

World's healthiest places to

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Clean air, low rates of illness and access to food help make some countries, including Iceland, Sweden and Finland, Switzerland, Australia, Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands as best living places in the world

THERE are lots of reasons to envy residents of Northern Europe. Each day they get to take in raw, dramatic landscapes, stunning architecture and world-class shopping. But, more important, they know a thing or two about health and wellness.

Forbes.com has found that the region is home to some of the world's healthiest countries, includ-

ing top-ranking Iceland, Sweden and Finland.

Others that fared well include Germany, Switzerland, Australia, Denmark, Canada, Austria and the Netherlands.

"Historically, these countries had an ethic of having more of a nationalized health care system," says Kate Schecter, a program officer for the American International Health Alliance, a nonprofit that works to advance global health by helping nations with limited resources build sustainable infrastructure. "There's this mentality that health care should be a given right for citizens."

Despite the fact that an estimated 47 million Americans lack health insurance, the U.S. ranked 11.

Rounding out the list, were Israel, the Czech Republic, Spain and France.

To determine our list of the healthiest places to live in the world, Forbes.com looked at the latest available health and environmental statistics for every nation, from sources such as the World Health Organisation, the World Bank and the UN.

But due to incomplete data, we ranked only the 138 nations with statistics in every measure. That's why you don't see countries such as Monaco, Norway, Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Ireland and Andorra—all of which had a shot of cracking the top 15 were they not missing information.

The statistics we examined

included estimated air pollution in world cities; the percentage of a country's population with access to improved drinking water and sanitation; infant mortality rates; the rate of prevalence of tuberculosis; the density of physicians-generalists and specialists-per 1,000 people; under-nourishment rates; and healthy life expectancies for men.

Beyond high marks for drinking water, sanitation and nourishment, which many countries achieved, Iceland and Sweden had some of the lowest levels of air pollution, infant mortality and rates of tuberculosis prevalence. They also both had the highest healthy life expectancies for men: 72 years.

Healthy life expectancy statistics, in particular, say a lot about the wel-

fare of a country's inhabitants, says Johannes Kinfu, a statistician for the World Health Organization. Those nations with the highest numbers tend also to have high gross domestic products, as well as accessible health care systems and lower rates of infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

Research has shown that long-term exposure to air pollution can affect lung function and lead to premature death. Other nations with estimated low particulate matter concentrations, according to the World Bank, include France and Australia.

Countries' success in combating pollution is likely due to a mix of policies addressing the problem, enforcement of standards and the use of clean fuel, says Kiran Pandey, a senior environmental economist

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for the Global Environment Facility, an organization affiliated with the World Bank, and an author of the research. But some places, such as those located along coastlines, are simply luckier than others, since crosswinds can dilute air pollution, Pandey says.

Low infant mortality rates are indications of socioeconomic factors, such as household incomes, which can influence the kind of nutrition and health care a child receives and whether a family is knowledgeable about protection against infection, Kinfu says. The Czech Republic also had one of the world's lowest infant mortality rates.

And while a high number of doctors located in an area might not necessarily mean its residents are

healthy, due to questions of access, it's generally a positive sign. Israel has a relatively high doctor density rate, according to the World Health Organization's World Health Statistics 2007.

While the average resident of any of these countries might take for granted or pay little attention to something like access to health care, these factors make a healthy nation, says Jen Kates, vice president and director of HIV/AIDS Policy for the Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit, private foundation focused on major US health care concerns, as well as global health.

"Everyone," Kates says, "needs to be aware that how we provide health care to people in a country is a critical issue." COURTESY THE DAILY STAR