

THE BLUE ZONE BUZZ

Longevity travel is the buzzword of the moment. This surging trend has seen people searching for ways to help extend their lifespan, looking to the Blue Zone countries for guidance

WORDS: SAMANTHA LEWIS

Huge value is placed on spending time in nature on Okinawa

IMAGE: GETTY

Longevity travel is one of the biggest trends of the year, as people worldwide become ever more fascinated with living a longer, fuller life. Many are spending significant sums, investing in state-of-the-art tests and biohacking treatments that claim to help you extend your lifespan. But what if you could live to 100 and still enjoy good health without the intervention of science or tech?

Deep in the south of Japan, miles away from the mainland, lies the subtropical island of Okinawa. A slow-paced paradise hugged by pristine beaches, it's home to a community of islanders that can teach us a thing or two about living well. Okinawa is one of the five original 'Blue Zone' destinations, a handful of places where people live the longest and healthiest lives. The others are the tiny Aegean Island of Ikaria, the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, the Southern Californian community of Loma Linda and Sardinia's mountainous eastern provinces.

Researchers Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain were the first people to suggest the idea of a Blue Zone, but it was Dan Buettner, a National Geographic explorer, who took the concept forward in the early 2000s. Conducting years of research into these areas, Dan found that there's no single answer for longevity; rather, it's influenced by several lifestyle factors, all of which combine in the five Blue Zones.

He observed that in these places, people don't necessarily spend money on gym memberships and superfood smoothies. Rather, they move their bodies naturally, regularly participating in low-intensity activities such as walking and gardening and eating seasonal, plant-based foods. Crucial, too, is prioritising time with friends and family, making sure to sit back, relax and enjoy life — and even enjoy a glass of wine or two.

It's an inspiring combination, and one that led Dan to work alongside wellness expert Céline Vadam in creating several health retreats across the globe, from Costa Rica to Thailand. These world-class wellness centres teach travellers about the Blue Zone lifestyle, encouraging them to slow down, focus on their health and swap old habits for new ones.

"The retreats show guests that having a healthy, longevity-driven lifestyle doesn't have to be complicated, expensive or difficult to set up or integrate," says Céline. "No matter our current situation and environment, there are things that we can do to help improve our overall wellbeing."

Each retreat reflects the culture of the host location, and guests are thrown into a variety of educational workshops and cooking classes, as well as movement and mindfulness sessions. This combines with visits to local villages, where travellers can witness life in the Blue Zones first hand, interacting with people to whom living well comes as naturally as breathing.

Céline has recently hosted the organisation's first retreat of the year, at the beachside resort of Andaz Costa Rica on the Papagayo Peninsula. While there, visitors participated in extensive discussions on ways to improve health and happiness, such as nurturing relationships and making friends as adults, as well as breathwork ceremonies and slow forest strolls. This sojourn will soon be followed by a retreat in Koh Samui in May and another in Okinawa in October.

As well as gathering Blue Zone wisdom, the retreats are a great chance to connect with like-minded people and inspire each other, says Céline. "I love watching attendees open up and grow a little more each day," she adds.



Learn from the locals

Retreats aside, travellers can curate their own explorative trips to the Blue Zone regions. Incorporating a few days in Okinawa while adventuring around Japan, for example, will reveal a place where people are not only living long lives, but where rates of chronic illnesses like heart disease and dementia are impressively low.

Diet plays a huge role in the longevity of its residents. Most meals in Okinawa are made up largely of vegetables, with one in particular — the *beni imo* (Okinawan purple sweet potato) — playing a starring role. This unassuming vegetable is packed with powerful antioxidants called anthocyanins, which give it its vibrant colour. And it’s readily available on the island.

“You’ll find purple coloured everything in Okinawa. Those potatoes are put in stews, in desserts, in ice creams,” says Jo Davey, who wrote Bradt’s guidebook to *Okinawa & Japan’s Southwest Islands* and has travelled the area in depth. She adds that her favourite way to consume it is in *sata andagi* (traditional Okinawan doughnut), which can be made with *beni imo* puree.

