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The Greek island with the key to longevity

One third of Ikaria's population lives past the age of 90 - and they spend every day doing what they love.



By Marissa Tejada
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With thin, white hair pinned to the side and thick glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, Ioanna Proiou slid her wrinkled, sun-spotted fingers over the strands of baby-blue wool stretched across her heavy wooden loom. She clanked a lever forward on the handmade machine again and again, a technique she has perfected over 90 years.



Do something in your life that stirs your passion

With that loom, Proiou creates the woven bags and clothing she sells from her little shop in Christos Raches, a village of 300 residents on the Greek island of Ikaria, a nine-hour ferry ride across the Aegean Sea from Athens. As her arms moved in rhythmic fashion, the loom shaking slightly, the 105-year-old told me how much she still loves her job.

“Do something in your life that stirs your passion,” she advised me. “When my husband died decades ago, I continued doing what I love. Later, someone else proposed to me, but I said ‘no’. I am married to my loom.”



Centenarian Ionna Proiou continues to weave bags and clothes to sell in her shop (Credit: Marissa Tejada)

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Not far from where Proiou sells her wares, Christos Raches' main square is quiet and calm. Locals sip coffee in the shade of leafy plane trees and exchange pleasantries outside their terracotta roofed homes. Business owners open and close their doors on no set schedule. Many of the shops operate on an honour system: customers take what they please and leave money on the counter in return.

It's a fairly common scene on the Greek islands, but Ikaria is different: here, one third of the island's population lives to be more than 90 years old. Along with Sardinia in Italy, Nicoya in Costa Rica, Okinawa in Japan and Loma Linda in California, Ikaria is a **Blue Zone**, one of five designated places where people live the longest.

Experts often cite a healthy diet and an active lifestyle as key to a longer life. The medical professionals and anthropologists associated with the Blue Zone project also note the importance of close family ties and involvement in faith-based communities. Ikarians make an effort to stay closely connected to their families and neighbours, and the elderly play significant roles in the community. Grandparents often help raise

grandchildren or run businesses. But Proiou credits her longevity to her passion for weaving and her outlook on life. “Do not want more than what you really need. If you envy others, that can only give you stress,” she told me.



Medical professionals note the importance of Ikaria's family ties and faith-based communities (Credit: Marissa Tejada)

Retired doctor Christodoulos Xenakis has another theory about how Ikarians avoid unnecessary anxiety. We met briefly during my first hour on the island and we had agreed to meet again, though tracking him down wasn't easy.

“No-one really sets appointments here,” he shrugged when I greeted the 81 year old – who is considered a young man by Ikaria standards – a few days later in the village. Time is an important part of life on Ikaria, Xenakis explained, but not the way most people think. “It's more like ‘see you in the morning, afternoon or evening’. We don't stress.”

“

Ikarians spend their days with purpose

That's because, Xenakis said, Ikarians spend their days with purpose. He excitedly told me about his latest project organising the **Ikaria Senior Regatta**, a boat race for which the minimum qualifying age for captains is 70. Twenty participating crews sail a 14-nautical-mile route from neighbouring Samos island to Ikaria and back.

“It's not *really* a race,” Xenakis said. “The regatta shows we can still do it and we are capable.”

“There's always something to do with your time,” he added. “But when you do things that make you happy or others happy, how can you not feel healthy, feel better or feel good?”






One third of Ikaria, Greece's residents live to be more than 90 years old (Credit: Marissa Tejada)

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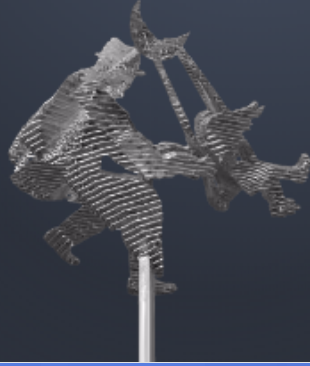


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