

The secret to Icelandic health and happiness

Icelandic police officer: “Would you care to explain why you have three sheep in your car?”

Me: “I rented the economy car so the fourth one wouldn’t fit.”

I spent 2 weeks in Iceland this summer. Not only was I looking forward to viewing that country’s untouched natural beauty (which we drove around and polluted with fossil fuels), but I was very curious to meet these remarkable islanders. Iceland consistently ranks high on worldwide health scales. According to the 2019 Bloomberg Global Health Index, Iceland is the world’s third-healthiest country. Canada ranks sixteenth. Iceland also rated fourth in the 2018 World Happiness report.

I began my study of these healthy, happy locals as I emerged jet lagged from Icelandic

Air flight one (maybe it was two). My first opportunity for evaluation was the car rental attendant who much to my surprise didn’t have blond hair or blue eyes. I gained his trust by smooth small talk.

“How will traffic be?”

“Shouldn’t be bad as many people are at the island festival.”

“So Icelandic people like festivals?”

“I wouldn’t know as I am Polish.” (Poles make up 3% of the population.)

Clearly, I would have to dig deeper.

After finding our bed-and-breakfast, which wasn’t easy as it is common to get directions in Iceland such as, “Our road isn’t on GPS so find the second gate past the two sheep,” I decided to do some research.

Perhaps, I thought, the secret to Icelanders’ health and happiness is the health care system. However, similar to our own system, in Iceland health care is a publicly funded and divided into health regions. They also have had problems with retention of physicians and other health professionals due to lower salaries than other Scandinavian countries—so I guess health care isn’t the reason for their happiness after all.

I thought, maybe the answer lies in Iceland’s natural wonders. Mountains, rivers, and waterfalls (which in Icelandic is a *foss*) are plentiful. I saw Dentalfoss, Permafoss, Candyfoss, Jackfoss, and more. But BC is beautiful as well—it even says so on our licence plates.

How about bad habits? Smoking rates in our two countries are similar, and when it comes to alcohol, Icelandic people are descended from Vikings so horns of ale abound. I decided the answer must lie in the local diet so I scanned in detail the first restaurant menu I was given—mostly lamb, fish, and cheese. Farther down the list I noticed I could order shark, whale, horse, and puffin. Other cultures consume the

first three, but cute little puffins? (By the way, it takes a few to make a meal.) Fruit and vegetables are rare, likely due to the fact they are hard to grow on cold volcanic rock. Icelandic people also love hotdogs, which don’t appear on any top 10 healthy lists. I had one, which was delicious mostly due to the crumbled Icelandic delicacy lining the bun—I think they are locally know as *Doritos*. So the mystery isn’t revealed in the diet.

Perhaps the people are in better physical condition. I did notice a lot of pools and gyms. They also love soccer (football) and 10% of the population accompanied their team to last year’s

World Cup. I haven’t heard of any famous Icelandic cyclists as their 90 km per hour paved roads don’t have shoulders, so they are probably all dead. But Canadians are a pretty fit bunch as we all play

hockey. (Well, I don’t, but the rest of you do.)

So maybe the answer was to be found in a couple of other interesting Icelandic facts. Iceland has the lowest population density of any European country at three people per square kilometre. Also, Icelandic couples often don’t get married—they just don’t see the need for it.

Perhaps the secret to health lies in the abundance of sheep, I next wondered. You can hike up a remote mountain, and around some corner sitting in a crevasse will be three sheep staring back at you. Apparently the farmers put them out in the late spring and round them up in the fall. They are all tagged to show which farm they are from, so the mischievous part of me wanted to pack a few of them in my car, drive them to the other end of the country, and release them there. The chance of being pulled over by police was slim; I saw only two officers (they don’t carry guns) during the whole trip and, you guessed it, it was at a bakery (donut shop). However, Canada also has a lot of sheep and even more cows, so I don’t think the answer lies in cloven hoofs.

So after 2 weeks of extensive scientific study I concluded the secret to health and happiness is this: don’t get married, don’t have neighbors, do eat puffin. Either that or drink like a Viking. ■

—DRR

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Transitions

Every year across the country there are millions of photos taken and shared at the beginning of the school year, marking the passage of time in a unique scholastic font. This happens in our household every September, and gradually the number of photo subjects decreases with each matriculation. Our youngest ones are in grade 12, and they went for their actual graduation photos this weekend. That just seems weird and too soon, but it is a fact of life.

We mark births, marriages, graduations, birthdays, anniversaries, and reunions with photos and proud social media posts and emails. They seem like happy things to document and we take photos and send details simply as a matter of course.

But there are other natural milestones that we are less likely to mark and share: an elderly person's last day in their own home, the beginning of the last day in the office, the last surgery performed, the slow or not-so-slow change from brown to grey, the first set of cheaters, the last moments of life. I mean, people do document these things, but sharing them proudly seems a bit more edgy, or taboo, or not fun, or just in bad taste.

I've been thinking that we should honor these transitions too. As humans and biological

creatures, we are always transitioning. In life, as we get older, people tend to just become more invisible, especially women. We exist, we keep on going, but for most people, it's as though there is a mute on being interesting enough to warrant updates, or we think that maybe because we aren't as youthful we wouldn't want to appear unattractive, having let ourselves go. We kind of become hangers onto our kids' or associates' transitions and ignore our own. Think about those lists of people we lost that they trot out at the Oscars every year. Most of those people lived for much longer *after* their careers than during them, but we don't think about that part of their life as being newsworthy or important.

In a medical career, we go from new recruit to junior staff to senior staff to retired (hopefully) emeritus. The time during which we are working passes by, and except for maybe some posed shots at a retirement party, or lifetime achievement awards, we usually don't mark the declining transitions in work except en passant.

I don't know. I guess as I see myself inching

closer to retirement, I want to start looking at these natural, gentle declining transitions as being just as positive as starting a new job, or getting a promotion, or having a baby. Anyone can be young; not everyone gets to be old.

I want to have pictures of my wrinkles and grey hair in all their non-glory. I want to know that as I get a thicker middle and become more hobbly-kneed that I'll accept that as a kind of marker of making it to a certain stage and be okay with the consequences and decisions I'll have to make. I

want a party when I go into an old age home, when it eventually happens. And I want someone to tell the story of my last days even if that transition is not pretty.

Life is short, shorter for some than others. Careers and families transition naturally, like a bell curve of what we think of notability. Let's not avoid embracing the downhill side of that curve. Sunsets are often longer and more beautiful than sunrises. ■

—CV

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