

Aging gracefully in Dominica

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Why is it that people in Dominica seem to grow old more gracefully and live longer than people elsewhere?

Diet and lifestyle are clearly all-important but are there other factors at work here too: quality of life perhaps, the support of families, something in the genes even?

Dominica boasts a remarkable concentration of very old people in good health and they've begun to arouse the interest of medical science.

In recent years the best hotel in Roseau, Dominica's capital, has found itself hosting some rather unusual celebrations: birthday parties, often organised by a vast extended family, for yet another of the country's citizens reaching the age of 100.

A century and still battling

Violet Wilfreda Joseph had her 100th birthday party 8 years ago. She was born in the last year of the 19th century when British colonial rule in Dominica had another 79 years to run.

So how does it feel to wake up in the morning knowing you're 108 years old?

"Glad to see the day", she told me, without a moment's hesitation.

Her mobility is restricted but she has good eyesight and hearing, an astonishingly unwrinkled face and still lives in her own modest wooden home in the centre of Roseau.

Could she give me any clues as to how she's lived so long?

For years she's started the day with a glass of coconut water, a drop of gin and a banana, though since her 100th birthday her family has persuaded her to drop the gin.

Fish is her favourite form of protein, especially fish heads ("I like sucking the bones", she told me) and she's always enjoyed Dominica's rich diversity of tropical fruit and vegetables.

And another important clue perhaps, she shares her home with three generations of her extended family, including several children.

They always give her a kiss before they go to school. "They keep me young", she said.

According to the Dominica Council on Aging, a charity which keeps records of the centenarians, there are currently 22 on the island in a total population of around 65,000.

That's 3 times the average incidence of centenarians as in developed countries such as Britain and the United.

And these figures are supported with written documents; birth certificates from the British colonial era alongside (mostly Catholic) baptismal records.

Dr Noel Boaz, an American professor of anatomy at the Ross Medical School in Dominica, has been researching the centenarians for the past 6 years.

Diet and lifestyle

His findings so far suggest that the key to their longevity is diet and lifestyle, not genetics.

Dominica is a mountainous island with its interior cloaked in dense rainforest. Roads were few until well into the 1960s, so when today's elderly were young long distance walking on rough terrain was a necessity of everyday life, along with hard physical work.

And their diet would have included natural products from the forest, herbs and herbal medicines, as well as that rich diversity of cultivated fruit and vegetables, almost all of it grown in their own gardens.

102 year old Rudolph Edward Georges is living proof of the benefits.

When I went to visit him one sticky tropical evening I found him lying not in but on his bed in vest and shorts. He sat up to greet me, and then came the real surprise: his handshake. I hadn't expected such strength from a 102 year old man.

For fruit and vegetables, he told me, "everything I planted I ate and everything I ate I planted".

He also produced his own cocoa, had his own chickens, goats and a cow and did the work on his smallholding after the long trek back from his job on a tobacco plantation.

His Sunday special, as he called it, was a glass of strong beer mixed with milk, eggs and sugar, plus a dash of lime and nutmeg.

Unusually among Dominica's centenarians, he smoked like a chimney (his words) until he was seventy. But it can't have had much impact on his fitness - once when his family hid his cigarettes he walked 13 kilometres to get some more.

His ten children, who are all still alive, range in age from 82 to 40, and when he was 98 Mr Georges travelled alone to England to visit one of his sons.

...but will it last?

It's hard not to feel a surge of optimism in the presence of such people, but the story of Dominica's remarkable centenarians may not have an entirely happy ending.

Dr Boaz doesn't think the phenomenon will last more than another decade or so because the lifestyle of younger Dominicans is changing.

Two American-style fast-food restaurants have recently opened in Roseau. There are TVs in even the poorest households, car ownership has risen to one in four of the population and toiling on the land is a last choice job for the young.

The era the centenarians lived through where they benefited from modernity in the form of better medical care and improved public health, while living a pre-modern lifestyle is coming to an end.

The memories had come tumbling out in the hour I spent with Mr Georges and I heard later that he'd said of our meeting: "I appreciated that, because what I had forgotten I remember now."

I too had deeply appreciated meeting him because of the glimpse he'd given me of a way of life poor in the trappings of modernity but rich in wellbeing and human potential.