



# Pursuit of Happiness

Tap into the lifestyle lessons of the happiest countries in the world. BY HOLLY RIDDLE

## Simple Moments:

Happy couple in Copenhagen, Denmark, the second-ranked happiest country

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Each year the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, a global initiative for the United Nations, releases its World Happiness Report. Leveraging a range of data from more than 150 countries, the report ranks destinations by residents' self-reported happiness.

In 2022 the World Happiness Report celebrated its 10th anniversary, and its expert editors and contributors paid special attention to the evolving study of well-being and happiness, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing use of social media. Possibly unsurprisingly, though, the study found what most could assume: "Feeling at peace with life, having a balanced life and focusing on others

rather than oneself were found to support higher life evaluations in all parts of the world, while being more prevalent in the happier countries and highest in the Nordic countries," explained the publication's founding editor, John Helliwell.

From a travel perspective, is it possible to tap into that peace and balance when merely visiting one of the world's happiest countries?

FOR YEARS THE NORDIC COUNTRIES have taken top spots in the World Happiness Report, and the most recent rankings are no different. The top happiest countries for 2022 were Finland, Denmark and Iceland, followed by Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Johanna Maasola is the tourism coordinator for Visit Jyväskylä Region in Finland's Lakeland region, where travelers flock to the four national parks, scenic views and saunas. While Maasola credits Finland's happiness to factors such as public benefits and equality, she said travelers, too, can tap into this life satisfaction, even if just for a short time, if they're willing "to live like a Finn."

"Our happiness is built of simple things," she said. "Sitting in a sauna doing nothing, just sweating. Walking in a forest without a purpose or maybe picking up berries and mushrooms and knowing they are pure. Dipping into a hole in the ice in winter on a lake and feeling the tickling on your skin. Talking with a friend or not talking, but yet still understanding the magical importance of silence. Finding beauty in coldness and darkness but also going wild in summer when the sun doesn't set at all."

This focus on finding happiness in simplicity and nature is not unusual among the top-ranking happiest countries. According to Adam Roy, CEO, The Volla, an accommodations provider in Saas-Fee, a resort destination in the Swiss Alps, despite Switzerland's sometimes-frigid weather and relatively high costs, the country's happiness ranking is not surprising.

He said, "Switzerland was praised for how its residents and citizens achieve 'balance in life,' which isn't completely surprising, given what the country has to offer. Nature is everywhere, so it's easy to shut your laptop at 4 or 5 p.m. to go and do something active — walking, cycling or even wild swimming."

Saas-Fee has paid particular attention to blending the worlds of tourism and nature by achieving status as the world's first CO2-neutral municipality and one of the top eco-friendly ski resorts in the world.

"The village uses 100 percent clean and natural energy, obtaining all of its electricity from local hydroelectric power, and has been completely car-free since 1951. When it comes to transport, the village offers an e-car sharing service and emission-free ski buses. The absence of cars contributes to the village's good air quality and offers freedom of movement in the streets," said Roy. "I think that this relates considerably to the relaxed atmosphere and character of Switzerland, which is something that draws tourists back year after year."

In Iceland nature meets a unique social structure that results in a high happiness ranking, as Ingibjörg Friðriksdóttir, from luxury resort Hotel Rangá, explained.

"In our hearts, we are a family-oriented nation," she said. "Family means we take care of each other, and there is a strong sense of com-



munity. A part of this might be the historical hardship and extreme climate. We had to rely on each other to survive, so this ingrained concern for each other became a part of our DNA."

She added, "When you are feeling down, having the possibility to go out and explore Iceland's magical landscape is energizing and truly makes you feel lucky. Then, when the freezing wind and horizontal rain hit your face, you have no time to dwell on bad thoughts ..."

The extreme weather makes for a one-of-a-kind experience for Hotel Rangá's guests, but Friðriksdóttir said with a few well-chosen layers, travelers can embrace the conditions and see how it adds to the Icelandic way of life, noting there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.

