I am 40, hear me roar

Sharon Stephenson finds herself among a generation of women having the best time of their lives

I've always had a thing about waking up in San Francisco on my 40th birthday. So I did, and ended up enrolling in a sexy bar with too much Cristal and a fabulous Marc Jacobs freak. Contrast that with my mother's 40th: still raising five children and holding down a full-time job, she would have been lucky to have stopped for a cuppa. But alone a glass of overpriced bubbly. Back then, women were often tired and underwhelmed, a generation of walking fire hazards in their polyester blouses and bad shoes.

Being 40 in the Noughties is, however, a totally different kettle of oestrogen. These days, we women can achieve a level of solvency that doesn't leave us beholden to anyone and we're determined to use that to enjoy a life of age-inappropriate behaviour our mothers could only dream about.

We conveniently forget our last birthday cake covered under the weight of too many candles. Instead, we're busy hankering after cash on anti-ageing creams, squeezing into inappropriately high heels and making sure our arses don't move so far south we can't fit into those $300 skinny jeans.

There's none of this "goin' gently into the night" rubbish: 40 is the new 20 and not only do we not look our ages, we also haven't figured out how to act them.

And don't think you have to be a feckless, childfree, career chick to be in our gang. Just as long as you were born in the 1960s, you're in. A friend of mine has a full-time job, a home and two children to wrangle, yet she works out five times a week, never sports nasty re-growth and throws fat skills of disposable income at someone to shout her full of botulism every few months. If there's a memo about ageing gracefully, she didn't receive it. Her belief is that crossing the line into middle age means certain bits have "shifted around, and you can no longer just chuck something on and look fabulous."

"It's all about not giving up," says the assisted blonde. "If someone's gone to the bother of inventing all sorts of ways to look young, skin, hair and bodies a hand, then it would be a tragic waste of scientific advances not to use them."

A 40-year-old colleague, who happily claims the only meaningful relationship in her life is the one she has with her credit card, puts it more bluntly. "You see these young girls across at the bar and you want to slap them. They don't have to work to look good: they can crawl out of bed, put on any old rag and they look fantastic, whereas I've spent the best part of Saturday afternoon getting ready."

Yet if you were to ask her – ask most of us who've spent four decades on this planet – where on the divide we'd rather be, and chances are we'd opt for the larger number. A totally unsubstantiated poll of friends, all in their 40s, produced the following positives about stacking up the numbers:

- We don't need to join Facebook or Bebo; we already know who our friends are.
- Most of us who are so inclined have already reproduced. The rest aren't bothered that our eggs are teetering perilously close to their use-by date.
- We don't care that we've never heard of most of the mums in the charts. Being 40 means never having to listen to, or pretending to like, crap music just because some misguided 18-year-old thinks it's hot. Ditto movies, books and fashion.
- We've developed selective hearing, which means we can zone out yelling kids and other drivel.
- We've got a firmish footing on the property ladder which means never having to share a roof with anyone we don't like ever again.
- We've got life experience and have survived most of what's been thrown at us. Disease, redundancy, travel, childbirth, death, heartache and loss. Big fat ticks.
- We don't feel guilty about in three Fridays in a row instead of spending them on the tiles.
- We've got the money to pay someone to do the things we can't, or won't, do.
- We've pretty much given away – of the salary, lifestyle and romantic variety – the flic. The perky breasts may have gone but at least we're more at ease in our slightly saggy skin.
- And yes, we've just about come to terms with the fact that we aren't going to achieve some of our childhood dreams. Which means we won't be headlining Wembley, winning an Olympic medal or storming Hollywood with our cute Kiwi accents any time soon. But it doesn't matter.

At 40-plus, we're more likely to be happy with our lot and our place in the world than those snapping at our heels. Not to mention damn proud of the hard work it's taken to get us here. To paraphrase that renowned philosopher Cindy Crawford: "I'm actually happier with my life than I was before, because the life I have now is the life I've worked for."

I'll drink Cristal to that.

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