

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Retracing their round-the-world wanderings three decades later

By Joyce Eisenberg
FOR THE INQUIRER

“Where are your suitcases?” my grandmother asked.

My husband and I were setting off on a three-month, round-the-world trip, and all we had were backpacks. It was 1982, and we’d found a window of opportunity after Ted’s surgery residency and before we had children. We traveled on our own from Sri Lanka to Taiwan and celebrated his 30th birthday in Bangkok.

We vowed to someday do it again.

And we did — some 33 years later. In the intervening years, our budget, our waistlines, and our children had grown. On what we dubbed RTW II, we took twice as much luggage and half as much time. We picked places we had missed the first time around — including Turkey, Cambodia, and Malaysia — and celebrated our 42nd wedding anniversary in Bagan, Myanmar.

So much had changed.

On RTW I, we chose our flights from airline timetables in the office of an Indian travel agent and booked guesthouses in Sri Lanka by airmail. Our belly packs were loaded with a 24-page TWA ticket and traveler’s checks. We lugged the 400-page *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring* with us. On its recommendation, we checked into the Palace Hotel in Singapore. In 1982, there were no online reviews to warn us that the Palace did double duty as a brothel.

In 2016, our money belts still bulged, but with stacks of crisp \$1, \$10 and \$20 bills for Myanmar, where banks don’t accept money that’s not pristine. Otherwise, we got local currency from ATMs. All our air tickets were electronic except for our flight to Borneo on Trigana Air, which didn’t know from e-tickets — or safety regulations. The carrier was banned from European airspace, but it was our only option. On this trip, I downloaded *Lonely Planet* chapters to my iPad.

Before the first trip, we wondered whether after nine years of marriage, both working full time, we’d be happy together for three months without a break. Would we run out of things to talk about? We were nervous about traveling independently in countries where we didn’t speak the language. Ted packed medicine we might need — “just in case.” We weren’t in a hurry: We spent one week just lounging on the beach in Phuket, another hanging out in Bali.

When we told friends we were planning another round-the-world trip, one asked, “Six weeks together. Are you kidding?” This time, we weren’t worried; we looked forward to having uninterrupted time together. When people told us Malaysia and Indonesia weren’t safe for Americans, we ignored their advice. On the recent trip, Ted packed medicine we couldn’t live without — literally.

The only places we revisited were Bali and Chiang Mai and — like us — they looked a lot different than they did three decades ago. We



Above, the author and her husband, Ted, in 1982 in Kashmir. At left, the couple in 2016 in Bagan, Myanmar.

walked the entire stretch of Bali’s Kuta Beach, eager to find Puspa Ayu, the \$9-a-night beachfront guesthouse that served us banana pancakes and jackfruit each morning in 1982. In its place were a sprawling resort and a traffic-clogged road. Chiang Mai had matured from a charming traditional town into a hip, bustling city reminiscent of Brooklyn.

On both trips, we visited nine countries, but this time — in our 60s — we were on the move constantly, aware that it might be our last chance to have such a far-flung adventure, grateful that we were in good enough health to do it.

Technology made our second trip easier and opened up opportunities. With Google Maps and translation apps, we didn’t get lost or struggle over a menu. On Facebook, we booked a same-day Burmese cooking lesson in a young woman’s village home.

Our life experience made the second trip even sweeter. We were more comfortable chatting with strangers, more eager to try unfamiliar food, and totally at ease with each other — even when we ran out of things to say.

We can’t wait to do it again.

Joyce Eisenberg is a Philadelphia writer and the coauthor, with Ellen Scolnic, of “The Whole Spiel: Funny Essays About Digital Nuniks, Seder Selfies and Chicken Soup Memories.”

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