BLUE ZONES: DIET, LIFESTYLE

Want to learn more about blue zones? Curious about the habits of people who are among the happiest and healthiest on the planet? This article on the blue zone diet, lifestyle, and longevity has got you covered.

Blue zones are a hot topic these days, and for good reason. These regions are home to some of the oldest and healthiest people in the world. In each of the 5 designated “blue zones,” people consistently live over 100 years old. This is over 20 years longer than the [average life expectancy in the US](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/20220831.htm)!

Since 2004, leading scientists, anthropologists, demographers, and researchers have studied the environment and lifestyles of blue zone residents to try and understand the secrets to longevity. The results of their extensive research is below.

As a travel blogger, I’ve visited some of these blue zones and can attest to their livable qualities firsthand. From the weather and climate to the local cuisine and community feel, it’s no wonder people live longer on average in blue zones.

Ready to uncover the secrets of blue zone health and longevity? Here is everything you need to know about blue zones, including what they are, where they are, why they exist, and why you should care. We’ll also share some practical ways to incorporate the Blue Zones diet and lifestyle into your own life. Let’s get to it!

*Follow my adventures to some of these blue zone places on*[***Instagram: @Global.Viewpoint***](https://www.instagram.com/global.viewpoint/)

What are Blue Zones?

Before discussing how you can implement blue zone diets and lifestyle habits into your daily life, let’s first cover what blue zones are.

According to Blue Zones founder Dan Buettner, blue zones are places “where people live the longest and are the healthiest.” In 2004, he and National Geographic teamed up to [discover the keys to longevity](https://www.bluezones.com/about/history/) around the world. They sought to build upon the demographic work performed by Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain in the [Journal of Experimental Gerontology](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15489066/). In doing so, they pursued additional evidence-based research to uncover the regions of the world with the highest concentrations of centenarians. The result of this expedition was the discovery of [Blue Zones](https://www.bluezones.com/).

Blue zones are regions around the world where people regularly live past 100 years of age – at much higher rates than the rest of the world. Natives of blue zones live longer than the general population due to genetics, diet, lifestyle, and more. There are 5 blue zones worldwide, which are found in the [USA](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/unique-places-to-visit-in-the-us/), Costa Rica, [Italy,](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/airbnb-in-tuscany-italy/) Greece, and [Japan](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/most-unique-airbnbs-in-tokyo/).

Coined ‘Blue Zones’ because Buettner and his colleagues identified them with blue circles on a map, these five locations are the only ones currently known. However, it’s entirely possible that more Blue Zones exist and have not yet been identified.

With higher life expectancies and lower rates of chronic diseases, blue zones have become a model for the rest of the world.

Where are the Blue Zones?

Now, let’s cover each of the Blue Zones that we know today. From east to west, here are the 5 blue zones that are a blueprint for the rest of the world:

Okinawa, Japan

Located in the southern islands of Japan, Okinawa is home to the oldest women in the world. These women practice tai-chi and forms of Confucian meditation well into their 90s and 100s.

The people in Okinawa are also [known to have less cancer, heart disease, dementia, and other inflammatory diseases](https://www.bluezones.com/explorations/okinawa-japan/) than anywhere else on Earth. This is due in part to a plant-based diet. There are also numerous socio-cultural factors at play here. One of their most important traditions is forming social networks called moai, which provide financial and emotional support to members of each group starting from the age of five.

Ikaria, Greece

Nicknamed the “island where people forget to die,” Ikaria is another prominent blue zone. This small island in the Aegean Sea is not far from the coast of Turkey.

Locals follow a Mediterranean diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats. It’s quite common for people here to take a mid-afternoon nap, which is not the case in other blue zones. Ikarians also generally practice fasting, which is scientifically proven to [slow down the aging process in mammals](https://www.bioagehealth.com/how-intermittent-fasting-can-help-to-fight-aging/#:~:text=The%20fountain%20of%20youth%20may,keeping%20cells%20and%20DNA%20healthy.). In addition, it’s known for having one of the lowest rates of dementia in the world, as well as cancer and other diseases. Ikarians certainly have a lot to teach us about longevity!

