

THE TIMES

How to live a long life: A new movement promoting the benefits of growing old takes the world's 'longevity hotspots' as its inspiration. Francis Gilbert explores the secrets of the not-so-ancients

Are we living in the age of the "oldie"? This week the veteran BBC broadcaster John Simpson -- who six years ago became a father again at the age of 61 -- hailed 65 as the new 55, declaring that being 65 now "is what being 55 seemed like back in 1967. If your health holds up, you ought to be able to keep active and involved until your eighties". He certainly doesn't need to look far for confirmation.

At 76, film-maker and comedian Woody Allen is enjoying his biggest commercial success, 74-year-old Ridley Scott has just directed one of the summer's most expensive blockbusters, Prometheus, and 79-year-old Yoko Ono is enjoying more critical acclaim for her art than ever, with a new show at the Serpentine Gallery. Even in the sporting arena, old people are still competing: this month Arthur Gilbert (no relation) became the oldest athlete to complete a triathlon, at the age of 91. In other spheres it's clear that older people like Warren Buffett and the Queen continue to play pivotal roles in the worlds of business and politics.

This said, older people get a largely negative press -- scarcely a day goes by without some dreary headline about our "ageing population". When I've canvassed people about whether they want to live to 100, many of them have reacted with horror, saying they couldn't think of anything worse. Being old in our culture is tantamount to being "diseased". For all the success of some high-profile pensioners, we're largely a youth-obsessed nation, yearning for all the perceived benefits of being young. That was why it was so refreshing to encounter a US-based movement, Blue Zones, which promotes the benefits of growing old.

Based on the bestselling book *Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest* by National Geographic writer Dan Buettner, the movement is popular because it reassures us that we shouldn't be frightened of growing old. Buettner's research took him to what he dubs "Blue Zones" -- areas where people live disproportionately longer than in other parts of the world.

He travelled all over the globe with a team of researchers: from the island of Sardinia to Okinawa in Japan; from Loma Linda in California to the Nicoya peninsula in Costa Rica. Using a mixture of scientific and anthropological observation, Buettner and his team explored the ways in which these cultures promoted happy, healthy longevity.

His findings make for fascinating reading. For example, in the mountainous Barbagia region of Sardinia, among a population of 17,864 born between 1880 and 1900, 47 men and 44 women lived past their 100th birthdays -- a rate of centenarians that exceeds America's by a factor of 30. It appears that their mountain-walking, their largely plant-based diet, supplemented by goat's milk and red wine, and their respectful, family-based communities have all contributed to their long lives.

Similar stories emerge from the Nicoya peninsula and Okinawa: healthy habits have been passed on from generation to generation, which has meant people living far longer than in much richer areas. The Okinawans, for example, have an "80 per cent" rule that means they stop eating before they are full -- as a result there are very few obese people.

Sadly, the younger Okinawans who have embraced Americanised, sedentary lifestyles are suffering from health problems such as diabetes -- which none of their elders has. The comparison between the older and younger Okinawans is hard proof, if any were needed, that westernised lifestyles do not foster long, happy lives.

Some communities, however, do buck the trend. The most notable of these are the Seventh-Day Adventists, an evangelical Christian sect, living in Loma Linda. Their teetotal, largely vegetarian and community-based lifestyles are particularly

conducive to longevity. There's no doubt that their strong faith plays a part, but it appears that it doesn't have to be religion that sustains you -- it could be your family or a way of life that might be your source of comfort.

For all its tone of a self-help book -- which inevitably leads to some simplistic-sounding advice -- the overwhelming message of Blue Zones is that a complex interplay of factors lies behind the long, happy lives that people in certain cultures enjoy. Some common threads can be drawn out, however: environments in which exercise is compulsory -- a part of daily life -- and cultures that promote healthy, largely plant-based diets, go a long way towards creating the conditions for disease-free, active older people.

But above all, it is in societies where older people are given a firm sense of identity -- which celebrate rather than denigrate old age, and have in-built structures that mean older people socialize with others -- that they are given a real incentive to live longer.

Blue Zones made me re-evaluate my life. As a middle-aged person in a highly stressful occupation -- teaching -- who enjoys rather too many bacon sarnies and buns, and gets much of his sense of identity from his job, I'm not exactly in line for a long life. The book made me think again. I have decided to take a step back from work, eat a bit more healthily and socialize more.

I would love to have the spirit and body of the cheery goat-farmers in Sardinia or the smiley-faced 100-year-old gardeners in Okinawa when I'm older.

Getting into the zone

The Blue Zones website (bluezones.com) offers all sorts of tips, some of which could be hotly contested -- such as an instruction to drink two glasses of wine a day. But here are a few alternative suggestions from the book ...

Saying that you're going to live a long happy life makes it much more likely that you will. A number of people feel that it's arrogant and tempting fate to make this kind of statement, but it's clear that articulating a desire to live a long life is an important step to leading one.

Eating meat on a daily basis isn't good for you. All these long-lived cultures eat it sparingly.

Make your own Sabbath. The Seventh-Day Adventists benefit a great deal from having a day when they only do things such as going for walks and socializing.

[The Blue Zones](#): Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest by Dan Buettner is published by National Geographic Society at Pounds 6.99