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Health

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Women's Secrets From Around The World

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**Five women
from around the globe
share their secrets
for staying healthy.**

When it comes to health and health care, America's got the high-tech approach down, with advanced (but invasive) medical treatments and effective (but sometimes dangerous) pharmaceuticals. People in other corners of the globe, though, travel different routes to wellness. In Japan, for instance, where women live longer than anywhere else, many people quaff an antioxidant-packed vegetable juice. In Germany, where life expectancy exceeds that of the United States, the government takes a more stringent approach to herbal supplements, researching their effectiveness and encouraging their use. Other countries certainly have not found the perfect approach to health. Still, there are lessons to be learned. So we sought out five especially healthy women from around the world, and asked them how they plan to stay that way.

WOMEN OF THE WORLD

*By Michelle Lodge
Photography by Kate Brooks,
Claudio Edinger, and Jason Loucas*



Naoko Kawamura, Japan



Vera Lucia Bastos Silva, Brazil



Gassia Mouradian, Lebanon



Alfrun-Thora Sanders-Reich, Germany



Alle Brunning, Australia

A DELICATE BALANCING ACT

Naoko Kawamura, 39

Tokyo, Japan; jewelry sales representative, single, no children

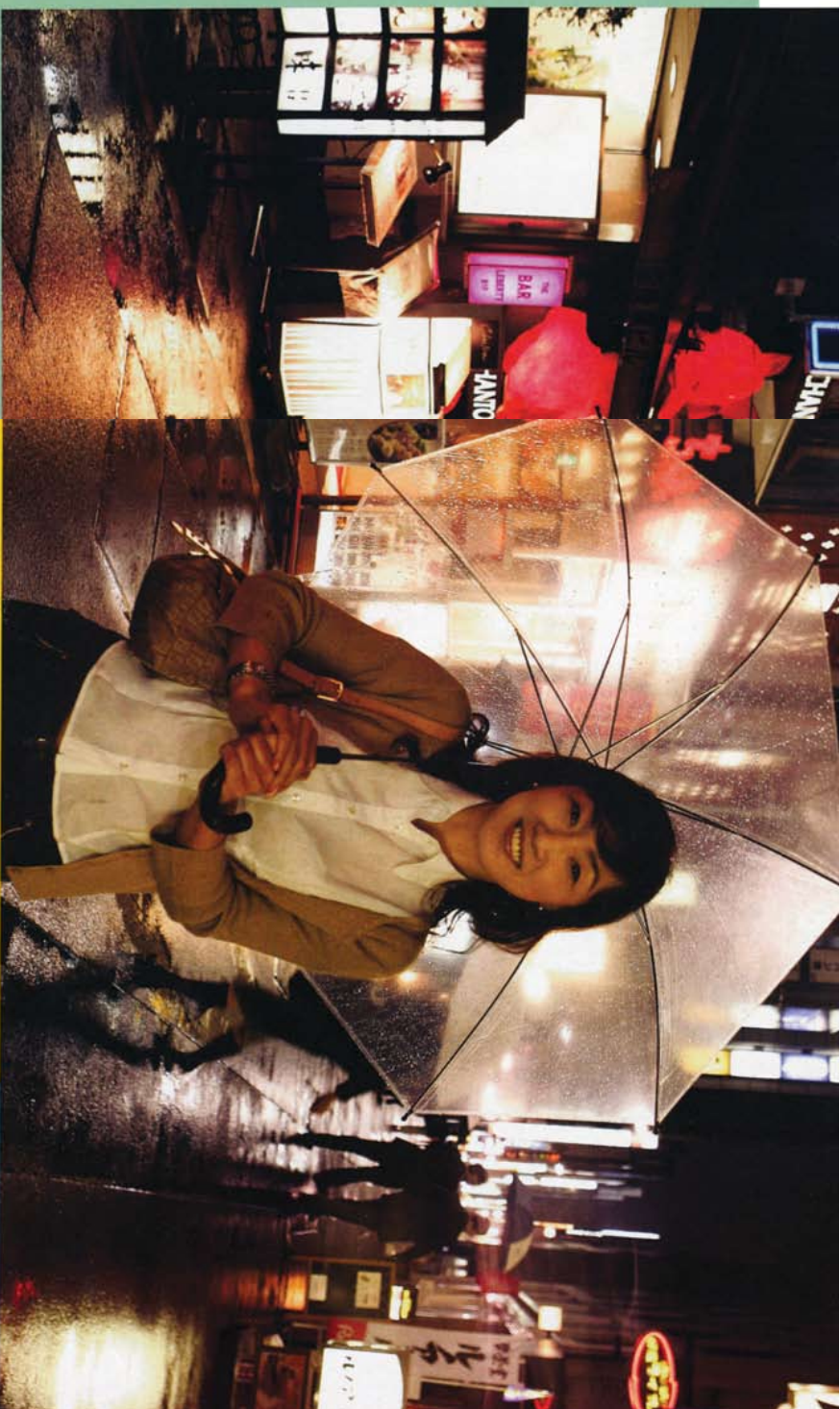
To Naoko, life is a precious gift. "I love my body and soul. I thank God that I was born," she says. She feels an almost religious obligation to take good care of herself and maintain her looks. Besides, it's only practical. A salesperson for tony jeweler Harry Winston, Naoko says her customers demand a near-perfect expertise—from the way she presents herself to the brilliant gems they see.

