

Client: Borgo Egnazia
Source: SUITCASE
Date: 1 March 2020

Staying Alive

Learning the secrets of the world's longest-living people at the first-ever Blue Zones retreat in **Puglia**

Words by KATE WILLS
Photos by ALEX RORISON

Rocco is telling me about his grandmother. She's 94, drinks two litres of wine a day and still makes pizza the way she taught him, which he is now teaching me. Nearly everyone I meet in Puglia has a story about nonagenarian or centenarian grandparents. Here in the heel of Italy's boot, such longevity is not exceptional. Although not technically a Blue Zone – an area of the world where the population outlives the American and western European average by around a decade – it is nonetheless the location of the first-ever Blue Zones retreat. I've come here for a week of immersing myself in the traditions and rituals of the world's longest-living cultures, with the hope of taking some of their strategies for vitality back home.

Now that “wellness” tourism is a trillion-dollar market, nearly every hotel has some sort of feel-better offering. Nevertheless, the team at bespoke tour operator Carrier, who interview me about what I'm looking for beforehand, know that I want something that goes beyond the usual yoga class, green juice and spa treatment. Although I'm not interested in weight loss, hitting my mid-thirties has meant my metabolism isn't quite what it used to be. Age has made me think about my body in a different way – I'm not quite at the stage of life where I need my hands on my lower back when getting up off the sofa, but I do feel a tiredness and fragility that I've never had before. That said, a week of starvation or intense exercise isn't my bag, so the Blue Zones retreat at Borgo Egnazia sounds not only like a fascinating proposition – I've heard of the Blue Zones and their 100-year-old sprightly Sardinian shepherds before – but also a chance to learn some new ways of being that go beyond merely eating healthily while on holiday.

The other reason I'm keen to visit is that I've heard a lot about Borgo Egnazia – not only for its celebrity cache (Justin Timberlake got married here and the Beckhams come for family holidays), but also because it's a painstaking reconstruction of a traditional Puglian borgo (village) complete with a bell-towered

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church and cobbled piazza. When I arrive late at night it feels like stepping into a fairy tale. Most of the light comes from hundreds of flickering candles or roaring fireplaces. The staff wear long crimson capes. There are baskets of apples dotted about and large keys on the snow-white walls. I make my way past a giant tree made of paper scrolls and up a grand marble staircase to my room. It's easy to get lost here – everything is made from tufa, the white limestone characteristic of the region, and corridors seem to stretch for miles. Down at the piazza, it's as if I've stumbled into a postcard-perfect Italian village, the kind that should be filled with hordes of selfie-taking tourists – except there's nobody here. My overall impression is of Disneyland dolce vita meets 28 Days Later (although to be fair, it is shoulder season).

The photographer Alex and I have a day to explore the region before the retreat starts, so Carrier has organised a bike tour to get us in the right mindset. As we glide effortlessly through sun-dappled olive groves and fields of fennel and chard, the smell of fig and manure hangs in the air. Puglia is known as the breadbasket of Italy – farms and fishing villages still make up the bulk of its communities and the way of life remains resolutely slow-paced. Our guide, Memo, takes us past sedate-looking cows to Masseria Lamapocora, a small dairy farm which has been making cheese for centuries. We're ushered through plastic curtains to meet Omar. He stirs the milk and whey in vats of hot water until it becomes stretchy like chewing gum, then deftly shapes it into perfectly round balls of mozzarella. Although it's only 10am, a jug of wine and a plate of formaggio in its many forms – burrata, bocconcini, ricotta – is placed in front of us. Devouring both in the November sunshine feels like the epitome of la dolce vita.

The next morning I learn that life in Italy is not only sweet, but also long. It's where the first-ever Blue Zone was identified in Sardinia, a hotspot where people have longer and healthier lives than any other place on earth. The term was first coined by the Belgian demographer Michel Poulain in 2000. He began drawing blue circles on a map to mark the areas in which people live an exceptionally long time, referring to each as “the blue zone”. Journalist Dan Buettner investigated the concept for a National Geographic article in 2005, extending it to other areas of the world with a higher than usual life expectancy: Okinawa in Japan, the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, Ikaria in Greece and among the Seventh-day Adventists in Loma Linda, California. Buettner's article, which features centenarians water skiing and performing judo, made headlines around the world and went on to become not one but six books, later developing into a Blue Zones Institute and now branching into retreats.

