

Condé Nast Traveler

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

MARCH 2025

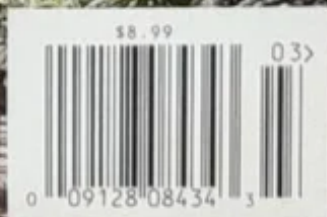
NEW ORLEANS

20 Years After Katrina



Offseason in **LAKE COMO**
China's **YUNNAN PROVINCE**
BYRON BAY Grows Up

and WELLNESS VACATIONS FOR A FULLER LIFE



BLUE ORIGIN

At a retreat on Costa Rica's Papagayo Peninsula, one of the world's longevity hot spots, Maria Yagoda remembers the importance of living well

An aerial view of Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort in Guanacaste Province, on Costa Rica's northwest coast

I WAS FLOATING in the private plunge pool of my villa, embedded in a lush slope of Costa Rican jungle overlooking a bay. The entire scene was animated by butterflies, birdsong, and monkeys rustling in the treetops. *Take it all in*, I reminded myself, then reflexively grabbed my phone to check the weather app before placing it back on the towel, scolding myself for my lapse in mindfulness. Moments later I did the same thing all over again.

This impulse, I rationalized, came from wanting to know how to best optimize every moment I spent at the serene tropical wonderland of Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort, which hosted the first official Blue Zones—sponsored retreat this past summer. It sits a stone's throw from the Nicoya Peninsula, an 80-mile stretch just south of the Nicaraguan border that is home to an unusually high concentration of centenarians, making it one of five geographic “blue zones” identified by the journalist Dan Buettner and a team of researchers as places where an exceptionally large percentage of residents live past the age of a hundred. I suspected that few of them were addicted to their weather apps.

Ever since getting diagnosed with advanced-stage Hodgkin lymphoma in early 2023, I've been glued to my phone, living in perpetual fear of test results but also of being alone with my thoughts. My body is not the same after cancer. Bulky IVs of high-dose chemotherapy pumped through my veins for nearly a year. Bouts of immobility, often in hospital beds, weakened the muscles I'd been dutifully strengthening over a lifetime of joyless exercise and healthy eating. My painstakingly balanced lifestyle hadn't delivered the benefits I was promised: lasting health and wellness. I controlled everything a person can control and still hadn't been able to outsmart cancer, rendering pointless thousands of tedious salads. Could a Blue Zones retreat offer me the tools to reconnect to my body after I'd spent months learning how powerless I was to control it? Could it help a person who has already entered that state everyone works so hard to avoid—chronic sickness—and is thus already disqualified from the possibility of achieving centenarian status? I wanted to try it, because this stretch of Costa Rica seemed like a tranquil backdrop for relearning how to live well.

The concept of blue zones originated from the work of demographers Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain, who in 1999 identified Sardinia's Nuoro Province as having the highest concentration of men living beyond 100 years old. Buettner zeroed in on other longevity hubs as well as the lifestyle principles they had in common, which he calls the Power 9. These include moving naturally, eating until you're only 80 percent full, having a sense of purpose, and “downshifting” after work or stressful events. Oh, and lots of beans.

Since the release of the popular 2023 Netflix documentary *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*, wellness tourism to blue zones has

WOMEN IN FOCUS

Menopause was last year's biggest wellness topic, as spas added treatments targeting this life phase. Now they've finally begun addressing other concerns, from postpartum health to endometriosis. At Bvlgari Hotel Tokyo, a bespoke therapy balances hormonal cycles, while Ananda in the Himalayas has launched fertility-enhancement programming.

exploded, making it one of the biggest travel trends of last year. So the organization Blue Zones, founded by Buettner in 2008, brought in the health coach Céline Vadam to help design retreats in longevity hot spots, which, in addition to Nicoya and Nuoro, include Okinawa, Japan; Ikaria, Greece; and Loma Linda, California.

My dreamy week at the Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort, which included Reiki and sound healing, was the first official Blue Zones retreat. Vadam, a bubbly French woman who founded the wellness consultancy We(i) Think and the health coaching brand Retrouv'l, planned intimate hour-long workshops on topics such as happiness and purpose, focusing specifically on the healthy attributes identified in this Costa Rican blue zone—like a cultural emphasis on social interactions and family ties.

As Vadam explained to me, Blue Zones the company isn't selling an individualized view of health; the whole point of Buettner's research is that our environments have an outsize impact on our well-being. If you live an hour from a store selling fresh fruits and vegetables, of course your diet will never amount to that of a Sardinian goat herder. As someone who works hard not to blame herself for her cancer and chronic illness, I was pleased to hear that the organization works with more than 75 cities in the US to help make people's environments healthier, rather than scold them for their bad choices. One of its community assessments is walkability, which determines how well a city enables families and disabled people to stay active in their environment. “We also work with companies on how to have healthy options in their cafeterias,” Vadam told me. “We work with restaurants on portions. We work with supermarkets to make sure that the healthy vegetables are in a more prominent place than the chocolate bars. We organize walking groups.”