How she starts her day: For breakfast, Naoko has yogurt, fresh grapefruit, a glass of water, and *soyjin*, a bitter, vitamin-packed juice composed of up to 15 green vegetables including kale. (*Aojiru* is widely available at Japanese convenience stores.) Naoko also takes a multivitamin containing, among other things, the spice turmeric that, in animal studies, has been shown to help prevent liver ailments.

On working hard: Naoko so loves showcasing beautiful decorative art that she has a hard time making a distinction between "work" and "hobby." So her workdays can go on as long as 11 hours. Still, she tries to keep balance in her life. For relaxation, she swims, takes aerobics classes, and does ballet. Every 3 weeks, she schedules *ashitaba*, a kind of foot massage. And for purification, she goes for colonic irrigation every 3 months (a habit some American doctors would call dangerous).

In her medicine chest: Aspirin, petroleum jelly, adhesive bandages, a laxative, diarrhea medicine, and Japanese herbal medicines (*kampo*) that are intended to reduce fever and soothe the stomach and bowel.

On staying beautiful: Like generations of Japanese women before her, Naoko believes that a pale, clear complexion is the key to looking young and beautiful. Her grandmother lightened her skin with a paste made of nightingale feces, and her mother applied fresh lemon slices to her face.



Naoko follows a more high-tech routine, though: Every 3 weeks, she visits an aesthetician who eliminates any brown spots with a laser. She also applies sunblock every day and carries a special parasol that intercepts harmful UV rays. But she considers unnecessary the ubiquitous skin-bleaching products that giant cosmetic firms produce specifically for the Japanese market. "I believe if I'm happy and have grace in my life, it shows on the outside," Naoko says.

Photo: Kate Brook/Polaris. Illustration: www.maps.com

More on Japan

Why do the Japanese live so long? They are physically active (71 percent exercise regularly). They weigh in at the right poundage (for 80 percent of women). And traditionally they eat a diet low in calories and red meat, and rich in fruits, vegetables, grains, and fish.

Then there's *kampo*, the Japanese version of traditional Chinese medicine, which is used both preventively and as a healing agent. Marginalized for 150 years after Japan adopted German-style medical education, the practice has recently been added to the curricula of Japanese medical



schools. But herbal products never went out of style; an estimated 70 percent of conventional medical doctors prescribe medications based on *kampo*.

Compared with Americans, "Japanese people tend to be more self-sufficient, more involved in keeping themselves healthy without first going to the doctor," concludes Jeff Disney, MD, an assistant professor of emergency medicine at the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland who practiced in Japan for 2 years.

Who lives longest?

Average life expectancy of women	Years
Japan	85
Australia	83
Germany	82
United States	80
Lebanon	75
Brazil	73

Source: World Health Organization

COPING IN A LOOKS-CENTRIC LAND

Vera Lúcia Bastos Silva, 29
Salvador (between Rio and São Paulo), Brazil:
hair stylist, single, no children

Vivacious and fun-loving, Vera has lots of free time during the week; she usually visits her customers' homes to do their hair on Saturdays and Sundays. Her off hours are spent sunbathing (using a sunblock with an SPF of 4 for her body and 15 for her face), watching movies, crocheting clothes, dancing, and listening to music from the '60s and '70s by artists like Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, and Janis Joplin. "To stay healthy," she says, "I avoid getting stressed about small things."

