

# SUMMARY

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF BLISS

ERIC WEINER



# **Summary of The Geography of Bliss by Eric Weiner**

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Part self-help guide, part travel log, *The Geography of Bliss* takes us to countries around the world trying to find where happiness lives.

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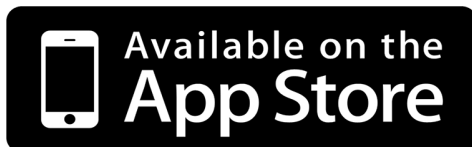


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# Introduction

Happiness is a hard thing to quantify, but for those concerned about public policy and well being it seems a logical and necessary subject to approach with a more analytical eye. What causes happiness? One could define the causes as being the presence of positive affect on one's life, and an absence of negative affect.

It is in this way that international rankings of happiness by country tend to measure the general happiness of a country's population. Canada is ranked as having low negative affect for instance, while Mexico ranks highly in positive affect. But is there a difference between happiness and contentment? Switzerland doesn't rank highly in positive affect nor low in negative affect, but ranks very highly in reported life satisfaction.

Eric Weiner explores these questions while also looking at the connection between happiness and affluence, education level, poverty, and governmental systems.

# The Netherlands

The Netherlands is home to the Journal of Happiness Studies and the World Database of Happiness and is one of the main hubs of scientific research on the subject. Every year it holds conferences for researchers on the subject of happiness.

It's also ranked as one of the happiest countries on earth. The World Database of Happiness collects data and research from around the world on happiness, and brings up many interesting conclusions and even more interesting questions.

For instance, why are republicans happier than democrats? Why do non-parents report higher levels of happiness, but parents report higher levels of life satisfaction? While some data seems to intuitively make sense; married people are happier than single people, rich people are happier than poor people etc.

Some things however seem downright paradoxical; the religious are happier than the irreligious, but secular countries on the whole are happier than religious countries. Or how the countries with the highest ranks for happiness also have relatively high suicide rates.

So what is it happiness really is then? What common factors do happy countries share? If you were to ask the Dutch, happiness implies security. The Netherlands has some of the most comprehensive social safety nets in the world, the gap between the rich and the poor is very low, and extreme poverty and homelessness are virtually non-existent. You really wouldn't have to worry about money and getting ahead in life the way you do in other countries, there is security.

It's also an exceedingly democratic country, with high levels of participation in the political system and a very lenient criminal justice system that focuses on rehabilitation and respect for human dignity.

However there are other countries that aren't like this at all yet report high levels of happiness. So what gives?

# Switzerland

Chapter two takes the reader to Switzerland, one of the highest ranked countries in the World Database of Happiness. Initially the author finds the country to be boring and a bit stiff. Everyone is always on time, the trains are always on time, the cities are immaculate and clean, everyone seems concerned with being punctual and precise. but as he meets people and asks them about Swiss culture he quickly learns these are in fact reasons for their happiness.

The Swiss aren't like the Dutch in their drive to achieve equality, the Swiss have a similar cultural push to succeed and become wealthy as Americans do. But unlike the people of the US, the Swiss pride themselves on not showing off their wealth and success, on never behaving as though they're better than anyone else. They are taught from a young age not to stand out, and thus whilst there are very wealthy people, and less affluent people, it would be very hard to tell.

"I met a few Swiss people who couldn't even bring themselves to use the 'm' word; they would just rub their fingers together to indicate they're talking about money. At first, this struck me as odd, given that Switzerland's economy is based on banking - a profession that, last time I checked, had something to do with money. But the Swiss know that money, more than anything else, triggers envy.

"The American way is: If you've got it, flaunt it. The Swiss way is: If you've got it, hide it." (pp. 31-32)

A similarity between the Swiss and the Dutch is their degree of political participation. Both countries have a citizenry that believes very strongly in democracy. However the Swiss take this to another level. Switzerland has a unique political system that combines elected representatives with direct democracy, which is to say citizens vote directly on legislation themselves.



They also have no executive position, no president or prime minister, instead their executive branch is run by a committee of 5 elected officials.

