

What are the Blue Zones and how did they help make Naples the happiest and healthiest city in the United States?

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"Naples is Miami, but without so many people and with better beaches."

Scott Cressman, a retiree of the financial sector of Pennsylvania, has a coffee on 5th Avenue in the historic center of Naples, a city located in the south of the state of Florida.

It turns out that this corner of the so-called "state of the sun", which faces the Gulf of Mexico, populated by huge houses and a picturesque historic center, is one of the happiest and healthiest cities in the United States.

This is according to the survey on well-being and quality of life in 189 locations in the United States by the Gallup and Sharecare companies, published in early March after measuring variables of health and stability over a decade.

In the list, **Naples** ranked first.

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"And how it's not going to be: here's the sea, the beach, the money and the tranquility that a city has for retirees," explains Cressman.



But the figures also confirm it:

- It has some of the lowest rates of obesity (less than 10% of its inhabitants, in a country where there are states where 40% of the population suffers from overweight).
- Low rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes (8% of the population suffers, less than half the national average which is 19%)
- And his life expectancy is the highest in the entire country: 83.4 years.

However, this was not the case a few years ago. And according to the pollsters, the rise of Naples to the coveted title of the best city has a name behind: **the Blue Zones project** .

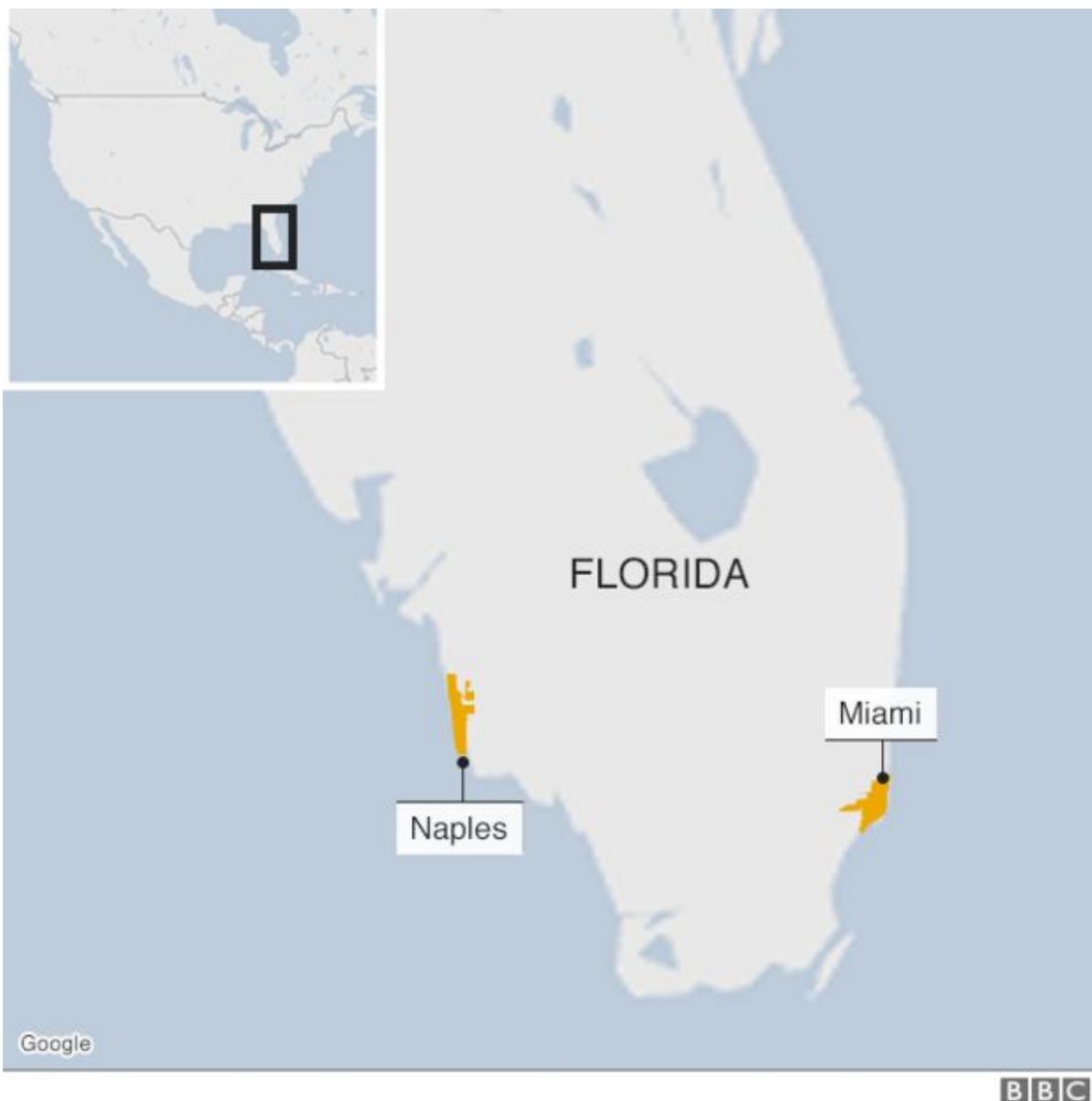
"In addition to its privileged location, for three years the authorities have been implementing this program that has helped to improve the conditions within the locality," he explained to BBC Mundo Dan Witter, analyst *s enior* de Gallup.