She prefers natural remedies to conventional ones. "I frequently eat pineapple to digest foods better," Vera explains. Instead of conventional medicine, she sips herbal teas for headaches and stomachaches. "I don't like to take drugs because of their side effects," she says.

How her day starts: Vera's mornings begin around 6:30. "I arrange things around the house and take care of my mother, who is in a wheelchair," she says. "Later I take the dog for a walk."

Vera's typical breakfast is bread, coffee, banana, melon, and a vitamin.

On staying slim: Nowadays, slender figures are considered more attractive than the curvier ones Brazilian men used to like. Vera maintains her weight by avoiding soda and sweets, and doing yoga and tai chi workouts 4 days a week. While she doesn't see much plastic surgery in her future, Vera does predict she'll get liposuction after she has children.

On sex: "It's very important before marriage," Vera says. "My fiancé and I enjoy an active, imaginative sex life and have intercourse nearly every day."

In her medicine chest: Vitamin pills, plus *Levedura de cerveja* (beer yeast, or brewer's yeast, high in B vitamins), which she takes in pill form twice a day* to keep her skin blemish-free.



More on Brazil

All Brazilian women aren't as laid-back as Vera, of course.

There's the famous image of being "tall and tan and young and lovely," like the girl from Joazeiro. But living up to that takes a lot more work than it used to. About 4 in 10 adult Brazilians are overweight, so 2 to 3 months before summer (this time of year), women engage in a frenzy of dieting, working out, and even having plastic surgery to look good in their bikinis, says Denise Pereira, MD, a Brazilian who's now a University of Miami School of Medicine professor in Coral Gables, Florida. The pressure to look good is intense: 90 percent of Brazilian women classify beauty products as essentials, not luxuries. The country is second only to Argentina in per-capita use of plastic surgery.

Still, Brazilians have several advantages healthwise. Though the tradition has been dropped in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, businesses still shut down for 1 to 3 hours at lunchtime in the capital, Brasília, and elsewhere to observe the afternoon *intervalo*, or *síntese*. Also, Brazil is among the world's top five producers of fruit, which helps keep meals healthy.