The Swiss people Weiner meets cite this as one of the reasons for their happiness. They place great value on having control of their own lives and government. The beautiful natural landscapes of Switzerland are also cited as reasons for happiness, citing research into the physical benefit access to nature has on humans. Access to natural settings, even just from a window view, is correlated with lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. These combined conditions have led to high degrees of contentment and satisfaction.

The author refers to this sense of equality, autonomy, and connection to nature as “conjoyment”, the state of joy and calmness at the same time.

# Bhutan

The next stop on our tour of the world's happiest places is Bhutan.

There's a pretty good chance you've never heard of Bhutan, it's a tiny mountainous nation near Tibet nestled between China and India. The landscapes are stunning and serene, and despite the fact that its government is the polar opposite of western countries, an absolute monarchy, it has a surprisingly radical concept; a Gross National Happiness measure. The government of Bhutan is mandated to try and increase the level of happiness of its citizens.

The country also calls into question virtually all the reasons we've examined so far for happiness. Democracy? Bhutan has none. Affluence? Bhutan is often literally dirt poor (i.e. unpaved roads). It is in many respects a third world country. However they do have some progressive policies that still elude much more wealthy countries like the US, namely universal healthcare and free education.

One thing Bhutan has in abundance that is not seen in Switzerland or the Netherlands is a strong focus on spirituality. Like much of India, Bhutan is a heavily buddhist nation, mixed with indigenous animist beliefs that has led to a culture that focuses on the here and now. On accepting life, letting go of material desires, and being connected to the earth.

The Bhutanese place very little stock in material wealth, and certainly don't attribute wealth to "success" the way we do in the west. Perhaps this is the reason that they are happy despite their high degree of poverty.

# Qatar

Our next stop is a detour on the happiness tour, to a country that stands in great contrast to the penniless Bhutanese. It's Qatar, an example of the old lesson that happiness can't be bought.

You might assume that living under an autocratic religious theocracy would make people unhappy, and it turns out you'd be right.

Like Bhutan, Qatar was one of the poorest countries on earth until only a few decades ago. Located on the Arabian Peninsula, Qatar has very little in the way of arable land, prior to the 1980s it was a country of nomadic un-unified tribes. And then oil was discovered.

The money came flowing in at an absurd pace, to the point that the country has no income tax, all utilities are free, as are healthcare and education.

And on top of it all every married man is given a stipend of \$84,000 a year from the government.

Qatar is notorious for seeming plastic and fake. There are material luxuries everywhere you look, but no art scenes, no great cinema, no music scenes. Culture is strictly controlled by the government, kept in accordance to an extreme conservative form of Islam. It is a country of shopping malls and swimming pools, but devoid of culture and humanity.

And so it should come as no surprise that Qatar ranks very low in happiness. The government certainly doesn't help the matter. Despite providing for the material needs of its citizens (though it should be noted there is a severely poor underclass in Qatar, including literal slaves) the Qatari government is brutal and autocratic. Public displays of affection are illegal, "immoral" behavior that isn't in line with extremist Islam is illegal, prisons are rife with human rights abuse. Women are 2nd class citizens with virtually no rights. There have been numerous documented cases of women who end up in prison for "pre-marital sex" when they go to the police to report sexual assault.

So what you end up with is a country of wealthy citizens unsatisfied with life (most don't have jobs), crushed under oppression, with their humanity stifled.

Affluence may or may not be necessary for happiness, but it certainly isn't sufficient for it.

# Iceland

Iceland is proof that natural beauty can come in the most unexpected forms. Built literally upon glaciers it is a cold country in the far north, but even despite the harsh environment (much of the winter literally cannot be spent outdoors) it is extremely beautiful. And beauty it seems, is something its citizens take very seriously.

If Qatar is a desert of art and culture, Iceland is a rainforest. Iceland is a country full of artists, whether professional or amateur Icelanders are all encouraged from a young age to explore painting, writing, sculpture, poetry, and music. The streets of their few cities are littered with art, bookstores, and concerts (when the weather allows).

