My Personal Review:
Thrive has at its core a very interesting idea. Based on a number of surveys, Dan Buettner identified four areas of the world which are each known for their high happiness levels. These are Denmark, Singapore, Monterrey Mexico, and San Louis Obispo California. Thats not to say that people in Singapore are happier than various locations in Europe and the US - but Buettner wanted to examine a range of cultures, so he was looking at the happiest in their region.
Buettner began with Denmark. Apparently the reason people are happy there is that they are all white, rich, and have self-funded a beautiful social network, sort of like setting up an ideal boarding school that you live in. Oh, and their motto is well it could be worse. I oversimplify a bit :) But it does seem to boil down to these ideas. Everyone feels like their neighbors are just like them, they all have good money and job opportunities, and they are OK with paying high taxes because it invests right into their fairly small community. Denmark has about 5.3 million people - smaller than New York City.

Now, to be fair, the schools in Denmark encourage them to learn fun, artistic skills. They have beautiful nature around them, they all enjoy riding bikes and stay healthy. Their economy runs smoothly. And again, with their way of life being This is good enough, be happy its not sliding downhill, they end up being content with what they have. Which certainly is a lesson that everybody can learn. The average happiness level here was 8/10.

On to Singapore. This is perhaps an opposite case to Denmark. Rather than being all the same, Singapore has many different cultures intermingled. Because many of these were foreigners, the government felt the best way to have coexistence happen smoothly was to create strict laws about everything. No gum. No trash. Every person felt as if they could strive and succeed, by following those rules. They feel safe, and that makes them serene.

Where in Denmark they think about how things are OK compared to the alternatives, in Singapore they focus on the things they can get. Theyre jealous of those with more money and drive to get that money for themselves. Buettner talks to people with 300 shoes who go to wild parties. Where in Denmark it seemed people were low key and quiet, here its about glitz and glamour. Interestingly, this happiest place in the Asian region is only 6.6 on the happiness scale.

On to Mexico. This is yet another situation entirely. The Mexicans feel their government is incredibly corrupt and have no sense of security there. They certainly do not have lots of money or ample jobs. Instead, what makes the Monterrey group happy is family, community, and religion. They have the sense that they are all in this together - this bleak state - and as long as they can laugh, sing, and enjoy what they have, they can get through it. Their average income is $11,000 a year - certainly not enough to buy 300 pairs of shoes, but enough to stay fed and sheltered. Their community is their main source of support. They dont crave high def TVs or fancy cars. They enjoy dancing together at the local celebration.

Its worth noting though that Monterrey is the most wealthy area of Mexico. So they know they are better off than all other Mexicans, which can certainly effect how content you are with what you have.
Last we come to San Louis Obispo. We have circled around to a rich, exclusive area again. Apparently students who go to school here are warned that while they will fall in love with the beauty of the surrounding nature and the great arts and social scene of the town, that its unlikely they'll be able to afford living here. It is a wealthy retreat that many desire to join. People come here who love the scenery and who appreciate the artistic offerings. It is almost back to the boarding school idea, that you have a lot of money and you use that money to create an enclosed world of your dreams.

Buettner tries to sum up these four different locations with some ideals that we can all live by. Some of them make sense. If youre self employed, you have some of the highest chances of happiness. Sure, because you can work on what you want to work on, you can direct your own life, and you reap all the rewards. In Okinawa there is no word for retire. People do not stop doing what they love just because they hit an arbitrary age limit. Sure, they might change their interests over time, but they stay engaged and active in them.

Other suggestions seem very iffy though. Join a church? While in Mexico their religion gives them a common support system to fight the governments corruption, the book also says that there are many very religious locations that are the most miserable on earth. It hardly seems that going to church, if you're not interested, can inject happiness into your life. Quite the opposite.

Also, Buettner apparently is against living together before marriage. He says people more likely to live together are more likely to divorce. Sure, and you can also say that people who are adamantly against living together are also the ones who will stay in abusive relationships because divorce is wrong. With stats saying that almost 1/3rd of women are abused by their husband or boyfriend, I wouldnt be so quick to jump on the stay together at all costs bandwagon.

I also had an issue with how gleefully Buettner seemed to enjoy finding wealthy people in these different locations and living the high life with them. I had to wade through details of sake parties, Champagne parties, and the famous people he met. I really didn't read the book to learn about Buettners party life. I wanted to know how average people lived - not how the rich and famous hob-nobbed with nobility.

Still, there was a lot of valuable information here to learn from the different cultures. You could of course take away the thought that being wealthy can buy you happiness and let you live somewhere thats beautiful and well taken care of. You can imagine that the fun of making money and buying lots of things can keep fueling your happiness. The book seems to say all of these things. However, I like to look at the various scenarios a bit differently.
In Denmark, they were all happy with what they had. Sure, again, they were wealthy! They were in a calm, no-ethnic-strife, beautiful location. But even so, a key part of their contentment was that they appreciated what they had, and did not chase additional wealth or items.

In Singapore, a key seemed to be that they felt safe and secure. One woman said she could go walking through the city at midnight and feel no concern. Their world was organized to help them thrive, based on their energies and efforts.

In Monterrey, the community provided their pleasure. They thrilled with family and friends, spending time together, and simply having fun. It wasn't about money or buying things - it was about relationships.

In California, it was about appreciating natural beauty and the arts. If you give yourself time to walk quietly through the forest, and then relax in the evening by listening to beautiful music, it brings joy to your heart.

I recommend reading Thrive to learn more about these different groups of people, but be aware that sometimes you'll have to sift through what Buettner is saying in order to figure out what is important to you.

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