Who's heaviest? Overweight* women around the world

United States	38%
Australia	23%
Lebanon	15%
Brazil	15%
Japan	2%

*WHO's 2001 World Health Organization Survey. World Health Organization

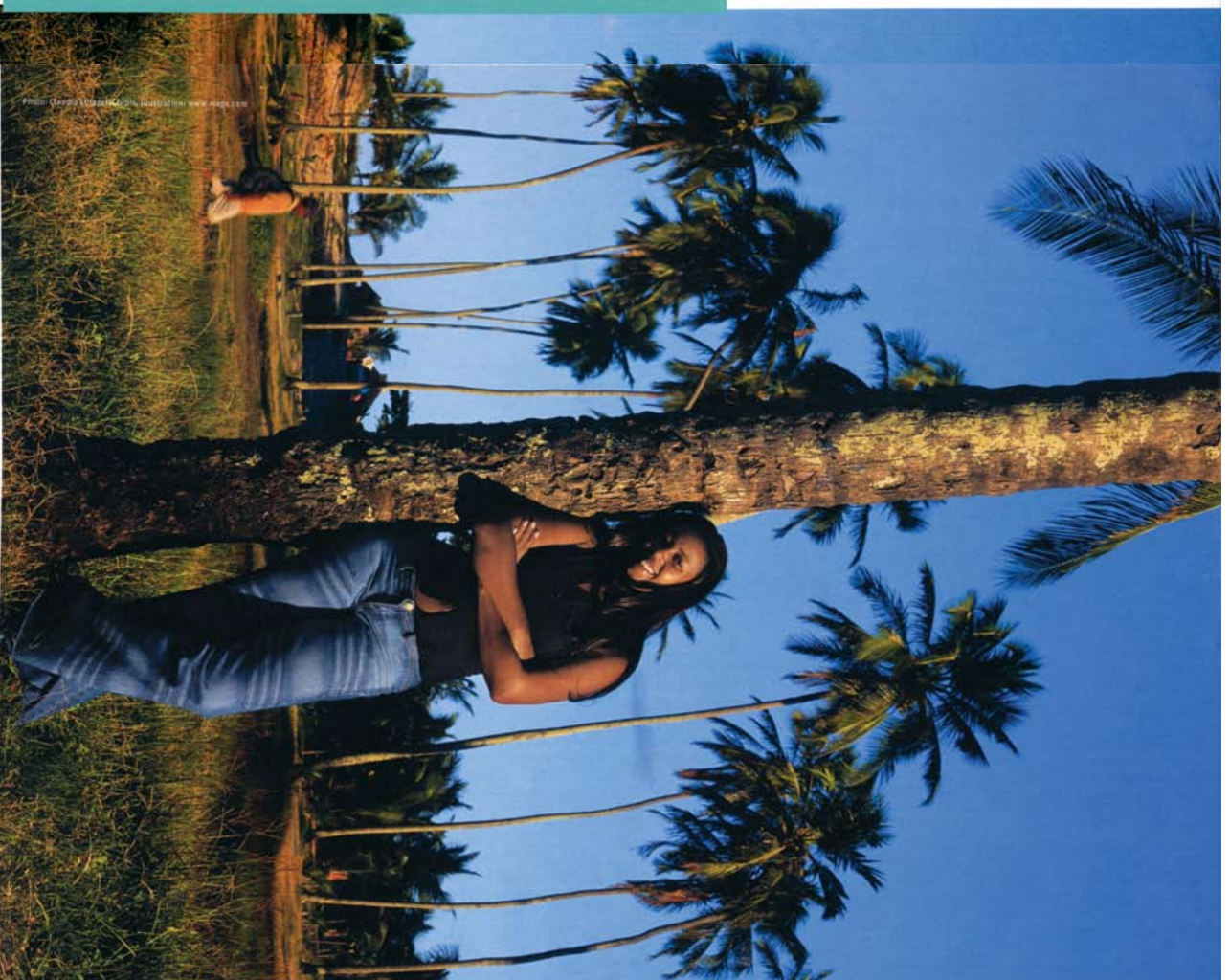


Photo: Getty Images/Chris Mattel/Photo.com

REMODELING THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

Gassia Mouradian, 33

Mein (25 miles from Beirut), Lebanon; painter and art student, wife, and mother of 7-year-old Azad

Gassia, a former teacher now enrolled in art school, paints in bright colors and broad strokes. Her ability to see the big picture has come in handy when taking care of her husband and son. Since high blood pressure and diabetes are in her family tree, Gassia makes an effort to serve a more nutritious version of Lebanese cuisine than her mother did. Instead of meat, fried foods, and sweets, she prepares fish, beans, lentils, hummus, tomatoes, spinach, and rice steamed with coriander. "Tabbouleh is so healthy I even have it as a main dish," she says.

Gassia also recognizes the importance of dairy products. "One casualty of growing up during the 15-year Lebanese civil war was that I didn't learn to drink milk. Only powdered milk was available then, and it tasted so bad," she says. "These days, I take calcium supplements and feed my son lots of fresh milk from Lebanese dairies."

Gassia generally has only two meals a day—breakfast and a substantial lunch at about 3 p.m. of whatever she's cooked for dinner. "In the evenings around 7 p.m., I serve food for my family," she says, "but I almost never eat them."

How she starts her day: Breakfast for Gassia is a small sandwich of fat-free cheese and whole-wheat bread with a café latte.

On self-acceptance: Well-to-do Lebanese women are fashion-conscious and like a finished look, Gassia says. "The seventh-graders she used to teach were already going to salons to have their eyebrows groomed). Nose jobs are common, she notes, although statistics are hard to come by in Lebanon. "When I was younger, I wanted surgery, too, to get rid of a large nose in my nose," Gassia says. "I'm glad I didn't, though."

On sex: "Having sex before marriage doesn't help one increase understanding of the other; it only adds more confusion," she says. "This special gift should be saved for the unique moment and person."

Turn to page 204 to see two more women's stories.



More on Lebanon

Lebanon is an amalgam—a developing Middle Eastern country with a dominant Arab population, but heavily influenced by Europe (especially France) and the United States. Its medical system had to be restored after the devastating civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990. Lebanese cuisine is very healthy, a variant on the Mediterranean diet that relies heavily on olive oil, beans, whole grains,

and vegetable salads such as tabbouleh. But there's a glaring exception: lots of fried food. More than two-thirds of women over 34 are overweight, and the country has high rates of heart disease and diabetes. Compared with Americans, the Lebanese tend to smoke more and exercise less, says Ramzi Younis, MD, a Lebanese who's an associate professor at the University of Miami Medical School. He adds, "Lebanon is changing, though, and getting more health-conscious."