"In Iceland, being a writer is pretty much the best thing you can be. Successful, struggling, publishing in books or only in your mind, it matters not. Icelanders adore their writers. Partly, this represents a kind of narcissism, since just about everyone in Iceland is a writer or poet. Taxi drivers, college professors, hotel clerks, fishermen. Everyone. Icelanders joke that one day they will erect a statue in the center of Reykjavik to honor the one Icelandic who never wrote a poem. They're still waiting for that person to be born." (p. 147)

Iceland is also yet another country that places great emphasis on equality. The gap between the rich and the poor is almost non-existent and safety-nets are abundant. The country goes out of its way to help new parents and there are strong workers rights and benefits guaranteed by law.

An interesting thing to note at this point is that countries with colder climates tend to be more collectivist in nature, they tend to have stronger safety nets and emphasis on equality. It's hypothesized that this cultural inclination towards helping one another stems from the fact that in the pre-modern era working together and cooperating and sharing fairly was the only way people could survive in harsh climates.

This also helps explain the high degree of connection the Dutch, Icelanders, the Swiss, and so on report feeling towards their society. They feel a part of it and responsible for it. Contrasted with Qatar, where there are no taxes, there is no voting, and many don't have a job. It's not surprising that there's not much of a feeling of connection to their country.

# Moldova

While some countries, like Bhutan, may have seemed surprising in how happy they were, no one will be surprised as to why Moldovans are ranked as some of the unhappiest people on earth. Moldova is devastated by poverty, it's rife with corruption, and it's under the boot of oppression.

There is very little arable land and almost no valuable natural resources, it is also the poorest country in Europe and has the lowest Human Development Index. After it declared its independence in 1990, and experienced a brief armed conflict followed by rapid inflation, Moldovans began emigrating to other countries en masse, mostly illegally. Inequality is rampant, with the children of the wealthy buying their way into prestigious universities and jobs. Despite an ostensibly democratic government, corruption has led to a lack of faith in the legitimacy of the government. In 2009 concerns over rigged elections led to mass protest and civil unrest, arrested protesters later reported being tortured by police.

This is not a unique occurrence, Amnesty International reports that torture by police is widespread and routine and the government has faced allegations of human rights abuses for years.

Moldova also offers a counterpoint to the Swiss claim that democracies are happier:

"For years, political scientists assumed that people living under democracies were happier than those living under any other form of government... but the collapse of the Soviet Union changed all that... Happiness levels did not rise. In some countries they declined, and today the former Soviet republics are, overall, the least happy places on the planet. What is going on? That old causality bugaboo, political scientist Ron Inglehart concluded: It's not that democracy makes people happy but rather than happy people are much more likely to establish a democracy.

"The soil must be rich, culturally speaking, before democracy can take root. The institutions are less important than the culture. And what are the cultural ingredients needed for democracy to take root? Trust and tolerance. Not only trust of those inside your group - family, for instance - but external trust. Trust of strangers. Trust of your opponents, your enemies, even." (p. 198)

While it's not always clear which conditions lead to happiness, the conditions of Moldova are undoubtedly a perfect storm for unhappiness.



# Thailand

"I've always considered myself a thoughtful person. There's virtually nothing I won't think about, from the intensely profound to the astonishingly trivial. The only thing I haven't given much thought to is... thinking.

Like most westerners, I've never felt the need to question the value of thinking... psychotherapy is built on this assumption - cognitive therapy, in particular. If we can only fix our faulty thought patterns, our corrupted software, then happiness, or at least less misery, will ensue.

I've spent most of my life trying to think my way to happiness, and my failure to achieve that goal only proves, in my mind, that I am not a good enough thinker. It never occurred to me that the source of my unhappiness is not flawed thinking but thinking itself.

Until I traveled to Thailand..." (pp. 224-225)

If the zeitgeist of Thailand in regards to dealing with life could be summed up in one sentence it would definitely be "don't sweat the small stuff". Or as the Thai put it, "mai pen lai", "drop it and get on with life".

Similar to Bhutan, the Buddhist influences on Thai culture have a big impact on their views of happiness. Thinking about one's personal happiness is frowned upon, and a belief in reincarnation encourages a relaxed perspective regarding the here and now. This is actually an attitude encouraged by psychologists. They call it mindfulness, and it is often a very difficult thing for Americans. American culture often encourages a preoccupation with the future, or work, or goals, which make focusing on the moment an uncomfortable and challenging task.

