



SECRETS TO LONGEVITY

In the four 'blue zones' people live well for a very long time

BY CATHY GULLI • On the island of Sardinia, less than 200 km west of mainland Italy, very old people are like celebrities. This is despite the fact that their days are mostly spent in bed or in their favourite chair. Otherwise, they eat, or on particularly active days, promenade through the village. A stop in any local *caverna* reveals just how much glory these seniors get. "Usually we see swimsuit calendars" inside North American sports bars, says Dan Buettner, but when he was in Sardinia, "it was Centenarian of the Month calendars."

As unsettling as a great-great-grandfather in a Speedo may sound, his fame—let alone his triple-digit age—provides one example of the differences between where most of us live and the world's "blue zones." These are places where people have the lengthiest lifespans. In a new book published by National Geographic, *The Blue Zone: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*, explorer Dan Buettner identifies four areas around the globe where this is happen-

DAVID SUTHERLAND/GETTY

ing: Sardinia; Okinawa, Japan; the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica; and Seventh Day Adventists in Linda Loma, Calif. (He says two more may be announced later this year.) While "we don't live in the South Pacific or on a mountain" like the blue zone populations, says Buettner, "how we emulate what they do in our houses and communities can [stretch] our lifespan by 10 years."

Each blue zone offers distinct keys to prospering. In Sardinia, besides revering their elders, people drink daily two glasses of red wine rich in antioxidants. In Okinawa, family and friends form a *moai*, a network to care for one another. Along the Nicoya Peninsula, people eat a diet similar to what their ancestors ate for the last 3,500 years, comprised mainly of black beans, fruit, and a type of corn soaked in lime that infuses it with amino acids. "It's almost a perfect longevity diet," says Buettner. And in Linda Loma, the Adventists observe a weekly Sabbath "no matter how busy or stressed out they are, no matter what's happened in this 'Crack Berry'

DOUGLAS PEARSON/CORBIS

SARDINIA: Where elders are revered a glass or two of red wine is drunk daily

world," he enthuses. The result: women live nine years longer than other California females; Adventist men get 11 more years of life than their state counterparts.

Of course, if you asked any of the blue zone inhabitants their secrets to a long life, they wouldn't have an answer. "A 100-year-old no more knows how he got to be 100," a tall man knows how he got to be tall, Buettner philosophizes. So, over a few years, he and his team of researchers identified the blue zones using demographic data such as life expectancy to centenary rate" (the proportion of a population that lives to be 100), middle-aged mortality. Then they went to those places and observed the lifestyle of the centenarians. Finally Buettner aggregated the information and distilled it into a list of common denominators that he says make up the formula for longevity.

"The Power 9," as they're called, are a list of nine habits in a pyramid shape evocative of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. At the top is the "Move naturally" category, which says low-intensity physical activity should be part of a person's daily routine. Buettner suggests "de-conveniencing your house or office to get more exercise in. Twenty minutes of gentle aerobic, balancing and muscle-strengthening movements four or five times a week should reduce mortality by 26 per cent and add three or four years to your life.

Below it, the "Belong to the right community" group focuses on the importance of having supportive relationships between friends and family. Buettner says that if you're estranged from relatives then you should make an effort, and if you don't have an encouraging friend, then you'd better "go searching for one." There's also emphasis on joining a sports team or community. One meta-analysis of 42 studies examining the link between religion and

longevity found that people who regularly participated in religious groups had a lower mortality by 29 per cent. If you do all this, says Buettner, you could tack on four years of living.

To get eight more years of extra life, the next category is "Eat wisely." It is based on the credo of Okinawa: "Stop eating when you're 80 per cent full—or feel almost satisfied. The Sa-

standard of two glasses of red wine a day is also endorsed, as well as a diet light on meat and heavy on plants. Lastly, the base of the Power 9 pyramid is the "Right outlook"

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HEALTH



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OKINAWA, Japan: where people stop eating when they are not quite full

if he can articulate his purpose in life, or as the Nicoyans say, “Why I wake up in the morning.” Buettner points out that all these changes don’t have a cumulative effect in adding years to lifespan, but rather work together to provide roughly a decade more longevity.

This is, obviously, hard stuff to do. On www.bluezones.com you can take the “Vitality Compass” test to determine your life expectancy and where you need to take particular care.

Buettner, who’s 47 and is predicted to live until he’s 95 after adopting many of the Power 9, suggests beginning with the three changes that seem easiest to pull off. People should also attempt them with a partner who can offer motivation, and with whom they can hold one another accountable. And, Buettner writes in *Blue Zones*, reward yourself when you achieve any modifications.

Slight improvements to the way you live should produce some results because, Buettner notes, a Danish study has indicated that longevity is only 20 per cent genetic—the rest comes down to lifestyle. It’s a controversial statement because daily discoveries reveal how DNA impacts our likelihood of developing various diseases. But Buettner says that blue zone populations don’t have to endure the long, debilitated path to death so common in North America. “The average Canadian is going to have 2½ to three years of morbidity,” he explains, compared to the blue zones where people suffer for six months. By living better, Buettner believes, “you’re chopping off the worst of the worst years of your life.” “The goal,” he continues, “is to live 90 or 95 really great years and die in our sleep.” And then Buettner adds, “Preferably after really great sex.” M

ON THE WEB: To calculate your life expectancy visit www.macleans.ca/howhealthy

HOW TO LIVE LONGER

Consider these recommendations, adapted from Dan Buettner’s Power 9 Pyramid in ‘The Blue Zone.’

1. Add simple activities throughout your day like walking farther than you need to, doing gardening or home repairs yourself, or running around with your children or pets.
2. Try eating off of smaller plates to decrease your portion sizes and reduce calories.
3. Limit the number of servings of meat you eat in a week.
4. Drink a glass or two of red wine most evenings.
5. Know your passions in life and take time to enjoy them most days.
6. Take quiet time to relieve stress.
7. Belong to a spiritual community and gather with them regularly.
8. Make your family and loved ones a priority. Express that through your actions.
9. Surround yourself with friends who have healthy habits and support you in your goals.

If you are doing many of these things you could add up to 10 good years to your life.

