

**The Outpost Exchange**  
**World Fitness**  
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Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who's the fittest of them all?

When reviewing the fitness factor of countries around the world, it's a challenge to compare dumbbells to dumbbells (I'm talking about weights here, people!), but that was the assignment I was handed, so I'm workin' it. I selected five countries, including ours, that have long life expectancies and that generally have a reputation for healthy citizens. I then applied the highly scientific method of subjective first-hand observation sprinkled with facts to come up with a comparison between the countries. Let's meet our contestants...

America is the exercise empire of the world, according to the IDEA Health and Fitness Association, an international organization with 20,000 health and fitness professional members from 80 countries. Yet we are also the globe's fattest folks.

The Chinese are legendary for their longevity. The country is also the fastest growing fast-food nation. More than 60% of the population in Beijing and Shanghai ate at KFC and McD's in 1999 and 2000, when just a few years prior to that such an option wasn't even available.

France has a *laissez faire* fitness attitude, yet is world-renowned for their slender citizens.

For decades the Japanese have incorporated ancient exercises into their work-a-day world...but is also the country of *karoshi* (death from overwork).

The Swiss, well, the Swiss appear perfect in every way: they take no sides, can hike a mountain like nobody's business and have a popular exercise ball named after them to boot.

**Through the Looking Glass**

The best comparable indicator of health that exists is life expectancy. The World Health Organization (WHO) offers two options to look at for a country's total population: the average life expectancy and the average *healthy* life expectancy. People may live long, but if it's in poor health, well, that doesn't really fit the bill for the fitness factor. So, for the purposes of this article, we're looking at the healthy life expectancy average.

We Americans love to look to the East for wisdom...and for fodder to explain our fitness failures. "If only we had thousands of years of ancient secrets to fall back on!" we whine. We cite the longevity of the Chinese as proof that all that Tai Chi in the park stuff pays off. But, in fact, the healthy life expectancy of the average Chinese person is only about 64 years. Slim and spry the Chinese may be, but we chubbier Americans pack in

an average of about five extra years of healthy living, according to the most recent statistics from WHO.

The Japanese boast one of the longest healthy life spans on earth—75 years—despite the fact that in 1990 10,000 business people dropped dead from the overwork epidemic known as *karoshi* that is unique to the country.

As an example of the trend of Japanese “super-seniors”—extraordinarily fit older folks—the Miami Herald recently profiled Yuichi Miura, age 72, who in May 2003 became the oldest man to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Several other robust elders and their feats of physicality were highlighted. What the article didn’t mention is how the younger generation works out at fitness clubs that feature bars and cigarette machines.

When I lived in Japan in the 1990’s I was amazed to find my Japanese exercise buddies belting down beers and puffing away on their Pal Mals just moments after class, the glister from aerobics still fresh on their face. Some Western Michigan University anthropologist has just written a book called “Working Out in Japan” on this very phenomenon that I experienced. Drat. I missed the boat on the book.

The French have that eponymous grueling bike race, the Tour de France. But most of those super humans are from other countries and are not indicative of any French penchant for fitness. The French live healthily three years longer than we do, but it’s likely more attributed to wine, great scarves and love making than any time logged at the gym. When I visited France a few years ago, the only exercising I witnessed were throngs of people walking: to work, with their dogs, with their friends, to dinner and just for fun.

The Swiss are walkers, too, and hikers as well. They also like to ski. They average a healthy life expectancy of 73.2 years, just about four years more than us. Several years ago I was on a trek in Northern Thailand with several Swiss travelers. Despite the fact that they were probably 10-15 years older than most of us in the group, the Swiss contingency was always the first to reach camp. At the time I chalked it up to the fact that they all had proper footwear, while the rest of us were hiking in tennies and Berkenstocks.

People like the French and the Swiss probably aren’t as obsessed with working out as we are because exercise is more often built into their daily life. As anecdotally noted above, people in a lot of other countries walk to work or dinner or social events. Americans require national advertising campaigns to woo us into walking.

William P. Morgan, a professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and director of the Exercise Psychology Laboratory there, believes the missing ingredient in the standard American exercise recipe is purpose. He calls it “Factor P.” “Things that don’t have a purpose or meaning are more likely to be dropped than those with a purpose,” he told me. He studied 10 individuals over the course of more than 10 years and charted their adherence to physical activity. These were people

who walked or cycled to work, who walked their dogs every day or who walked to the grocery store. They had 100 percent adherence to their physical exercise because, Morgan contends, it was purposeful.

Perhaps that's the secret to people in these other countries. For the most part, their cultures cultivate purposeful physical activity.

As a rule, Americans sit around more. It is estimated that only 25% of US adults are physically active while another 25-40% are totally sedentary. What the rest of the population is doing, I have no idea. But there's lots of data on what exercise can do for our health.

For instance, people who maintain an active lifestyle are at a 45% lower risk of developing heart disease than sedentary people. Brisk exercise can lower cholesterol and high blood pressure and reduce the risk of stroke. Hey, it's even been shown to increase libido! Perhaps the Ad Council should do a public service campaign positioning exercise as free Viagra.

Reports also tell us that regular exercise can reduce pain and stiffness and increase flexibility, endurance and overall well-being and quality of life. In other words, we could extend that statistic of "healthy life expectancy" from the average of 69.3 years for Americans to perhaps the whole 77.3 years that the average American lives. In case you can't do the math quickly enough--that's eight more years of feeling good!

So, who's the fittest of us all? Heck, I don't know. You be the judge.

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