Who indulges themselves most often?

At least once a week

Germany	73%
Brazil	61%
United States	41%
Australia	33%
Japan	25%

Source: 2002 Euro Global Wellness Survey



Photo: Kate Brooks/Polaris; Illustration: www.maps.com

KEEPING IT GREEN

Alfrun-Thora Sanders-Reich, 42
Feldafing (outside Munich), Germany; lawyer and mediator, married, mother of 8-year-old Julian, and expecting a baby this month

Alfrun's mother had to get organic food items from a special chain of stores. But these days so many Germans prefer organically grown, pesticide-free food that Alfrun can readily find it at nearby markets. She and her family have always followed a diet of whole grains, tofu, fresh fruits and vegetables, little alcohol, few sweets, and milk that comes from dairies that give their cows no genetically modified feed.

Due to deliver any day now, Alfrun goes to a conventional obstetrician for her pregnancy care and will deliver her next child in a hospital. But she was treated last year for a viral infection at a special clinic in Munich that's staffed by internists who are familiar with homeopathic medicine.

As a child, Alfrun was rarely given antibiotics when she had a cold or inflamed throat. Instead, her mother administered bed rest and homeopathic remedies. "Some other mothers thought my mother was cruel, but it's paid off," she says, "Today I rarely need the drug. And my son has never had an antibiotic."

How she builds in family time: At least twice during the work week, Alfrun's whole family, sometimes including Julian's grandmother, has lunch together at her home for about 45 minutes.



On staying beautiful: Alfrun rarely applies makeup or perfume, and she never gets her hair colored. She's also opposed to cosmetic surgery. "Because I want to look natural, I won't do it," she explains. "I think cutting the body with knives affects its integrity."

In her medicine chest: Homeopathic medicines like arnica D12, and herbal products such as chamomile, a cough syrup made from thyme, and echinacea (although, Alfrun notes, it is not recommended during pregnancy).

On her son: "Sometimes, my son gets angry with me, because he wants to eat the sugary cereals like his friends. So at times, I let him," Alfrun explains. "It helps to be flexible, don't you think?"



More on Germany

Germans love the natural life (one survey found that 91 percent feel it's important to spend time in natural settings), and the government encourages them to keep their environment and their bodies clear of chemicals. About 5 years ago, the country's head of agriculture announced plans to produce 20 percent of Germany's farm products organically, although there is disagreement as to how well it's working. And last year, the government passed a law strictly isolating farmland where genetically engineered crops are grown so that the altered foods don't intermingle with unaltered ones.

Most famously, the German government underwrites research on the safety and effectiveness of hundreds of herbal medications like echinacea, resulting in authoritative information on their therapeutic uses, correct doses, and contraindications. The report, known as the "Commission E Monographs," is available (in English) at www.amazon.com.