More than 100 years

A screenshot on a television warns about the imminence of the first tropical storm of 2018: Alberto.

In spite of the warnings, a group of friends gathers in the Park of Hope and Courage, near the center, to start their walk every Friday.

"When I was invited to join the group I thought it would be good for me to do some exercise, but here they told me that what would really help me is having a group of people to socialize with," says Margaret Maree, a graphic designer who He moved to Naples a year ago, while stretching arms and legs to warm up.



She is part of the Moai group of Caminantes de Nápoles, which includes two of the components that the Blue Zones project promotes in this part of the country: walking and socializing.

But how and where did the project that seems to have sealed the prosperity of Naples come about?

It all started 13 years ago, when after spending several months traveling the world, the American journalist **Dan Buettner** published an article in the *National Geographic* magazine called "The secrets of a long life".

In that article, Buettner pointed out five places around the planet where, for different reasons, there was an unusual and prolonged life expectancy. Places where people lived more than 100 years.

He called them "Blue Zones", simply because some of the demographers he had interviewed had marked the cities on the map with a blue highlighter.

Those longevity paradises were the islands of **Okinawa** in Japan, **Sardinia** in Italy, **Icaria** in Greece, the town of **Nicoya** in Costa Rica and a monastery in **Loma Linda, California** .

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NAPLES, FLORIDA

The city with the best welfare index in the US

20,000

population

US \$ 80,000 is per capita income, twice the national average

83.4 years is the life expectancy, the highest in the country

10% of the population suffers from obesity, one of the lowest percentages in the country

Source: DataUSA, Florida Department of Health.

"What Buettner saw were healthy and sociable behaviors that allowed people to have not only a longer life, but also a calmer one, without chronic illnesses and therefore happier," explains Deb Logan, director of the Blue Zones project at the south of Florida.

Buettner established nine lines of work that could help improve the quality of life of the communities. And it was from there, says Logan, that the Blue Zones initiative was founded.

Those nine points are:

- Find a life purpose
- Eat more vegetables
- To meditate
- Drink wine (moderately)
- Strengthen family ties
- Eating without filling (the 80% satiety rule)
- Walk
- Socialize
- Link with any belief or religious faith.

Three years ago, Buettner's project landed in South Florida, brought by medical centers in the area.



"They realized that they could cut health care costs if they could get people to improve their health habits, because much less is spent when good prevention is done," explains the specialist.

The idea has been to implement these practices in different sectors of Naples such as schools, workplaces, restaurants, supermarkets and even local churches.

Little changes

Despite the threat of a storm, the sky is radiant.

At Pelican Marsh Elementary School students and teachers prepare for a party: the school will be certified as an educational center that meets the healthy standards of the Blue Zones.



We have sea, sun and beautiful beaches, how can we not be the happiest city? "

Steve Bracci, lawyer

The children wear turquoise shirts - one of them, that of the Uruguayan national team - while they sing children's songs that celebrate healthy food and good hydration.

"We have changed certain habits that once seemed normal, **but seen closely are very harmful** , as for example, birthday cakes," says Susan Barcellino, the school director, who also dressed in blue for the occasion .

And remember that, for each birthday, the school distributed a cake, donuts and muffins among the children, as a celebration.



"It was an impressive amount of sugar that was repeated with each birthday and that was encouraged by ourselves, so we decided to change and now we ask the parents, instead of buying a cake, to make a donation or something similar," he noted. Barcellino.

But the idea, explain those of the **Blue Zones Project** , is not limited to schools.

Juan Padilla is an Ecuadorian who emigrated 15 years ago and, after working for several years in the Walgreens pharmacy, became the coordinator of the Wynn's supermarket, located near the beach.