Sardinia, Italy

Located in the Mediterranean Sea, Sardinia is home to the first identified blue zone. It’s located in the Barbagia region, which comprises the mountainous highlands in the island’s interior. Furthermore, Sardinia’s Ogliastra Region is home to the world’s oldest men, many of whom still work in fields and vineyards.

Sardinians are very close to their food – as they still hunt, fish, and harvest the meals that end up on their dinner plates. What makes Sardinia a bit different from the other blue zones is the importance of dairy (particularly cheese in their diet). However, it’s important to note that most of their dairy products come from sheep and goat’s milk rather than cows.

The people of Sardinia have a strong focus on family values, assuring that every member of the family (including elders) are taken care of. Scientific research has proven that strong family ties leads to [lower rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicide](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2752557). In addition, Sardinians are known for their “sardonic” sense of humor. Laughter is another great way to reduce stress.

Because of their lifestyle, Sardinians enjoys low rates of diabetes, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

Nicoya, Costa Rica

Located on the Guanacaste Peninsula in northwestern Costa Rica, Nicoya is a rural, beachside, blue-zone community. Most residents here live to be over the age of 90 and there’s a high number of centenarians as well.

Nicoyans attribute much of their longevity to social values of faith and family. They also have a plan de vida (“reason to live”) mindset that keeps them active late into their lives. These people consume practically no processed foods, instead eating local fruits and beans. They also benefit from water rich in magnesium and calcium, warding off disease and strengthening bones. Add to that the year-round sun exposure, and it’s no wonder Nicoya, Costa Rica is a top blue zone.

Loma Linda, California

Situated in [Southern California](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/best-airbnbs-in-southern-california/), Loma Linda is the only blue zone in the US. It’s a Seventh-day Adventist community that follows a religious lifestyle.

Their blue zone diet consists of vegetarian foods such as vegetables and nuts, and no alcohol or smoking. They also place an emphasis on community. Volunteering and other pro-social practices help to improve and prolong their health.

How do people in blue zones live so long? Diet, exercise, lifestyle + more!

How do these populations spread so far across the globe boast the oldest and healthiest people in the world? The [Danish Twin Study](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8786073/), which examined the heritability of human longevity, demonstrated that only about 20% of longevity comes from genetics. This means that the remaining 80%, which includes lifestyle and environmental factors, has a much bigger impact on longevity than genes.

Each of these blue zone locations shares some common qualities. This includes their diet, exercise, faith, and social structures.

Why are Blue Zones Important?

So, what’s the point in studying the world’s longest-lived communities? When Dan Buettner began the journey that led to the discovery of the world’s Blue Zones, he was looking to unlock the secrets of longevity. And that he did!

Buettner and his team found striking similarities in these blue zone communities around the globe. They studied each community in depth and consolidated the most important lessons from the Blue Zones.

After analyzing the blue zones and discovering their most important secrets, Buettner and National Geographic publicized their findings. The Blue Zones concept spread like wildfire – the first book covering them hit the top of the New York Times Bestseller’s List (and many others). People were talking about Blue Zones everywhere, from Oprah Winfrey to Anderson Cooper.

Everyday people took the idea and ran with it, and many people changed their lifestyles to promote Blue Zones practices. The findings were also well-received in scientific fields, and have become a cornerstone of research regarding health and longevity.

What can we learn from Blue Zone diets and cultures?

Let’s be clear – you don’t have to pack up and move to your nearest Blue Zone right now. First of all, many of the benefits shown from these communities start at birth with immediate integration. But more importantly, you don’t need to! You can use lessons about the Blue Zone diet, culture, and more to live longer.

1. Easy blue zone habit: Incorporate more movement into daily life

To become your healthiest self, you don’t need to run marathons, Iron Mans, or Spartan Races. Don’t worry gym rats, you don’t have to stop pumping iron to stay healthy. But if you’re struggling with exercise or physical training, consider adopting more of a Blue Zones lifestyle.

Instead of working out for an hour a day, try to stay active throughout the day. Instead of always taking the elevator, walk up the stairs instead. Take up gardening, walk to work, or take frequent breaks from the computer to get up and walk around. Getting up on your feet more often will help you stay calm and more centered. It will also help you extend your life.

