of Skål is not the 'Eilat' branch, it is the 'Red Sea Bay' branch and is the only branch of Skål in the world that incorporates three cities, from three nations, into a single chapter! Ahuva finds it very meaningful and important that they share the common goal of promoting regional, cross-border tourism and making the peace treaties an active exchange of business and tourism rather than just a piece of paper. The club meetings are rotated between the three regions - Eilat, Israel, Aqaba, Jordan, and Taba, Egypt - and are hosted by Skål members in each. Last month was Aqaba's turn. The young, dynamic atmosphere of the Red Sea Branch that was purposely cultivated by Ahuva is further enhanced by the informal settings of the meetings. While the meetings do commence in the traditional manner with agendas and minutes, the majority of the time allotted is then freed for the members to circulate and socialise with each other in order to form friendships and strengthen business connections.



The Red Sea Bay branch was founded 3 years ago come October, and Ahuva has been president of it for the last two years. There are more members from Eilat than the other two regions, mainly, Ahuva believes, because of the security hassle for foreigners crossing into Israel. Hence there are five affiliate members in Aqaba, for example, who regularly attend meetings there but do not become full members because they will not attend the other 2/3 of the meetings that require travel and border crossings. Politics, ethnicity, religion, or any personal other factors do not play a role. The only criteria for joining Skål

Asked how she sees tourism in Eilat, Ahuva expressed disappointment. "Four charters a week, and one of those just Italians on their way to Taba? It used to be forty a week!" Ahuva does not accept terrorism fears as the reason for decline. "Boutique hotels in Tel Aviv are full up. Hotels in Jerusalem are full up. Taba Heights, a hotel complex with seven hotels, is full up in spite of what happened to the Taba Hilton and in spite of Israelis no longer going there because of that. Big hotel companies like Movnpick are building hotels in Taba or Aqaba, while none are being built here."

"So if not terrorism, what do you feel *is* the reason?", I ask her.

"Lack of proper marketing - lack of unity, coordination, cooperation between the various tourism entities in Eilat. We heard about a marketing plan for this as a peak tourism year - where is Eilat in all that, where are the tourists? Marketing is given a budget that is not enough and is not being used efficiently, partly because of the divided efforts pulling in different directions.

"We also need to keep tourists in the city, not just be a way-station for Russians going from Sharm el Sheikh to Jerusalem or tourists landing at Ovda to go to Taba. There needs to be a finger on the pulse, tourism leaders making sure of what we [Eilat] get out of it. We need to hear what tourists want or need and appeal to that.

"Jordan set Aqaba apart as a tourism region with its own governor and its own budget. It also did not divide the resources into separate tourism organisations shuffling budgets back and forth between them, but rather yoked all its tourism 'donkeys' onto the same 'cart' so they would pull together and thus waste less resources. Eilat needs to have a concentrated, unified, aggressive marketing strategy and that also means money." Ahuva went on to explain that in Aqaba, for example, there is not both a 'Tourism Administration' and a 'Ministry of Tourism' office - they are combined into one office. Which, by the way, in spite of being an Arab country, is run by a woman, Ms. Mona Hawa.

Contrary to both the international and regional policies of Skål, which promote full equality including gender, Ahuva perceives a great deal

are the candidate's position and seniority in the tourism industry.

Some of the longer-term goals that have been discussed by the Red Sea Bay branch include a full marathon and a triathlon, starting from the Saudi Arabian border and crossing through Aqaba, Eilat, and Taba. The overall ideal that the club would like to see come into fruition is cooperative tourism packages that include all three of the regions.

A more immediate cooperative project, started back in April 2007, is the creation of a regional map depicting all three areas, to be distributed in every hotel and tourist hotspot in the region. However, the tri-national cooperation between Skâl members that overlooks politics, finds itself ground to a halt because of them. 'For want of a horseshoe the kingdom was lost'. For want of a signature, the regional map project is 'lost', or at least seriously delayed. Ahuva finds it frustrating and incomprehensible why those people whose municipal job descriptions include liaising with our neighbours cannot show, rather than just declaring, support by picking up a phone - or better yet making a visit - to use their official influence toward expediting that signature over in Aqaba. Because unfortunately, some things are beyond what volunteers can control and require official signatures and intervention.

Ahuva grudgingly understands, however, the reasoning behind Aqaba's official reluctance to sign and feels Eilat could take a lesson from their page. Aqaba has learned how to preserve its own tourism, how to elegantly say 'no' to being a just way station to other sites (such as Petra). Ahuva feels that, this notwithstanding, the greater long-term gain is through cooperation and that "if you don't want to promote us, at least present us." The Red Sea Bay branch had hoped to present that tri-regional map as a *fait accompli* at Skâl's last annual international meeting, attended by over 1,000 tourism entities from throughout the world. They are hoping very much to at least be able to at the next one, in Taipei, Taiwan, in October 2008. The work has been done, the graphics exist, everything is in place for production. Only a couple of phone calls and a stroke of a pen by political officials are holding it back.

of male chauvinism in Eilat. "Women's accomplishments are not recognised in Eilat," she says. "Women are met with the 'glass ceiling' in business here. With the exception of the hotels, and even that is fairly recent, a woman cannot get to the top in a business unless the business is one she has created herself." Which is exactly what Ahuva did and continues to do. But the 'old boys' club' mentality in Eilat that at best condescends to women and at worst closes them out, annoys her. She knows many qualified women like herself in business or tourism who do not get the opportunity to actualise their abilities. The loss is not just to the women who want to advance, it is to the city as a whole. "Eilat can lose good people if they do not get the recognition due their efforts and the support to help promote and implement them."

Ahuva does not seek the limelight, and in fact she told me this is the first interview she's granted in spite of requests from various media over the years. When asked why she agreed to Eilat Today's, she said that it was for basically two reasons. One is that because the article will be in English, she feels it can reach a larger audience to help her 'spread the word': Instead of devoting any time at all to talk about her business, even if it meant a bit of inherent 'free advertising', Ahuva preferred to promote Skâl and its goals. The other was the more general scope of the interview we intended. Ahuva has a lot to say and a lot of insight and experience in tourism to offer the city, and we are happy that she agreed to discuss it with us and share it with our readers.

http://eilat-today.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=122&Itemid=1