

Iceland, friendship and the passing of time

By Stephanie Granot

Two women celebrate their turning-point birthdays by going on an Arctic adventure



The ice beach

When my friend Bluma called from New York in August to suggest that we meet in Iceland for our mutually impending *big* birthdays, I jumped at it. I Googled a world map on my phone and discovered Iceland, roughly one-third of the way between Norway and Canada. It looked like a chilly destination for November, but it seemed somehow appropriate that two women who had celebrated their 21st birthdays careening around Tel Aviv together on a '64 Vespa (which also turned 21 that year) should celebrate the big 50 doing whatever people do in Iceland.

Fortunately Bluma, ever the more organized between us, was all over what people do in Iceland. In a week's time, she presented me with our itinerary, a bucket list of sorts: We would traverse the southern portion of the ring road that circumvents the country -- effectively the only way to get around Iceland from October through April. Along the way, we would hike a glacier, see a volcano, climb into the Continental Divide and hopefully see the aurora borealis, those northern lights known to light up the winter sky over Iceland like a laser show at a planetarium.

And so, 29 years and eight kids after Bluma, the Vespa and I survived our 21st birthdays in one piece, we borrowed some snowpants, left our husbands with car pool schedules and respectively boarded planes from Newark and Tel Aviv (via Paris) to Reykjavik. A mere five hours after takeoff -- a blip for someone used to the Tel Aviv-New York line -- I walked off the plane right into a giant billboard of a very fit-looking man scaling a glacier, proclaiming "A 40-year-old can do anything!" The irony. Not exactly confidence-inspiring for a not-so-fit woman about to turn 50. But the spirit of adventure was in the air, and I spent the next few hours trying to get an Icelandic SIM card to work in my phone while awaiting Bluma's arrival. When Air France 1121 finally pulled in, Bluma and I shared a tearful hug under the *Snyrtingar* ("toilet") sign and picked up our rental car. Bluma investigated the GPS while I peered at the map (average word = 20 letters), and off we went to the little farmhouse on the

outskirts of Reykjavik, where we spent our first night in matching twin beds.

The next morning after our hostess Edda insisted on making us breakfast and packing us lunch, we set out for Thingvellir, site of the Continental Divide, where Europe split from North America millions of years ago. The astonishing sight of boiling water bubbling up over snowy ground, at the foot of an active volcano, made us momentarily forget it was the coldest either of us remembered ever being. We watched the geyser erupt every few minutes, spewing boiling water into the air that froze to ice moments after hitting the ground, then we trekked down to an enormous waterfall that could give Niagara Falls a run for its money. When we could no longer feel our fingers, we walked back to our trusty Honda and started the three-hour drive to Vik, the southernmost point of Iceland.

One of the first things you notice when driving in Iceland is that you can drive for hours and not see another soul on the road. Want to stop and gaze at waterfalls or photograph black lava fields against snowcapped mountains? No problem. Just stop in the middle of the road and take your time. In fact, the population of Iceland is so small that there's an app for single people who meet to check if they're related. The lack of people, however, can work against you if you're not familiar with the language. As we approached Vik, the wind picked up, and Bluma found it harder and harder to hold the car steady. We turned on the radio, sang along to Meghan Trainor's "All about the Bass," debated its meaning for an hour and hopelessly tried to decipher the urgent-sounding announcements between songs.

By the time we found our guesthouse

in total darkness, the only structure around for kilometers, the wind was so strong that we decided to leave our stuff in the car and just make a run for the door not more than two meters away. Bluma reached the door, struggled to open and hold it for me, then I saw her mouth form a big "O" in fright when she realized that I couldn't let go of the car without literally being blown away. She sprinted to get the owner, who came running with a rope just as I was attempting to crawl in on my borrowed snowpants. Not my finest moment. The next day, we were trapped by the unexpected Arctic storm and discouraged by the delay in our glacier hike. But we were grateful for our host's hospitality (as we had nothing but M&M's and an apple from New York between us) and awed by the raw power of nature, not nearly so evident in our everyday lives.

