



Live (Almost) Forever

Ten life-extending strategies from guys who've given the Grim Reaper the slip

BY JOHN HASTINGS

TWO ISLANDS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN. One island in the East China Sea. A remote peninsula in Costa Rica. A town in . . . San Bernardino County, California? From the exotic to the ordinary, these far-reaching locales are all rich in one valuable natural resource: longevity. Scientists call them Blue Zones—places where the residents outlive the rest of us by an average of 10 years, with many pushing life's envelope past 100.

But here's what makes demographers do a double take: *Men in most of these regions live nearly as long as the women do.* That's not just uncommon, it's unheard of. Across the globe, women live considerably longer than men; in the United States, the difference is about 5 years. So what are the secrets of these modern-day Methuselahs? We asked researchers and self-made expert Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones*, for the answers.

Nevada Okin/Frull/Azenberger/Redux

Sardinia, Italy

Sardinians' record longevity may be due in part to DNA. The region is isolated and immigration rates are low, so the gene pool is relatively pure. But the active lifestyle and long-standing social customs are also at play, experts say.

- **Buy a corkscrew.** Like most other Italians, Sardinians down a couple of glasses of vino a day. But the region is unique because the local wine is far richer in heart-healthy flavonoids than American and most other European varieties, a 2006 study in *Nature* found. Good news: Sardinian reds are sold in the United States, including those exported by Argiolas (argiolas.it) and Sella & Mosca (sellaandmosca.com).

- **Never graduate.** Sardinians continue working well into their 90s, says Michel Poulain, Ph.D., a demographer at Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. "There's no 65-year-old retirement age." You don't literally have to "work" all your life; just keep working at learning. In a 2009 University of California at San Diego study, folks who felt young reported learning more new skills than those who felt their age or older. Acquiring new knowledge may in turn reinforce youthfulness. So learn Italian, take a wine-tasting class, or heck, study magic and become the next David Blaine. You just may pull a few years out of your hat.

Nicoya, Costa Rica

At age 60, Nicoyan men are twice as likely to reach the 90-year mark as American men are, says Luis Rosero-Bixby, Ph.D., director of the Central American Population Center at the University of Costa Rica.

- **Toughen up your telomeres.** Rosero-Bixby's team analyzed blood samples from elderly Nicoyans and found that they had longer-than-average telomeres, the ends of the chromosomes that dictate how many times cells can divide before dying. Longer telomeres have been linked to longer life, so avoid anything that may shorten them—starting with stress. "The Nicoyans live simple lives," says Rosero-Bixby. "They have few belongings, which is an easy way to reduce stress." Refocus your spending: Instead of buying things, devote disposable income to *doing* things. In a 2010 Cornell study, people felt less satisfaction and more regret ("Why didn't I buy that TV?") after looking back on material purchases than they did after investing in experiences.

- **Grow a garden.** To eat like a Nicoyan, switch to locally grown food. One payoff is more nutrition: Produce stored for 1 week can lose vitamin C as well as B vitamins, according to a study review in the *Journal of the Sciences of Food and Agriculture*. It's even better if "locally grown" means "from your own backyard." Recent Texas A&M research found that older home gardeners were more active and satisfied with their lives and, not surprisingly, ate more vegetables than nongardeners did. Short on green space? Ask a local nursery about nearby

community gardens, or plant a container garden. Broccoli, peppers, and spinach can thrive in 1- to 2-gallon containers.

Okinawa, Japan

The island of Okinawa is Japan's poorest prefecture, yet it still has one of the world's highest rates of centenarians. Compared with mainlanders in nearby Fukuoka, Okinawans have healthier arteries and lower levels of LDL cholesterol.