Visitors should be prepared to walk when they’re on the island. “It’s sunny a lot of the time so you want to spend time outside,” says Jo, “and the rail system isn’t extensive, so people are reliant on their own two feet rather than public transport.”

You may also experience the impressive social support system. Known locally as *moai*, these are essentially small groups of individuals who share commonalities, hobbies or experiences. They form the backbone of Okinawan life, contributing to a widespread sense of fulfilment and camaraderie, and leading in turn to longevity.

Closer to home, another option for a Blue Zone trip takes travellers to the Greek island of Ikaria. Located in the eastern Aegean, about 30 miles off the coast of Turkey, its 8,500 or so residents have some of the longest life expectancies in the world. In fact, it’s said one in three Ikarians live past 90.

Here, you’ll have a chance to disconnect and embrace a slow, mindful pace of life. You’ll likely notice that most Ikarians don’t wear watches and have a unique relationship with time. “We don’t stress,” says Thea Pakiros, who runs a bed and breakfast on the island in the village of Nas. “Live in the moment — that’s the most important thing.”

Just like in Okinawa, diet is key to Ikarians’ successful living. Food on the island is almost always locally grown, foraged and fresh, and most locals have their own gardens with fruits, vegetables and herbs. Many also make their own wine, which is consumed in moderation. “A glass or two never hurt anyone,” says Thea, adding: “We enjoy our wine, but we tend to drink it with food or with company rather than in bars or at home alone.”

Ikarians also have a strong sense of community that in turn fosters social connections and support networks. “We help each other out,” explains Thea. “If there’s a family in trouble, there’ll always be fundraisers and parties to raise money.” She notes that it’s hard to feel lonely on an island where everyone looks out for each other.

If we take one thing away from the Blue Zones, it’s that the secret to longevity may be easier than we think. “Don’t try to change your behaviour, change your ecosystem,” advises Dan. “Eat plant-based foods, travel by foot, prioritise a good night’s sleep, keep your mind engaged and, above all, make time for yourself.” By incorporating these things into our lives, it might just be possible for us all to reap the benefits of Blue Zone living, wherever we are. ▢



IMAGES: GETTY; KAMALAYA KOH SAMUI; ALAMY

One to watch In 2023, Dan Buettner hosted a Netflix docuseries, *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*. Travel to each of the locations with Dan to take inspiration for your next health-focused adventure



THREE MORE
LONGEVITY
RETREATS

1 Kamalaya, Thailand
This six-night retreat has been created in partnership with the official Blue Zones organisation. Taking place at Kamalaya, on Koh Samui’s south coast, guests will delve into the Blue Zone principles through workshops and interactive sessions. The schedule also includes yoga, ayurvedic spa treatments and more. 10-16 May 2025, £4,992 (excluding accommodation and flights). kamalaya.com

2 Bluceira, Portugal
Inspired by the Blue Zones, this retreat is for individuals who want to unlock the secrets to ageing well. The goal is to develop healthy habits over three weeks that you can continue at home. Days include some form of movement, delicious food and time to explore your base — the pretty fishing town of Ericeira. Various dates, from £4,828 for a double room (excluding flights). bluceira.com

3 Brain Health Kitchen Retreats, Italy
Physician, chef and author Dr Annie Fenn leads this eight-day tour of Sardinia, one of the original Blue Zones. Guests will visit remote villages, meet with centenarians and taste traditional Sardinian cuisine. Daily hikes, e-bike rides and beachside yoga sessions are also on the agenda, as is a visit to a local winery. 18-25 May 2025, £6,222 for a double room (excluding flights). brainhealthkitchen.com

Clockwise from top left: Sardinia was one of the original Blue Zones; at Kamalaya, guests will discover Blue Zone principles through workshops; on Ikaria, one in three locals are said to live to 100; meals are predominantly made up of vegetables on Okinawa