HANDLING THE AUSSIE SUN

Alle Brunning, 29

Dee Why (near Sydney), Australia;
freelance TV reporter, single, no children

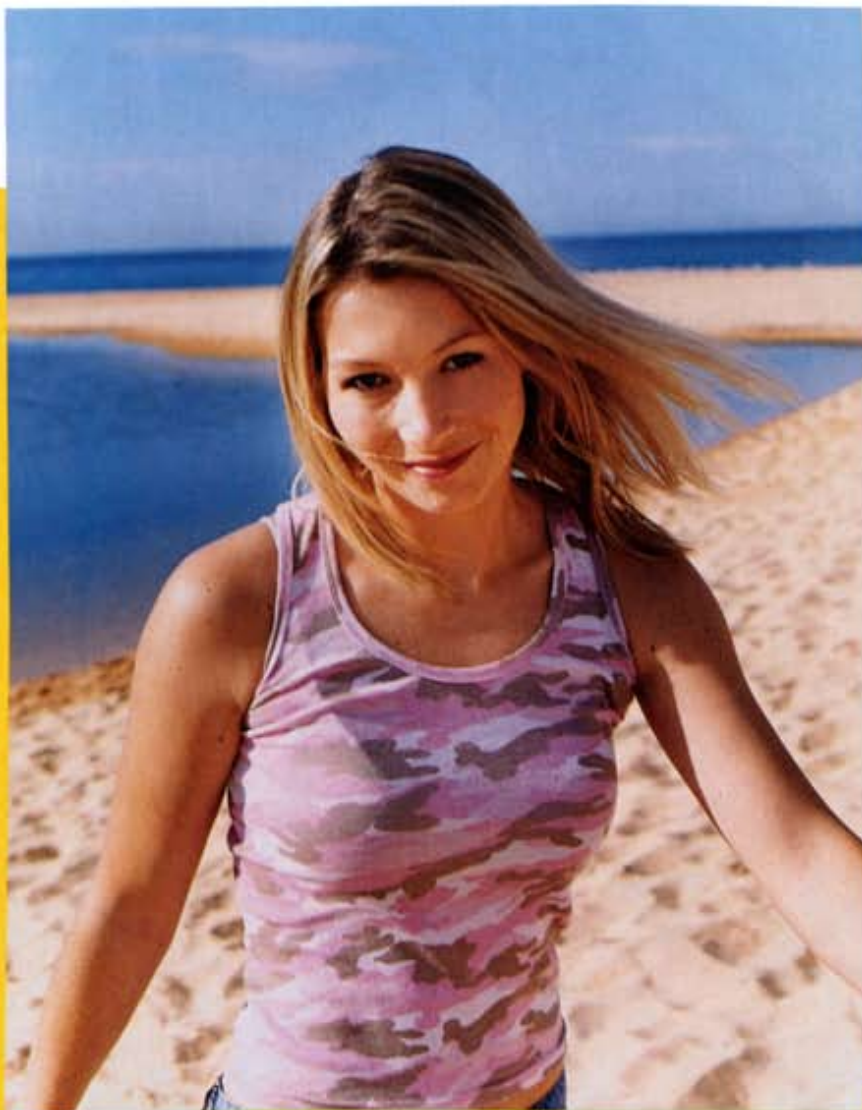
Alle's life moves almost as fast as the car and motorcycle races she covers for Channel 10 in Australia. Fortunately, the bubbly journalist has no trouble keeping up. "I am rarely sick," she says, "and I've never been in the hospital."

Her free time is also busy. Alle hits the gym three to five times a week for aerobics, step, Pilates, and weight-training classes. "Whenever I can, my fiancé and I bring my dog along for a jog in the sand dunes near my house. That makes all of us happy," she says.

How her day starts: Breakfast is usually cereal with skim milk, or toast with Vegemite, a strong-tasting yeast spread high in B vitamins that is the Australian national condiment.

On living in the sun: Alle can't even remember the last time her face got sunburned. "I avoid sunbathing between 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m., never forget my sunnies [sunglasses], and usually wear sunblock or makeup with a 15 or 30 SPF, particularly when working outdoors." Once a year she gets her skin checked by a doctor.

On growing older: "Aging, and looking older, does scare me a bit. It seems like it sneaks up on you. One day you just wake up, look in the mirror, and think, Whoa, where did all those lines come from? I've felt like that a bit lately," Alle says. "But I have good skin for my age because I take care of it."



More on Australia

The image of the fit, tanned Australian, forged by Olympic gold-medalist swimmers and buff surfers, is becoming a thing of the past. Start with the tan: Because of Australia's latitude, it gets much more intense sunlight than Europe, and skin-cancer rates there are among the world's highest (four times that of the United States). For more than 25 years, a government campaign has encouraged restraint in the sun, as well as regular skin checkups. And the population has taken heed: In 1998, 7 out of 10 Australians liked the way they looked with a tan; today, only 3 out of 10 do. Australians aren't

totally living up to the buff stereotype either. In the last 10 years, the average Aussie girth has been widening, thanks to a diet rich in junk food. "We are second only to Americans in obesity," says George Fielding, MD, an Australian who's affiliated with the New York University Medical School.

The country is still comparatively fit, though. A relatively high percentage of Australians exercise regularly—67 percent versus 51 percent in the United States. And in a country where most of the population lives on its coasts, swimming is a major pastime. 🏊

A regular Time contributor, author Michelle Lodge has visited four continents—and has her eye on the rest.