The Thai language is interesting in that it has words and phrases that refer to different types of smiles. Terms that refer to polite smiles you don't really

mean, to the smiles we make when we're actually sad, to smiles of affection and respect. It's why one of the nicknames for Thailand is "the land of smiles".

# Great Britain

The British often say “we aren’t in the business of happiness”. And that perhaps sums up the author’s experience in the UK quite well. Happiness there isn’t seen as an inherent goal in life.

That said, the author recounts an interesting experiment done by the BBC on the subject of how happiness can be spread. Set in the notoriously depressing London suburb of Slough, the BBC sent experts to work with 50 volunteers to see if they could become measurably more happy, and in turn spread that happiness.

Over the course of 12 weeks they were taught positive thinking exercises, mindfulness meditation, and psychological phenomena like how if you force yourself to smile more, you end up feeling happier. The volunteers practiced displaying more physical affection, spending more time in nature, doing yoga, engaging in playful behavior, and trying to spread contagious laughter.

By the end the volunteers were pulled as being significantly happier. Though it would have been interesting if the BBC had done a follow up to see if these effects continued long term.

# India

We've seen in multiple chapters the influence Buddhism has had on attitudes towards happiness, so what of the country where Buddhism was born?

The two religions that dominate India are Buddhism and Hinduism, and while they differ wildly, one of their shared characteristics is the view that chasing happiness is a futile and counter-productive endeavor that will itself only lead to unhappiness.

A fundamental tenet of Buddhism is that suffering is inherent to life, and that the only way we can be free of suffering is to free ourselves of desires, especially material desires.

While you might think such a country would be full of spirituality, unfortunately modern India has a huge problem with religious grifters. Gurus and cult leaders are in abundance, and they sell enlightenment for profit. Happiness is big business and grifters will offer the claim that they have all the answers, while in reality they give very little away.

However the roots of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs are still there. That the more you pursue happiness, the more elusive it will become. That we are all subject to Karma. Karma is often misunderstood in the west as being "what goes around comes around", but that's not quite right. Karma is more akin to what we might call fate, it is the sum total of your actions in this and past lives and it is essentially out of our control.

What happens happens, and trying to change that will only make you miserable.

# USA

Depending on who you ask it will likely come as no surprise that unhappiness is an epidemic in the United States. While the country itself is wealthy, happiness isn't proportionate. Happiness has actually been declining for the last 50 years, and rates of depression and anxiety have been increasing.

Some might point to this as an example of how material wealth isn't a good predictor of happiness. But others might point out that while the US has become wealthier, that wealth has not been felt equally. Income inequality is at an all time high, the cost of housing, medicine, and education have continually risen despite wages being stagnant for 40 years.

And unlike countries like Bhutan, American culture views poverty as a personal failing. That wealth comes only to those that deserve it. Unlike Iceland, failure is shameful in the US. Unlike the Netherlands, equality and social safety nets aren't present or valued. Unlike Thailand, Americans are constantly encouraged to be on the move, to think of the future, to think where you are now is never good enough.

A big issue for American happiness is the culture of overwork. Americans spend more time working than most other developed nations, and less time with loved ones. American communities are atomized, which is to say spread out and isolated. Most people don't even know their neighbors. Obesity is also correlated with higher rates of depression.

One might be tempted to make a comparison to Qatar, but a significant difference is that America, despite this unhappiness, has an abundance of art and culture. In fact it's the number one exporter of art and music and media on earth. It's the birthplace of jazz, the blues, rock and roll, cinema, comic books, and scores of the most well known English language writers.

But these art forms were often themselves born out of inequality and struggle. It seems that unlike Iceland, where art is pursued as a form of self-actualization, Americans often pursue art as a means of expressing their unhappiness.

## Final Summary

The path to happiness isn't a straight line, it's a maze, but there are certain constants that seem to exist. Material wealth can help in reducing anxiety and suffering related to poverty, but it can't provide happiness on its own, and after a certain level of wealth it stops contributing to happiness completely. Community is universally important, humans are social animals and we cannot be happy whilst isolated. Autonomy and contributing to society seem to contribute directly to happiness, but it can still be obtained without them. Living in the moment seems to consistently be a positive influence on happiness.

And ultimately chasing happiness seems to always be futile. Happiness comes from the here and now, not from the pursuit of it.



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