2. Finding purpose in everyday life

You don’t need a Japanese or Spanish mantra to get you out of bed in the morning. Take a moment to think about some of the things that you are grateful for and excited about in your life. What aspects of life are you most passionate about and inspired by? Make it a daily ritual to go over them every day. I regularly practice journaling and writing down goals and dreams for the future. This simple exercise will have a profound effect on your mental health, and incorporating it into your life will improve your physical wellbeing as well.

3. Find ways to relieve stress

Even the healthiest people in Blue Zones experience daily stress – so don’t expect a change in diet or exercise routine to erase all your worries. Instead, work on healthy ways to cope with and reduce this stress. Each of the blue zones has different ways of doing this, so do whatever works for you!

Try taking a nap, a break from work, praying, or anything else you can think of. Some of my favorite stress-reduction techniques include [cold immersion and ice baths](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/cold-water-immersion-benefits/), [barefoot grounding in nature](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/benefits-of-grounding/). Even gentle stretching and conscious breathing throughout the day can make a huge difference.

4. Eat less if you want to fly

One of the best blue zone diet tips: pay attention to how much you eat (and when). Being mindful about your consumption can reduce overeating, and promote a healthier relationship with food. Healthy eating habits will improve your quality of life in the short term and add years to your life in the long run. Remember the Okinawan’s 80% rule? Try to refrain from eating when you’re 80% full.

5. Eating more plant-based foods

Across each of the different blue zones, people mainly stick to plant-based diets. This can have great effects on your health and well-being. Beans, fruits, and vegetables are a staple in blue zones diets, so definitely consider adding a little bit more color to your culinary palette.

6. Spirituality is way more important than people realize

The concept of “surrendering” and praying to a higher power has tremendous psychological benefits. When you consider your life, think about any religious or spiritual influences you may have. Introducing spirituality and faith into your weekly routine can quite literally add years to your life. Consider looking for a faith-based community with similar values to you, made up of like-minded people.

7. As the people in blue zones believe: All you need is love

In modern life, we tend to over-focus on negative emotions like fear, guilt, shame, and anger. But what if we brought more love and passion into our lives, especially with our families?

As blue zones tell us – one of the best things you can do for your health is to spend more time with family. Nurturing relationships with your children or parents may not appeal to all, but it’s certainly worthwhile. Fostering more love in the family unit will improve the physical and mental health of everyone involved.

Family structures in the United States tend to be a bit different than places like Okinawa – so don’t worry, your in-laws don’t have to move in with you just yet. Instead, focus on strengthening relationships even from afar. With so many [digital apps](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/best-travel-apps-for-iphone-android/) and [resources](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/travel-resources/) at our disposal, it’s never been easier to keep in touch than in the 21st century!

8. Find your tribe

If COVID has taught us anything, it’s that humans are social creatures that crave deep and meaningful friendships. It’s totally okay if you haven’t been tied to four close friends since you were in diapers – not everyone can do it like the Okinawans. But let this serve as a reminder to revisit some of your close friendships and build upon them.

Forming strong social networks with friends is a great way to support each other. Surround yourself with friends who promote healthy habits and provide emotional support, and do your best to do the same for them!

Do these lessons actually work? Implementing the Blue Zones diet and lifestyle in other places

Skeptical about these blue zone habits? Check out the story of Albert Lea, Minnesota. By implementing changes inspired by the Blue Zones, this rural community was able to totally transform the health of its economy and people.

Applying the Blue Zones diet and lifestyle in Albert Lea, MN

When Dan Buettner studied Blue Zones and their diets and cultures, he wanted to put his findings in action. He decided to work with a town in the United States, and try his best to turn it into a sort of Blue Zones replica. This vision included partnering with town officials and public health campaigns in order to apply the lessons he learned from the 5 original Blue Zones. After Buettner and his team talked to a few candidates, they settled on the town of Albert Lea in [Southern Minnesota](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/cabin-rentals-in-minnesota/).

