

24 April 2008

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107-year-old Japanese Nisaburo Senba plays the piano as his 100-year-old wife Yae listens in a wheelchair. In 2005, they made the world's oldest couple. MSNBC

[World's Hot Spots of Longevity](#)

What's the secret behind a long life?

At the moment, the American life expectancy is of 77.8 years, but the number is expected to plummet due to the current obesity pandemics. However, there are zones on our planet where people live like in fairy tales, holding the secret of eternal youth. Dan Buettner has been tracking down world's centenarian hot spots ("blue zones") for several years, and the results of his investigations are found in the book "The Blue Zone: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest", as reported by National Geographic. Several basic factors have started to emerge as being behind a long lifespan: a plant-based diet; regular, low-intensity activity; an investment in family; a sense of faith; and purpose. "Nowhere is a strong sense of purpose more acute than in Japan, where the concept has its own name: ikigai. You see it over and over again: People who are living a long time have a reason to get up in the morning," said Buettner. As of now, only 75 people (64 women and 11 men) are recorded to be 110 or older. Japan holds the world record for average longevity, with about 28,000 persons aged over 100. Japan possesses one of the longest average life spans, 85.3 years for women and 78.3 for men. The world's oldest man is also Japanese, Tomoji Tanabe, and is 111 years old. Okinawa Island is famous for the longest disability-free life expectancy in the world. Other "blue zones" are Sardinia (Italy) with the highest concentration of centenarians (mainly men) and the community of Seventh Day Adventists of Loma Linda in California, whose men live 11 years longer than the average American men do. Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica is another "blue zone" of healthy centenarians, where people live in a solid support network of friends and family. "We know that people who make it to a hundred tend to be nice. They... drink from the fountain of life by being likable and drawing people to them. Nicoya Peninsula has the lowest middle-age mortality in the world. A 60-year-old in Costa Rica has more than a fourfold better chance of making it to 90 than a 60-year-old in America. They spend 20% the amount we do on public health, but they spend it in the right places," said Buettner. The study made by Buettner neglected factors like infant mortality, which can decrease life expectancy in some areas. Genes make just 6 and 25% of how long we live, but the way we can control the rest is still a matter of research. "Set up your life, your home environment, your social environment, and your workplace so that you're constantly nudged into behaviors that favor longevity," advised Buettner, pointing to low calories diets and a more veggie lifestyle. "You look in the blue zone in Okinawa, these people are consistently eating off of small plates. One of the cues for fullness is an empty plate, so stock your cupboard with smaller plates. The research is really quite overwhelming in showing the longevity and health benefits in reconnecting with your religion... and investing in your family," he added. More "blue zones" are awaiting to be discovered, he stressed. "There may be one in Canada. If confirmed, this blue zone probably has the lowest middle-age mortality in the world - beating out even the Nicoya Peninsula," said Buettner. A team from the New England Centenarian Study at Boston University has gathered DNA information from about 100 supercentenarians (people who live to 110 and beyond), in the search of longevity-enabling genes. "The key to a long life is now believed to be a mix of genetics and environmental factors such as health habits. Our research on about 1,500 centenarians suggests another factor that may protect people from illnesses such as heart attacks and stroke - they don't seem to dwell on stressful events," said project director Dr. Tom Perls. **The Okinawa case** The heaven of longevity is encountered in the Japanese island of Okinawa, which, besides holding the record for longevity and centenarians of the world, is the only place on the planet where 80-90 year-olds live like persons 30 years younger. Ancient Chinese legends already called

Okinawa "the land of the immortals". Thousands of people got to see it too, 7 years ago, when Seikichi Uehara, 96, defeated an ex box champ in his 30's. Or when Nabi Kinjo, 105, killed a poisonous snake with a flyswatter... It is here that you see 100 year-old persons that are not even thinking about retirement. On Okinawa, there are 457 persons aged 100 or over, an average of 35 for each 100,000 inhabitants. It is the highest rate in the world. The Okinawa inhabitants reach ages similar to the Japanese average: 86 for women and 78 for men. But the real shocking factor is not that Okinawa people reach these ages, but that they grow old in a much better state. The statistics reveal a significantly lower risk of heart attack and stroke, cancer, osteoporosis, Alzheimer... Even more, some Okinawans in their 90's can honestly vouch that they still have an active sex life (without Viagra). Decades of research show that there are two main factors behind the longevity on this island: alimentation and a healthy lifestyle that experts believe can be imitated. The aliments eaten by the Okinawans can be found everywhere, even if the soil of the island may also have a say in this. The traditional diet of Okinawa consists of portions made of a bowl of cooked food and a fruit. Okinawans eat seven portions of vegetables and fruits daily, seven of cereals and two of soy products. They take various portions of fish weekly and, very sporadically, meat and dairy products. Overall, their diet is low in calories and contains a lot of vegetables. Okinawa, the main island of a tropical chain of 160 coral islets called Ryukyu, has a volcanic soil, whipped by typhoons and torrential rains, and has ever known complete peace or steered away from epidemics. During the Second World War, it was the scene of a fierce and crucial battle. Today, the US military bases occupy 20% of its surface and the Okinawa Prefecture is the poorest province of Japan. With all that they have experienced, the elders of Okinawa have surprisingly low depression levels. You can see persons aged 90-100 on motorcycles or mountain bikes on the streets of Okinawa, and most of them practice karate, kendo, dancing, walk daily several kilometers, and even work on vegetable gardens and after that sell the products. But remember, these people do not go to fitness gyms (there is no such thing in Okinawa) nor do they practice jogging; they can, however, practice profound respiration, tai-chi, and gardening. or other activities in the open that positively influence the stress level. They are rather preoccupied by hobbies, but linked to a social network that makes them feel connected to the environment and their fellows, and helps develop their spiritual side. Physical activity is not isolated, but has an objective, making the elders feel active members of the community. Another factor in Okinawa is that people take care of each other, forming more coherent and supportive links than in the western world. Above all, they have a positive attitude towards life - that explains the extremely low levels of stress experienced by these elders. Of course, there a genetic factor may also be contributing to this vitality. During the XXth century, 100,000 Okinawans migrated to Brazil, where they adopted the Brazilian diet, rich in meat. The result was that their average lifespan lowered with 17 years. When the Okinawan youth started to go to American fast-foods and pizza bars, which surround the American bases, the obesity levels, cardiovascular diseases and premature deaths of the young reached record levels in Japan. Okinawa did not escape the trading trends either: in the center of the island, you can now find a big store with a big billboard reading, "Okinawa, the world capital of longevity," which also offers the ingredients of longevity: brown sugar "made of Okinawa cane", kombu, tofu and other products, all of them supposed to prolong your life...