And although he admits that he has had to reluctantly change his high-carbohydrate diet, people point to him as one of the main promoters of a series of novelties in the sale of provisions, with the intention of making **Naples** a healthier place .

"We have made changes that seem small but they help: one of them has been to put the cereals that contain sugar in the highest part of the shelves and in this way to prevent children from putting them in the market cart without any control", explains Padilla.



But perhaps one of the most successful ideas has been to place more bottles of water on the shelves, replacing soft drinks.

"We reduced the space in soft drinks coolers like **Pepsi, Coca-Cola**, etc. And what was left over we filled with water and healthy drinks."

According to Padilla, that meant a drop in sales of soft drinks within the premises of 25%, but in a simultaneous increase in the delivery of water and non-sugar drinks of 30%.

"We are not stopping selling anything, but with these types of decisions we are saying that we prefer a healthy life," says the supermarket manager.

Is it necessary?

However, not everyone in Naples thinks the Blue Zones are beneficial to the city.

Friday is midday and Alberto makes his appearance: a block of gray clouds is parked on the white beaches of Naples and, a few minutes later, spits out a downpour that will only end a day later.



In the windows of the office of lawyer Steve Bracci do not stop rattling the heavy drops of water. On his desk he has several documents that serve him to support his rejection of the Blue Zones project.

"It is pure social experimentation where the resources of the schools, which are public, are being spent on matters that are not needed," he argues.

For Bracci, that Naples is considered the happiest or healthiest city is not due to its Blue Zones, but because the town had, before the arrival of the project, an almost insurmountable quality of life.

And it gives two data: the per capita annual income is **US \$ 80,000** , twice the national average, and it is the second city - after Los Alamos, New Mexico - with the highest percentage of millionaires.

"The only thing Zonas Azules has done is that we move from third place to the first in welfare and, honestly, I do not see the merit of that."



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"I do not know what the true intention of the project is, one of its main arguments is the projection of increasing life expectancy, but that is only a projection, nothing concrete," Bracci adds.

Faith and survived

Alberto goes around Florida and leaves his trail of intermittent rains, gray sea and few tourists in sight.

On Sunday morning it begins to clear and people get ready to go fulfill the commitment, sacred for many, to go to church.

Janice Cressman puts on a shirt that says "Team Jesus" (Jesus team). As we approach the United Mayflower Congregation, other people join him, dressed in the same printed T-shirts.

Index of welfare and quality of life in the USA. (Source: Sharecare-Gallup)

MARKET STALL	CITY	INDEX
1	Naples, Florida	67.6
2	Barnstable Town, Massachusetts	66,4
3	Boulder, Colorado	65.3
4	Santa Cruz-Watsonville, California	65,1
5	Charlottesville, Virginia	65

And the last five positions:

185	Binghamton, New York	58.9
186	Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton, North Carolina	58.6
187	Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula, Mississippi	58.6
188	Canton-Massillon, Ohio	58.3
189	Fort Smith, Arkansas	58.2

The **United Church of Christ** , as it is known, is also certified as a "Blue Zone" temple.

Here is exercised what is perhaps one of the most controversial premises of the project: that of fostering faith, based on the supposed benefits of believing in a superior being and cultivating spirituality.

In fact, Buettner affirms in his foundational book that belonging to a religion can increase the life expectancy of a person from four to 10 years.

"Do you think that's true?" I ask Janice.

"I do not know, what I feel is that here in the church I am part of something that I can not explain to you.



Alan Coe, the reverend who leads the community, dressed for today's sermon - which dealt with fairness, Martin Luther King and rock - with a tie that has the flag of the United States.

"I agree that there is no way to measure the relationship between religion and life expectancy, but in my experience I think it has to do with how faith prepares people to endure the hardest moments, the moments of mourning," The pastor rehearses as an answer.

"I believe that faith makes those moments shorter, that they affect your health less," he adds.

At the end of the morning appears, after three days, the blue sky of all Naples postcards. The parishioners retire, but first they shake hands with Coe, who wishes them a good week.

"This church has the Blue Zones certificate, do you think that has generated a change in the community?" I ask.

"I think so, there are very interesting things in this plan that promotes well-being," he says without hesitation.

"However, I have a problem with that ... What I do not understand is why they are not in other areas of the country where programs like this are really needed," he asks.

"They should go where they would make a difference, here most people already have everything, their cars, their houses, a lot of money."

But for now the Blue Zones Project is in about six US states. and in several cities on the east and west coasts.

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