

Italy

The secret of a long life? Ask a Sardinian...

Pork, red wine, mountain air and staying active are key, as Marianna Hunt found in the island's 'Blue Zone' towns with their many centenarians

Anna Mulas turned 100 this March. Two years ago, she was still ploughing the garden outside her house (her son Sergio shows me a video of his 98-year-old mother wielding a pickaxe with aplomb).

Anna is one of five centenarians in Seulo, Sardinia – a town of just 800 or so inhabitants. Last week, I am told, there were seven. From 1996 to 2016, Seulo had 20 residents aged 100 or more – a world record, locals claimed, for the most centenarians per capita.

Several towns in the area dispute this, each vying for the crown. All form part of Sardinia's "Blue Zone" – one of five such areas around the world where scientists have found that people live an unusually long time. This cluster of villages in the spiky mountains of Nuoro province has around 10 times more centenarians per capita than either the United States or Britain, according to the Blue Zones Institute, which identifies and researches these regions.

For the towns, longevity has become something of a calling card. In Seulo, portraits of deceased centenarians adorn the stone walls of the homes they once lived in – with captions detailing their stories and the secrets to their long lives. One reads: "Antonio Carta: Never smoked. Used to eat everything but never ate too much. Loved eggs with pork lard."

So, what's the secret? "It's a very natural way of life here," said Maria Paola Loi, a guide who works with luxury travel company Black Tomato to offer tours of the Blue Zone. "The traditional goat herder and shepherd lifestyle is still influential. Even the oldest residents have very active lifestyles." Luigi Carta, 99, who ran a tailor shop in Seulo, says: "Until last year I was still driving to my vineyard to look after my grapes and plant vegetables."

Diet is important too – namely vast quantities of pork. "The pigs roam free here and sometimes mate with wild

boar – so the meat is very high quality," Maria Paola says. Add the local crispy flat bread (*pane carasau*), plus lashings of pasta, and you have an anti-ageing feast to send Gwyneth Paltrow running.

There is no better celebration of the Sardinian diet than that laid out by Pasqua Salis, 84, at her Su Gologone hotel. Guests are invited to the "bread nest" – a terrace perched above a furnace where elderly ladies in traditional dress bake glutenous delights as you enjoy the sunset. A force of nature herself, Pasqua puts local life expectancy down to respect for the elderly, close neighbourly ties and a good glass of red wine.

One of the key threads linking the five Blue Zones is that they tend to be geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of the world. Traditional ways of living, eating and working are therefore more likely to be preserved.

As for the wine, there is science behind it. Cannonau di Sardegna, widely drunk in the Blue Zone, has two to three times the level of flavonoids as other wines. This has been shown to help maintain arteries and normal blood pressure, reducing the chance of heart disease. It is apt, then, that a traditional toast here is "A *kent'annos*" ("May you live to be 100 years old").

Aside from clues to a long life, the Nuoro region hides other treasures: the exquisite filigree workshops of Dorgali; the 150 murals on the streets of Orgosolo that narrate its history; and one of Europe's deepest canyons, Gola Su Gorropu, where golden eagles glide above 1,640ft-high limestone cliffs.

As life expectancies increase around the world, interest is growing in travel based around ageing well – and the industry is adapting to cater for this. In Sardinia, 7Pines, a new luxury resort on the Costa Smeralda, is offering excursions to the Blue Zone. They include a guided tour and tastings of local produce, with prices from £331 per person including food and transport.

You can do cooking workshops at the hotel too, where the chef initiates you

into the diet of the Blue Zone – with ingredients plucked from the surrounding sea and 15 hectares of gardens. Two pools and (soon to open) tennis courts

help guests embrace the active lifestyle.

Aside from Nuoro, Black Tomato has started offering "field trips" to some of the other Blue Zones around the world: Okinawa in Japan; the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica; Loma Linda in California; and the Greek island of Ikaria. In Okinawa, longevity retreats involve lessons in *ishoku dogen* (medicine and food coming from the same source) and martial arts sessions at a local dojo.

Wannabe Blue Zones are starting to form. In Puglia (not a designated zone), the Borgo Egnazia hotel offers longevity retreats certified by the Blue Zones Institute. Guests take part in "movement classes" (not just an extended game of adult Twister, apparently), cookery workshops and group socials.

Even if such activities don't appeal, there is hope. Research has shown that travelling itself can add years to your life. In 2018, the results of a 40-year study by the University of Helsinki revealed that people who take more time off work each year to go on holiday ultimately live longer. Now, that is a prescription I can happily embrace.

Where to see the Blue Zone effect

Okinawa, Japan

Once called "the land of the immortals", Okinawa is a chain of more than 150 islands between Japan and Taiwan – and its residents enjoy one of the longest life expectancies in the world.

The islands have about twice the number of centenarians per capita as the rest of Japan, according to the Okinawa Research Centre for Longevity Science. Okinawans are known for their plant and



soy-based diets and social networks – *moai* – that support them into old age

Nicoya, Costa Rica

Costa Rica regularly ranks as one of the happiest places on the planet – and its Nicoya Peninsula is home to many who make it to 100. A good sense of humour may hold the key, along with hearty breakfasts and light dinners. Join Nicoya's cowboys and roam the mountains on horseback (*below*), sharing their breakfasts of *gallo pinto* – rice and beans – and home-made tortillas

Ikaria, Greece

Located between Mykonos and Samos, Ikaria is often overlooked by travellers.

“People enjoy strong red wine, afternoon naps, late-night dominoes and a relaxed pace of life that ignores clocks,” said Dan Buettner, founder of the Blue Zones Institute.

The local diet is high in vegetables and olive oil but low in dairy produce (except goat's milk). Lie-ins are an integral part of the culture, so don't expect anything to get done on time



▼ Anna Mulas, 98, with her son Sergio

Source: The Daily Telegraph {Travel}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 13, August 2022
Page: 19
Area: 867 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 317817 Daily
Ad data: page rate £46,000.00, scc rate £214.00
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Keyword: www.blacktomato.co.uk



HOW TO DO IT

Getting there
EasyJet ([easyjet.com](https://www.easyjet.com)) flies to Olbia from London, Bristol and Manchester, with fares from £19 one-way

Where to stay
Black Tomato ([blacktomato.com](https://www.blacktomato.com)) offers a seven-night stay at Su Gologone and the 7Pines Resort from £4,100 per person B&B, including flights, car hire and the Blue Zone Field Trip

▲ 'The shepherd lifestyle is still influential here': Seulo in the south of the island

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