Retreats, by definition, are more individually oriented. Before my first session, over a breakfast of fresh fruit and excellent local coffee, I took the Blue Zones online “vitality test” to determine my life expectancy. It asked questions about my diet and exercise →



habits, but also how many days out of 30 I was sad, and whether I'd had any major illnesses, like cancer. At the end, my life expectancy flashed on the screen: 50.3. There was an option to click on a button that said, "Add 37.2 more years." I laughed. My first 30-something years hadn't been so fab: Was tacking on three more decades really so desirable?

At the introductory workshop in one of the property's opulent two-story suites, with sweeping vistas of the bay, Vadam had our group of six examine a wheel of the Power 9 principles. She asked us to identify how we felt we were faring on each, drawing a dot either close to the circumference (great) or close to the center (bad), and then connecting all the dots. If you felt you were excelling in every area, from 80% Rule (the fullness goal) to Loved Ones First (maintaining family connections), your dots would connect to a perfect circle; if you felt good about just a few, your shape would have a zigzaggy perimeter.

My shape was a chunky star, with four main points indicating my strong suits: Plant Slant (all those salads), Right Tribe (my social circle), Move Naturally (engaging in regular physical activity outside the gym), and Downshift (being able to unwind). I felt satisfied to see I was doing well in those areas, which almost compensated for the Purpose dot at the center of the circle; I essentially gave myself a zero. I reflected on how many hours a day I watch *90 Day Fiancé*, and I challenged myself to consume slightly less in favor of activities that are more aligned with my values, like hanging out with my dog. I felt a sense of progress.

"Wellness programs today are very exclusive, while Blue Zones principles are inclusive," said Vadam. "They are strong enough to make an impact but flexible enough to ask, 'How does it move into your life?'" I leaned into that flexibility, because there were certain lifestyle suggestions I knew were not for me. For example, I would never want to live a life in which I ate until I was only 80 percent full. I feel strongly that anyone who has endured chemotherapy deserves to enjoy exactly as much food they want to.



From left: Grilled sea bass tacos topped with avocado at Andaz Peninsula Papagayo Resort; the resort's Onda Spa blends into the lush surroundings

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDAZ PENINSULA PAPAGAYO RESORT, COSTA RICA

I was happy to start eating more beans, but Dan Buettner would have to pull the Cheez-Its from my cold dead hands. On the topic of movement, I've learned that the amount I do or don't exercise should be dictated by how my body is feeling, which changes on a day-to-day basis. While I wish I could make a pledge about walking more to pick up groceries, instead of getting them delivered, I know that's not realistic.

In the session on happiness, Vadam went over the three p's vital to emotional well-being—pleasure, purpose, and pride—and asked us to consider how our environments impact our happiness. I reflected on the heaps of unnecessary stuff in my apartment and the fact that I rarely see grass. I scribbled "bad" in my notebook. As soon as I started to feel deficient, I was reassured to be among a small group of people who also had trouble accessing happiness on a

daily basis. The workshop helped to alleviate some of the shame we can feel for living our lives wrong, or not well enough, because no beings on Earth, save perhaps the monkeys in the treetops, have it all figured out.

When it comes to medical advice for my illness, I have ears only for my team of doctors, nutritionists, and surgeons. Unfortunately, no amount of beans or good vibes can stave off a recurrence of my cancer. But I thought about the little things that actually are in my control: being more intentional about scheduling time with friends, carving out more of my day to decompress, and pursuing activities that fill me with a sense of purpose. Strolling to dinner on my last night, I chose to release the "living long" tenet of Blue Zones philosophy and to embrace the "living well" part. Rather than instill a specific doctrine, the retreat reminded me of what I liked

about life, such as the sense of wonder I get when I travel and the feeling of being surrounded by natural beauty.

These little shifts in perspective, of course, were easier to come by at a luxurious eco-resort with a great spa, awe-inspiring biodiversity, and exceptional restaurants committed to local sourcing. At Chao Pescado, the hip pan-Latin tapas bar, I ordered some blue-zones-inspired dishes made with indigenous ingredients. Between sips of a gorgeous nonalcoholic margarita, I dove into a plate of seared local mahi-mahi, garnished with culantro (an herb in the same family as cilantro) and crispy pejibaye, the sweet and nutty fruit of regional peach palm trees. For dessert, I sank into a slice of dense cake made of native purple corn, topped with a floral honey ice cream. For maybe the first time, I wanted to live forever.

NEW & NEXT

LAYAN LIFE BY ANANTARA, THAILAND

This 19,020-square-foot wellness retreat within the beloved Anantara Layan Phuket Resort marries modern technology, like 3D body scans, with ancient Thai healing traditions. Layan Life offers bespoke programs, built by a team of medical doctors and practitioners, that run between 3 and 10 days, incorporating nutrition, guided fitness, and epigenetic testing. *Open now*

MIRAVAL THE RED SEA, SAUDI ARABIA

One of the foremost wellness brands in the United States will celebrate its 30th anniversary by opening its first international location on Shura Island. It will include a wellness center with four yoga studios overlooking the water and a 39-room spa offering Watsu treatments and salt rooms. *Opening late 2025*

AMAN ROSA ALPINA, ITALY

When one of the most prestigious names in luxury hospitality partners with a beloved property in the Dolomites, it's big news. Planned improvements include doubling the size of the spa, incorporating an outdoor pool and hot tubs, and rolling out holistic treatments geared toward active ski-bunny guests. *Opening 2025*