

I plan to grow up to be a magnificent elder. Look at the old lady in the punky haircut, they'll say, loved and loving at 93, still hiking, still laughing, still dancing till dawn (OK, midnight). A long life is part luck, part grace and—what else? I'd always wondered. And then I discovered the Blue Zones. The mystery of exceptional aging is no mystery at all. There are guidelines to be followed, insights to be shared, rules we can respect. One of my favorites involves waking up every morning with a passion and a purpose that gives your life meaning. When that ends, so will you.

Live Long, Die Happy.

This is the time of year I live, play and work on a tiny, remote Greek island with no airport and fewer than 3,000 residents, goats included.

It's a beautiful, magical, revelatory place. Be happy for me. A generous spirit is a sign that your healthy lifestyle training is paying off.

Of course, I take the World Wide Web with me, so anxiety is never far away. And neither is the island of Ikaria, one of the world famous Blue Zones, seven well-studied communities where surprisingly large numbers of people live into their 90s and beyond, and are vigorous, healthy, and relatively happy right to the end.

I can see Ikaria from my terrace, high above the Aegean, sipping a glass of cold retsina, chipping away at a chunk of freshly made feta cheese with wild oregano on top. It's a form of research. It inspires me to ask this age-old question:

Why do some people live so much longer than others?

Genetics play only a small part in longevity, 20 percent or less. Much more important are your personal lifestyle choices: What you eat and drink; the amount of physical activity you do; the time you spend with family and friends; how you handle tension, trauma, the ticking of the clock.

Ikaria—25 miles long, 5 miles wide, with healing hot springs that have made it a tourist attraction since 600 B.C.—has been studied up one mountainside and down the other. Blue Zone researchers want to determine what keeps Ikarians living so long, so well, with so little heart disease and diabetes, and virtually no dementia.

Let me repeat that last part before I forget: In Ikaria, dementia is practically unknown. In the U.S. dementia is rampant, costly, and incredibly scary.

In the U.S., only one in nine baby boomers will live to the age of 90, according to Dan Buettner, head of the Blue Zone movement. On Ikaria, one

in three live to 90 and beyond.

Amazing. What do they know that we've forgotten?

You can find the answers in great detail at BlueZones.com. However, here's my summary, after spending some sweet days, walking and talking my way around Ikaria. I hope you're not too busy to read it:

Take your time. To live longer, slow down. On Ikaria, wristwatches are as useless as speed bumps. Ikarians are famous for moving at their own pace, working when they want to work, chilling when they want to chill. I learned that on my first visit there, having lunch with friends at a wonderful little taverna in the port of Agios Kirikos. We all ordered Greek salads. Some of us are still waiting.

Eat your greens. Over 150 kinds of wild greens grow all over the island, and Ikarians enjoy them in a variety of unusual salads and pies. It takes just the slightest bit of courage to stick your fork in. The island greens are a super source of antioxidants and are eaten, like almost everything else, with a splash of olive oil.

Drink herbal tea. Ikarians drink endless cups of tea made from wild mint, chamomile and other local herbs high in compounds that significantly lower blood pressure and decrease their risk of heart disease and dementia.

Take a nap. Ikarians take daily naps (about 30 minutes) at least five times a week. Blue Zone researchers calculate this lowers their risk of heart attacks by 35 percent! In a few of the mountain villages, they sleep by day and work and play through the night. Why? Because they want to.

(FYI: "Based on interviews," says Blue Zones expert Dan Buettner, "we have reason to believe that most Ikarians over 90 are sexually active.")

Keep moving. Many Ikarians live in mountain villages that require vigorous walking. They keep terraced gardens, tend to animals, and get lots of exercise every day without thinking about it.

Connect to community. Ikarians maintain strong social ties to their families, neighbors, and villages. They wake up feeling they have a purpose in life, whether it's tending to the great-grandchildren or feeding their chickens. They take time every day to meet face to face with friends, sipping Ouzo, shooting the breeze.

Eat the Ikarian way. Ikarians thrive on local fresh food, all of it organic and unprocessed. They avoid dairy but consume gallons of goat's milk, as yogurt or cheese. Their version of the gold-standard Mediterranean Diet is high in fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, potatoes, and olive oil. They drink a glass or two of local wine—absent nitrates and pesticides. (Some folks think it tastes like rotted leaf mulch; I like it. It could be a case of mind over matter.) And they benefit hugely from daily doses of their local honey, a thick amber-colored concoction rich in anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory compounds.

Each of these Blue Zone guidelines could be a book. There is so much more to say, to do, to be. Maybe another time. You're free to go now. Time for a life-extending nap.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! The Blue Pearl Zone

“In the end, all that really matters is the state of your heart.”

—Swami Chidvilasananda



GOING DEEPER

Choose one of the Blue Zone rules and plug it into your own life, no matter where you live or how old you are.

Slow down? More exercise? Guilt-free naps?

If you can't decide, try this one: Give yourself four olive-filled weeks on the Mediterranean Diet. I choke on the word diet, but in this case, it's come to mean a lifestyle choice, a super healthy way of eating that has nothing to do with denial and deprivation and everything to do with consuming real food, in moderate amounts, with a focus on fruits and vegetables, olive oil, whole grains, lean meats and fresh fish. There are many variations, but the core principals are the same, including a modest pour of red wine and enough time to slow down and savor every sip.

The Med Diet isn't for everyone. But in study after study, it keeps coming out on top as a way of eating that is good for all sorts of Westerners who want more energy, less bloat, and, over time, a comfortable, sustainable weight.

It's not about being thin. It's about eating real food, with real taste, and real advantages to your health and wellness.

If you come to love the Med Diet, and it becomes part of your lifestyle, bravo.

Next step? A week on Ikaria, possibly two.