By the time the storm subsided the following day, we were all ready for adventure with dry gloves and a weather app on our phone. We set off for the surrealistic Jokulsarion glacier lagoon, its white and blue glaciers floating so close you could touch some, and its sister the nearby Ice Beach, the final stop of the tiniest remnants of glaciers on their way out to sea. We took photos of each other posing with life-size ice sculptures, delicate handiwork of Mother Nature who had been so ferocious just a day before. We sat quietly for a while, contemplating all there is to contemplate when one is turning 50 and sitting on an iceberg.

When a cold rain began to fall, we finally picked our way over pieces of ice, which looked just like broken glass, back to the Honda and drove to the Dalshofdi guest house near Kalfarfel, psyching each other up for the next day's glacier hike. To be precise, Bluma was trying to psych me up, while I came precariously close to chickening out.

Despite the freezing temperatures, we spent half the night outside examining the sky for evidence of aurora borealis, but no luck. We fell into bed for a few hours' sleep, and before you could say "ice pick," the big day had arrived.

We put on more layers of clothing than we thought possible and drove for an hour to the Solheimajokul glacier, where we met our fearless guides in their small wooden house/office, along with a small group of fellow scared-looking would-be glacier climbers.

Our guides wasted no time fitting us with rope belts, ice axes and crampons -- claws that strap to your shoes -- and piled us into their truck and drove to the foot of the glacier.

After some brief instructions, including a warning about falling into bottomless ice crevices if we didn't stay right behind them, we started to climb. The first few steps on solid ice felt like ice skating in sneakers. But as we got the hang of digging in our crampons, I actually stopped looking at my feet long enough to somewhat enjoy the stunning scenery. Johann the guide told us we were in the exact location where the blockbuster movie *Interstellar* was filmed last summer. But as the ice got slicker and steeper and we skirted around a few more crevices, my eyes became glued once more to my crampons, no matter how many times Johann told me



The author with Bluma Uzan at Solheimajokul

to look up. Even when he informed me I had the same shoe size as Anne Hathaway and perhaps I was wearing her very crampons, I just kept putting one cramponed foot in front of the other, for once not distracted even by celebrity shoe talk. When I saw what looked like Bluma's feet not far ahead of my own, my eyes followed the feet up past the legs, and there was my old friend, waving and giving me the victory sign. I cramponed over and, channeling Leonardo DiCaprio's king of the world moment, gave her a flying hug, fortunately not knocking either of us into the abyss.

We congratulated each other and looked around in awe at the starkly beautiful glacial landscape, like nothing on planet Earth we'd ever seen or would probably see again.

After a few photos, we carefully made our way an hour or so back down, me limping on a knee I managed to twist (crampons are not designed for spazzes).

Victorious, but exhausted and starving, we got back into our trusty Honda and drove to Hella, home of one of Iceland's famed volcanos. We spent the night in an old-fashioned inn, where we were treated to pizza and much-needed Viking beer. This was our last night to see the aurora borealis, absent from the sky all week due to our Arctic storm. So we layered warm clothes over pajamas and trekked out to a field to wait...and wait... and wait... By 2 a.m. the skies were black, and we were freezing. It was time to face it: There would be no Northern Lights for us on this trip. Disappointing, but it does leave the door open for a next adventure.

Lessons learned

- * Iceland is truly a land of fire and ice.
- * Eyjafjallajokul is pronounced like saying: "Hey, I forgot my yogurt" very fast.
- * Iceland is beautiful, full of adventures and friendly people, but it might be advisable to visit during the summer months.
- * The essence of a person never really changes. At 50, you have the same soul you had at 21.
- * Don't let silly billboards intimidate you.
- * When scaling glaciers for a 50th birthday, consider wearing a knee brace.
- * True friendship will weather all storms, even Arctic ones.