“Diets and exercise don't work,” declares Jake Glover, a Washington DC-based health researcher who's leading our retreat on the first morning. It's a pretty unexpected start for a week of wellness, but he goes on to explain why. None of the longest-living people in the world go to the gym, but they do move around all day. If these people have found the magic elixir to a long and fulfilling life, then the Blue Zones Institute is all for packaging it up and selling it – even if it is a bit disconcerting that unique cultural traditions such as the Okinawan concept of a “moai” (a social support network which starts at age five) now have a big pound sign attached. >>>

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Our own little moai is here for all kinds of reasons. There are two Swedish women – an entrepreneur and a financier, one of whom reveals that she is in treatment for breast cancer. There's a British PR who is in-between jobs and a German journalist who interviews CEOs for a living. On our first day we learn about the “Power 9”, key strategies that all Blue Zones have in common. Some are obvious, such as to move naturally and eat with a “plant slant”. Others are more specific, such as eating until you're 80-per-cent full. The Okinawans even have a saying for this, “hara hachi bu”, which they repeat like a prayer every time they sit down to eat. Some strategies are more surprising – nearly every Blue Zoner drinks alcohol once a day. However, they drink it early and with friends, which is why we'll be having “wine at five” every evening. We watch videos of Dan Buettner in Blue Zones locations including Loma Linda, a Seventh-day Adventist community 60 miles from LA. Buettner meets a 105-year-old woman and asks her how it feels to have reached such an age. “Well, I feel a lot sexier at 105 than I did at 104,” she tells him.

Occasionally the workshops, which have a very American angle, veer into total sentimentality – “we all have a unique gift that we're put on Earth to share”, for example – but most are fascinating. We do a happiness quiz, in which we give ourselves a rating in columns for pride, pleasure or purpose depending on whether we meet certain criteria, whether that be owning a plant or having sex four times a week. We spend a long time thinking about what our purpose is, learning that Costa Ricans call it “pura vida” and Okinawans call it “ikigai”, which roughly translates as “that for which I get out of bed in the morning”. Jake tells us that those who can articulate a purpose live eight years longer.

Every day starts with stretching or yoga, and unlike the rushed sun salutations you often get in hotel yoga classes, this is a specialist, focused class in which straps and bricks are used to isolate movements and really feel our bodies – even if some moments are a bit lost in translation with our Italian teacher (“now your groin is quiet”). We spend every morning in our Blue Zones workshop, which regrettably takes place in a chilly library with the curtains drawn rather than out in the glorious Puglian sunshine. I'm pretty sure vitamin D must be a factor in longevity – all five of the Blue Zones are warm climates – and I'd suggest that in future they relocate these sessions to one of the resort's more inspiring outdoor areas. I have three heavenly spa treatments at the hotel's Roman bath-esque Vair Spa, where a vestal goddess in a floaty pink gown performs a facial massage that leaves my skin as plump as one of the hotel's many cushions. Should I now live to 100, I would still look at least 75 if I had these on a regular basis. ▶▶

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At lunch we have a cooking class, making orecchiette pasta, focaccia and pizza, which we then devour along with portions of salad to make up our “plant slant”. During these lessons I learn that Puglia has 50 varieties of tomato, including the regina, which hangs from the ceiling for months, sometimes years. I find out that taking basil leaves from the bottom of the plant can be toxic. I also learn that eating to only 80 per cent full can be very, very difficult.

In the afternoon we do a movement concept, such as a walk of trust (during which we lead each other blindfolded through the resort’s extensive gardens) or a bicycle ride to an olive-oil farm. At Masseria Maccheroni we meet Alessandro, who has been up all night pressing olives (they must be squeezed within 48 hours of being harvested) and is so enthused by his crop that at one point he actually exclaims “mamma mia!”. Each day Alessandro and his whole family take a tablespoon of olive oil for its medicinal properties. He gives us a tasting of his best extra virgin and encourages us to detect its notes of artichoke, grass, kiwi and apple. It’s spicy and bitter and I buy a bottle, wishing I had space in my suitcase to bring more home.

In our workshops we learn that a key ingredient to longevity is fostering social connections, so our evening entertainment is designed to do just that. One night we take part in a “Master of Laughter” workshop – part am-dram, part dancing and several parts silliness. For our last night we’re invited to join in with the band Terraross as it performs a tarantella, an ancient Apulian folk dance meant to evoke the hysterical movements used to get rid of the poison from a spider’s bite.

In white-and-red traditional costumes, this seven-piece troop of performers could seem cheesy, but its music is surprisingly powerful. It’s a sentiment that could apply to my whole time here – while at times the application of Blue Zones principles can veer towards the heavy-handed, the wisdom guiding them leaves me with a host of sustainable life strategies to take forward. Maybe it’s the rhythmic drumming of the tambourine, the cave-like atmosphere and the candlelight, but when it comes to movement as medicine? I’ve never felt more alive.

THE LOWDOWN

The next Blue Zones Retreat runs from 18 October 2020, with Carrier offering a seven-night stay at Borgo Egnazia from £6,230 per person based on single occupancy. This includes two nights in a Corte Bella room on a full-board basis plus the five-night Blue Zones Retreat package, which covers the full-board Blue Zones menu and activity plan of movement lessons, cooking classes, evening entertainment and spa treatment. Price also includes return flights from London Gatwick and private airport transfers

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