In second-ranked Denmark, however, travelers will find an attraction fully and thoroughly dedicated to happiness: The Happiness

#### Communing with Nature:

Chalet Feekatz in Saas-Fee, Switzerland (top); and northern lights at Hotel Rangá in Iceland (bottom)

PHOTOS: © CHALET FEEKATZ, © HOTEL RANGÁ



**Pura Vida:**  
Hot springs at  
Tabacón Thermal  
Resort & Spa in  
Costa Rica

PHOTO: © TABACÓN  
THERMAL RESORT & SPA

Museum in Copenhagen, created by The Happiness Research Institute.

“Our aim with The Happiness Museum is to reveal the number of angles we can approach happiness research from. The journey guests are taken on in the museum demonstrates [that] happiness is a component in so many areas of our lives: from politics and city design to happy memories and relationships,” said Onor Hanreck Wilkinson, analyst at the institute. “If hygge can be understood as the pursuit of everyday happiness, people visiting Denmark can certainly tap into that. Ultimately, hygge is about giving yourself and others a treat and savoring simple moments that can be described by feelings of a warm atmosphere, presence, pleasure, equality, gratitude, harmony, comfort, truce, togetherness and shelter.”

DREAMING OF GETTING AWAY somewhere warm soon, but still want to visit one of the world’s happiest countries? While the top five happiest countries are limited to Europe, other regions of the world proudly boast their own rankings.

Israel, for example, found its way to No. 9 in the rankings, making it the highest-ranked, non-European destination. According to Eyal Goldberger, the newly appointed manager of the David Citadel in Jerusalem, this ranking can be attributed to a few things.

“There is a strong sense of belonging and family,” he said. “Everyone knows and relies on their neighbors, and everyone’s door is always open. People spend the majority of their free time outside, going on short trips with friends and family ... . You rely on friends and neighbors and share some of the stress of balancing life and responsibilities with ‘semi-strangers’ at times.”

New Zealand followed directly behind Israel in the 2022 rankings, falling in the report’s 10th spot. Dunedin is quite possibly one of the happiest cities in the entire country. Situated about an hour’s ride south of Christchurch, the city of just more than 133,000 people reports 85 percent of its residents think of Dunedin as “a great place to live,” and nearly 90 percent rate their quality of life positively.

“It is a special place blessed with natural wonders, rare wildlife and well-preserved heritage attractions. Dunedin is where architecture meets sweeping coastal landscapes, a wonderful mix of quirky urban charm and dramatic surrounds,” described Enterprise Dunedin manager John Christie.

Farther down the list but still top in its region, Costa Rica achieved the highest happiness ranking out of all Latin American destinations. In discussing the country’s status, Mario Mikowski, a member of the board of directors at Tabacón Thermal Resort & Spa and owner at Hotel Nantipa, a Tico Beach Experience, made special note of what he calls the “*pura vida*” mindset, a common Costa Rican greeting that literally translates to “pure life.”

“Our *pura vida* mindset is instilled in us as Costa Ricans, but it’s not something that’s exclusive to us,” he said. “We like to think that visitors to our hotels and our country enjoy experiences that have a legacy, that they take home learnings they continue at home, whether that’s being inspired by our surroundings to get outside and live a more sustainable lifestyle; energized by our cuisine to incorporate it into their diet; relaxed by the spa and thermal river at Tabacón to remember the importance of taking time for yourself; or moved by our community to connect with people, pay forward a *pura vida* mindset or simply drink better coffee.”

WHEN LOOKING AT THESE countries as well as all the data for the 2022 World Happiness Report, Helliwell noted a few surprises for the year, including the rise in the frequency of benevolent acts across all global regions, especially when it came to helping strangers.

Overall, though, when asked to give a lesson that can benefit both the population and the destinations hoping to improve their happiness rankings, Helliwell noted the “striking importance of positive social connections and of the value of living in a society where people look out for each other.” And what better way to establish new and positive social connections in the new year than with travel?