And so Albert Lea became the pilot of the [Blue Zones Project](https://info.bluezonesproject.com/home). First, Buettner and his team talked to local authorities and organizations about the problems facing the town. The city was recovering from an economic crisis, and its citizens smoked more than they exercised. It was ranked among the unhealthiest and unhappiest communities in Minnesota, and the [Blue Zones Project](https://albertlea.bluezonesproject.com/) was determined to change that. With an ambitious and expansive plan in mind, they got to work.

What did they do?

To encourage exercise, the town created a pedestrian walking path around their lake. They also improved their network of sidewalks in town, so that residents could easily walk anywhere they needed to. In addition, they added more spaces for outdoor dining and common spaces like parks were renovated to promote community gatherings as well.

To make this blue zone community project possible, local establishments pitched in. All of the town’s restaurants offered plant-based meal options, and began to offer fruit instead of fries. They encouraged customers to choose healthier alternatives to their regular orders. Grocery stores and schools did the same, replacing candy and sweets with fruits and other healthy snacks.

What were the results? How did these Blue Zone ideas benefit Albert Lea?

The statistics from this project are shocking and impressive. Within just a year and a half of the projects’s inception, the community saw a 3.2 year increase in life expectancy. Its residents contributed to this by losing over 7,000 pounds combined! In addition, the smoking rate dropped dramatically to below 15%. It’s important to note that the impact of this project goes beyond physical health – the change also positively affected the local economy.

Due to the improvements in health and quality of life, healthcare costs dropped in Albert Lea by a remarkable 40%. Increased productivity of locals caused the economy to flourish, pulling it out of an economic crisis. For the first time in years, businesses relocated to the town center, and property value increased by a staggering 25%.

By looking at this blue zone town as a blueprint, it’s clear that adopting the diet and lifestyles of Blue Zones can significantly increase quality and length of life. If implementing some of these lessons into a rural Minnesotan town can have such striking results in such a short time, imagine how you can change your own life!

Other Blue Zones Projects

Inspired by these findings? You aren’t the only one. In fact, the Blue Zones Project spread to many other cities [across the US](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/best-hidden-vacation-spots-in-us/). The project is now working in 27 cities in states including [California](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/lake-houses-for-rent-in-california/), [Texas](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/lake-house-rentals-in-texas/), [Iowa](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/cabins-for-rent-in-iowa/), and [Hawaii](https://www.myglobalviewpoint.com/hawaii-house-rentals/). All of these projects have seen similar results to the Albert Lea pilot, reporting increases in healthy living and economic activity.

Now what – where do I start with zone blue?

Excited to begin changing your life? It’s easy to implement some of these Blue Zones ideals into your day-to-day life. However, it might be a little tricky to figure out where to start. I recommend asking yourself these questions and then following the framework above to take incremental action towards your goals:

Movement/Exercise:

How can I naturally add more physical exercise/movement to my day?

Are there any hobbies or activities do I enjoy that involve movement? Is there more space in my weekly schedule to do them?

Purpose in life:

What makes me feel most alive, passionate, and inspired about?

What topic or issue gets me fired up and makes me want to take action?

How can I make it a daily practice to help others more?

Rest & Relaxation

What activities or hobbies help me settle down my mind?

What daily habits or rituals can I add to my daily routine to make me feel more relaxed and at ease?

Eating better is a cornerstone of blue zones

How often do I eat? Do I eat when I’m hungry or do I eat when I’m bored?

How much processed food and sugar do I eat on a daily basis? How do I feel in the hours after eating them?

Do I routinely eat a lot of fruit and vegetables? Is there any way I can naturally incorporate more healthy foods into my diet?

Social connectedness

How connected am I to family and friends? What can I do to strengthen these relationships?

Do I have any weekly social activities or engagements that I’m a part of? If not, what local groups or organizations interest me?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how spiritually connected am I? What is my level of faith in my own abilities and a higher power? Are there any faith-based groups that I could spend an hour a week being a part of?

Conclusion on Bluezone health and longevity

I hope you’ve enjoyed this piece on blue zones, and you’re excited to take home some of these lessons to improve your life! By implementing some of these habits and lifestyle changes into your daily routine, you will see dramatic effects on your mental, physical, and emotional health. If you’re looking for even more information on Blue Zones diets and health benefits, check out the [official blue zones website](http://bluezones.com/)!