- **Eat the super tuber.** The traditional Japanese diet of leafy greens, rice, and fish is touted for its life-extending benefits. But Okinawans have traditionally made one key tweak: Instead of rice, their staple carb is the sweet potato, which can lower cholesterol and fight inflammation, according to a Japanese study. Sweet potatoes are rich in potassium, vitamin C, carotenoids, and fiber—nutrients often lacking in the American diet. And unlike white potatoes, the orange alternative won't significantly spike your blood sugar. Eat them Okinawan-style—added to soup or seasoned with turmeric, a potential cancer fighter.

- **Make your own moai.** The ancient Japanese formed *moais*, or groups of four or five friends who loaned each other money or food. The practice persists on Okinawa, says Poulain, except modern moais meet daily or weekly just to . . . talk. Your move: Prioritize regular hangouts with your buddies. In a recent Drexel University study, older adults with subpar social lives were more likely to die of heart disease and cancer than those with more connection.

Ikaria Island, Greece

This Aegean island is dotted with radioactive hot springs, thought by ancient Greeks to possess healing powers. But the Ikarians' real secrets can't be measured with a Geiger counter: They know what to eat and when to sleep.

- **Consume the mood food.** Depression, which has been shown to shorten life, is exceptionally rare among Ikarian men, reports recent Greek research. Credit the catch of the day: A 2010 Greek study found that Ikarians who ate about 11 ounces of fish a week were 66 percent less likely to battle the blues than those who ate less or none at all. Their diet of sardines, gilthead (a bream), and tope (a shark) is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, including EPA and DHA, which may speed transmission of mood-regulating brain chemicals. Focus on fatty fish, such as salmon, herring, and tuna, which pack the most omega-3 punch.

- **Take naps.** Eighty-four percent of the island's "oldest old" men—and everyone over age 90—take daily afternoon naps, another Greek study found. And in an analysis of 23,000 people in Greece, University of Athens researchers found that regular napping can slash heart-disease deaths by 37 percent. The ideal time to doze? Shortly after lunch. "You'll add onto sleep from the night before rather than subtracting from sleep you'll get tonight,"

WALK LIKE AN IKARIAN

Thwart death by making exercise intrinsic to your life

Now you know how centenarians eat, drink, and socialize. So where's the sweat? "People in the Blue Zones don't go to gyms or run marathons," says Leslie Lytle, Ph.D., a professor of public health at the University of Minnesota and codirector of the school's Blue Zone Vitality Project. "Activity is embedded into their daily lives—they have physically demanding jobs, walk to the grocery, herd sheep." Add to this the fact that four out of the five Blue Zones are in mountainous regions, and you can see the making of one heck of a workout. If you want to be more active, try to use foot power whenever possible: Take the stairs, hoof it on local errands, and take your dog on a walk—make that a *run*—worthy of a Sardinian shepherd. **LAURA ROBERSON**



says W. Christopher Winter, M.D., medical director of the sleep medicine center at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Virginia.

Loma Linda, California

How does a city an hour from Los Angeles become a Blue Zone? Simple: Populate it with Seventh-Day Adventists, who avoid smoking, boozing, and caffeinating. In California, male Adventists live about 7 years longer than other white male residents, a 2001 Loma Linda University study found.

- **Pray for your life.** The Adventists' diet is heavy on whole grains and vegetables—a big reason for their remarkable health. But their spiritual sustenance may be equally important: In a 2008 study in the *Annals of Epidemiology*, people who attended a weekly religious service were less likely to die over the next 8½ years than those who never attended. If your worship has waned, you can still tap the effect. Regularly meet with like-minded people to nourish your soul. Volunteering, for example, can help beat depression, a 2010 Israeli study found.

- **Chill out.** One Blue Zone strategy we can't stress enough is, well, not to stress. Like the Ikarians, Adventists take their R&R seriously—they designate a weekly day of rest. Reexamine your downtime: Are you truly relaxing? Or are you bar hopping, working from home, or running a taxi service for your kids? You don't have to set aside a full day—a midday walk once a weekend works. (Saturday nature walks are written right into the guidelines of the Adventist faith.) A 2010 study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* found that a walk outside is more invigorating than a walk indoors. ■