As droves of baby boomers retire or prepare to do so, the generation that never settles is now focused on maximizing health, fulfillment, and longevity. And the quest for a fountain of youth is getting a renewed surge of interest replete with its own cadre of titles and television shows meant to inspire and guide seekers on the journey to long, "well" lives. In keeping with the trend, Dan Buettner—writer, holder of three Guinness world records in long-distance cycling, and leader of multiple international adventures—brings us *The Blue Zone: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest*, which hits bookstore shelves today. His book is the culmination of a project that began in 2000 and included a 2005 *National Geographic* cover story, "The Secrets of Living Longer." (The term "blue zone" was coined after a demographer used a blue marker to note the areas on a map where the eldest, healthiest people resided.) U.S. News caught up with the author-explorer to discuss his book and the "Power 9," a set of principles we can live by to add extra healthy years to our lives.

These "blue zones" are places where the world's masters of longevity reside. How did you locate the four such places you write about—Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, Calif.; and the Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica?

In 2000, the World Health Organization came out with the finding that Okinawa had the longest disability-free life expectancy in the world—the longest, healthiest lives. And that's what we want, us 77 million baby boomers. So the National Institute on Aging partnered with me and National Geographic, and we came up with what we think was a very responsible methodology for looking at what things work at extending our healthy life expectancy. We found parts of the world where people lived the longest by two measures: middle-aged mortality rates, which factors out death at birth, and the centenarian rate.

And how does the health of the world's healthiest elders—those living in the "blue zones"—compare with that of Americans?

Life expectancy is as much as 10 years greater. There was as much as a sixth the rate of cardiovascular disease and a fifth the rate of the big cancers like colon and breast. That's huge, because cardiovascular disease and these cancers kill about 80 percent of people over 65 in our country. And diabetes isn't really an issue with this group.

You make the observation in the book that long-lived people tend to be likable. What's important about that?

We know that if you're likable, you're going to get better care from your caregivers. You also tend to not be abandoned by your family and friends. They've walked this planet for a century and have had an extra number of decades to observe the fact that being compassionate, giving, interested, and interesting is important.

So if you're a younger person—younger than 100, that is—who isn't particularly likable now, are you doomed?

These centenarians weren't always likable. In fact, a lot of them were cantankerous. You talk to their kids, and they say, 'I hated my mother when I was younger, and now I love her.' They evolved. You make a huge evolutionary leap between 80 and 100.

Part of this project has been identifying the "Power 9," based on observation of the lives of the well and the long-lived. They're changes we can make to emulate them. They look like nine simple things, but they have years of research behind them.

One of the "Power 9" is having a sense of purpose. What's yours, and why does it matter?

I happen to be curious. I happen to be family oriented. A component of me wants to do some good. The next thing is figuring out how I put those things to work in my life. That formula is different for everybody. Purpose becomes really crucial in middle age because when your kids grow up and your job sort of wanes, it's like, "What do I do now?"

Many people in the United States seem to be living the antithesis of the way these long-lived people in the Blue Zones do. Considering it has taken millenniums for these four cultures to yield lifestyles aligned with long, healthy lives, can we in America realistically change?

Yes. One of the happy coincidences is most of these "Power 9" are not hard, and a subtle shift of energy can yield an enormous benefit. For example, the idea that having happy hour could more powerfully impact your life than going to the gym seems so flippant, but it's not. In the Blue Zones, these spry centenarians never signed up for diets or belonged to gyms, but they hung out with groups of people who supported the same behaviors. We know that the power of moderate drinking is probably worth three to five good years of life if you can pick up that habit and not make it immoderate.