

lessons from a Blue Zone

A trip to Nicoya, Costa Rica, unveils healthful living habits.

By Danielle Douglass

When I booked a trip to Costa Rica last year, it didn't occur to me that I'd be staying on the Nicoya Peninsula. For me, this realization about one week before my departure in late June was huge. It was significant because Nicoya, which is an hour and a half drive inland from where I'd be staying in the coastal town of Playa Grande, is one of the world's five Blue Zones®.

Blue Zones are places in the world where people live to be 100 years old at a much higher rate than in the U.S. National Geographic Fellow and author Dan Buettner studied and researched these places. In his best-selling book, *The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*, Buettner reveals lifestyle similarities of the five places deemed Blue Zones. The places are spread across the world – Okinawa, Greece, California, Italy, and Costa Rica.

Coincidentally, the driver who took my friend Lisa and me from the Liberia Airport to Playa Grande knew all about Nicoya being a Blue Zone. Gustavo "Gus" Fonseca grew up in the region about 20 minutes away from the city of Nicoya.

About a week later on our last day in Costa Rica, we hired Gus to take us to Nicoya and show us the town. The day I spent talking with Gus and exploring Nicoya was eye opening, educational, and inspiring.

Here are some of the things I learned from Gus about why Nicoya is one of the world's Blue Zones.


1. The people in Nicoya are relaxed and not nearly as stressed as Americans. They take multiple breaks throughout their day to sit and relax or socialize with family and friends.
2. Nicoya's people eat mostly rice, beans, and fruits and vegetables, and eat meat



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only once a week. There's one fast food restaurant on the town's border, but I noticed only a handful of patrons.

3. Gas is very expensive in Costa Rica, so few people drive. Most residents use public transportation, ride bicycles, and walk.
4. There are numerous fresh fruit and vegetable markets. I visited a couple of them and was amazed at the variety of fresh produce available at reasonable prices. Patrons piled their carts full of nutritious items.
5. Many Costa Ricans work outdoors at physical jobs such as tending to crops and working on farms.

My day in Nicoya is something I'll never forget. It reminded me that there are lessons we can learn from different people and unfamiliar places. I'm incredibly lucky to have been able to see such a place and I look forward to visiting other Blue Zones. 

Want a more detailed account of what it's like in the Blue Zone of Nicoya, Costa Rica? Visit HMSA's health and well-being blog, Well-Being Hawaii, at wellbeinghi.com to learn more.