

Lifestyle/ Travel & Leisure

The power of blue spaces: time spent near a lake, beach or river improves your physical and mental well-being

Many people may be thinking about visiting green spaces when the pandemic subsides, but what about blue spaces?

Holidays by the water, at lakes, on beaches or beside rivers, have been shown to improve mood and well-being. Researchers are not yet sure why

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Blue spaces, such as beaches, rivers and lakes, have a good effect on our well-being. Photo: Matthew Bailey/VWPics/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

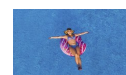
Many people around the world have spent much of 2020 trapped at home but are now beginning to contemplate post-coronavirus trips, and are perhaps mindful of the importance attached to spending time outside, in green spaces.

Less has been said about the restorative effects of outdoor spaces that are blue. Nevertheless, researchers at BlueHealth, a research consortium funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, have discovered that proximity to water – be it in the form of oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, swimming pools or even fountains – can significantly boost physical and mental well-being.

Over the past four years, the BlueHealth team – which includes psychologists, epidemiologists, landscape architects and public health experts, among others – studied the effects of aquatic environments on human health.

The team surveyed more than 18,000 people in 18 countries and territories, and collated a wealth of information about the blue spaces they frequent: how long do they spend in them; what do they do there; and how do such visits make them feel.

The power of a sea view – it makes you healthier, study finds



1 Jul 2019

Nine hundred and eighty four people in Hong Kong completed the survey, around a quarter of them in the youngest age bracket: 18 to 29. Of the Hongkongers surveyed, 91 per cent had visited a blue space in the four weeks before responding (above the average of 87 per cent for all 18,000 respondents).

These blue spaces included seaside promenades (36 per cent), piers (13 per cent) and outdoor public pools (9 per cent). The most common activities undertaken in those spaces were walking (without a dog; 42 per cent), socialising (8 per cent), running and swimming (both 7 per cent).



Wide open skies and ocean views at Big Sur in California. Photo: Getty Images

While not entirely revelatory – the book *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science That Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do* was published in 2015 – the BlueHealth findings might help bring about a change in how we view well-being, especially those of us who don't consider ourselves “beach people”.

“When compared with other blue spaces, the coast seems to have a particularly strong positive impact on people's health,” says Dr James Grellier, the BlueHealth project manager.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to live by the ocean, of course, but the researchers also discovered that regular 20-minute walks alongside water can significantly improve well-being and mood when compared with the same exercise taken in a strictly urban environment.

Pandemic-free Chinese island Hainan pulls in the tourists

8 Dec 2020



“People often have underappreciated blue spaces near to home, and even small spaces can provide the opportunity for rest and relaxation,” says Grellier.

Furthermore, well-being can be boosted even over a short period of time – for instance, while someone is on holiday.

“Not everyone lives next to pristine blue spaces. For this reason, finding a clean beach or a beautiful river to holiday at, or a room with a sea view, is particularly important to many people seeking to relax and recuperate from the stresses of everyday life,” says Grellier.



There are many theories about blue space and why it is so good for us. Photo: James Wendlinger

“Additionally, some of our preliminary findings show that unstructured activities like playing with your children, socialising and sunbathing [at the beach] are typically linked to the happiest and least anxious visits.”

The BlueHealth researchers have yet to determine what exactly makes blue spaces so therapeutic, but theories abound.

“For example, it’s common on coasts, and large rivers and lakes, to be presented with long and unbroken views. This feeling of space may bring about changes in our mood,” suggests Grellier. “Also, exploring rock pools, swimming in the open water, paddling in the surf ... we can hypothesise that these more primal activities give us some respite from the stresses of modern life.”



Spending time by the water is relaxing and boosts mental and physical well-being. Photo: Getty Images

And, like green spaces, those that are blue are typically associated with sunlight and fresh air – which are so often said to be the best forms of medicine.

However, before we all rush off to find the nearest blue space, Grellier offers a word of caution.

“While I would certainly recommend that people visit blue spaces while on holiday, I would also encourage them to think about the impact their visits might have on local ecosystems and communities. It might make sense to avoid places with inadequate infrastructure for mass tourism.

“Equally, I would suggest thinking about the effect visits might have on local residents’ access to, and use of, such spaces.”



BlueHealth project manager Dr James Grellier lives in Cornwall, in the UK, and loves exploring beaches and coastal paths.

That said, a responsible beach holiday post-Covid-19 could be the perfect antidote to the stresses of pandemic living. If you're in need of some travel inspiration, consider Grellier's favourite endeavours.

"I live in Cornwall, a beautiful part of the UK surrounded by fantastic coastline, so I spend much of my holidays exploring the beaches and coastal paths here," he says. "When I go abroad, I tend to look for places off the beaten track. I equally love the feeling of space on the coastline of the [North American] Pacific northwest, the crashing waves of the Atlantic coast of Portugal, and the tranquillity of the Aegean Islands in the springtime."

Coastal walks, surfing, island hopping – we can't wait to take the plunge.