

SUNDAY INSIGHT

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HOME SWEET HOME: Piha, on Auckland's west coast, is a popular destination for thousands, but all is not well with its unhappy residents.

DOUG SHERRING

WHY SO BLUE?

DEEP IN Waitakere City, Westfield Westcity shopping mall's high concrete ramparts set it apart from the shabby shops and discount stores of the Henderson stretch of Great North Road. With its familiar layout, replica chain stores and harsh lighting, this mall could be anywhere in the country — until you look around at the grim faces.

Supermarket shoppers elbow their way through the deadpan crowd, and even the hand-holding couples look gloomy. Aside from the giggles of window-shopping teenage girls, few smiles crack the surface.

Then we start telling bad jokes. Excerpts from *The Most Awful Joke Book Ever*, reliably yield smiles. "Doctor, doctor, I feel like a car." "Yes, you do look exhausted."

The grin on the face of 69-year-old pensioner Emily Boots is particularly wide. She laughs: "Ooh, that's a silly one!"

It seems Waitakere could do with a laugh. In a draft report, New Zealand's Happiest Places, the final of the seven-part TopSpots report series to be published today, Rodney takes the happiest-place honours while Waitakere languishes at the bottom.

Robyn Malcolm can judge the mood in Waitakere better than most: the hard-working, hard-partying character she plays on TV's *Outrageous Fortune* is the archetypal Westie, yet the actor herself lives in Devonport on Auckland's North Shore. Malcolm says every place has its happy and its unhappy bits: "It depends on who moves in."

But then, she can't resist slipping

People are healthiest in Rodney, wealthiest in Wellington, and spend time with their families in Tauranga. But in Waitakere, they're not so happy. **Sarah Lang** sets out to make the Westies smile.

into character as the chain-smoking leather-and-lace-clad mum Cheryl West: "West Auckland's bloody brilliant," drawls her character. "It's got the best beaches, the best shops, good red-blooded New Zealand families, they know their cars, they know their pubs."

Based on data from the Quality of Life Report — commissioned by 12 participating city and district councils from across the country and also released this month — New Zealand's Happiest Places rates the happiness levels of the 12 communities and compares the results with the country's overall figures.

Spanning how we feel about ourselves, our lives and our communities, the criteria are health, satisfaction with leisure time, sense of safety at home in the day, perceived safety of unsupervised children in the local area, balance between work and other aspects of life, emotional wellbeing, frequency of experiencing stress, feeling of isolation, ability to cover costs of everyday life, overall satisfaction with life, and perceptions

of quality of life.

Easily topping the podium, Rodney took six of the 11 category trophies and came out more than 100 points ahead of silver medallist Dunedin. As well as Rodney, 11 of New Zealand's 16 cities (all but Napier, Palmerston North, Upper Hutt, Nelson and Invercargill) participated in the original study. Retiree-haven Tauranga elbowed Wellington out

WEST IS BEST: Robyn Malcolm, who plays Cheryl West in *Outrageous Fortune* says Westies aren't sad.



of the medals but the capital, which has scored consistently highly in all the TopSpots studies, topped the perceptions of quality of life and ability-to-cover costs categories. Blue-collar Porirua was the unexpected bolter, coming in as the fifth happiest place overall — while ninth-placed Auckland didn't fare so well overall but did okay in people's quality of life perceptions.

In last place with just 70 of a maximum 1100 points (less than a quarter of the points of its closest competitor, Manukau) was Waitakere, which came last in seven of the 11 measures. Its best category ranking was eighth out of 12 for stress.

SO WHAT are they all so happy about up in Rodney? Conjuring up images of silver hair, lifestyle blocks, palatial baches and a white-sand strip of coastline, Auckland's northernmost district spans Kumeu and Helensville in the west, the comfortably off villages of Wellsford and Warkworth, winery-laden Matakana, the Golden Years oasis of Orewa, and Hibiscus Coast commuter suburbs such as Whangaparaoa. Although it has just 90,000 residents (more than Palmerston North but fewer than Lower Hutt), its population is the fastest-growing in the country, employment growth outstrips the national rate; it's home to the highest proportion of CEOs, general managers and legislators in New Zealand; and despite the slowdown in the national market, house prices

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HAPPIEST TOWNS



1	Rodney District	885
2	Dunedin	775
3	Tauranga	665
4	Wellington	660
5	Porirua	620
6	Christchurch	590
7	North Shore	450
8	Hutt	365
9	Auckland	350
10	Hamilton	330
11	Manukau	290
12	Waitakere	70

Scores are out of a possible 1100

Source: TopSpots draft report

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are continuing to rise.

Broadcaster Jeanette Thomas, 36, moved from Auckland's Mt Eden to Whangaparaoa six years ago because it seemed the perfect place to raise daughters Mia, 7, and Charlotte, 5. A breakfast-radio host and presenter of TV show *Target*, Thomas and policeman husband Dave couldn't afford the kind of home they wanted in Auckland. Now the family lives in a roomy house with a good-sized backyard in a quiet cul-de-sac, just a stone's throw from the beach and a big park.

"I love Rodney," says Thomas. "It's such a great place to bring up children. The beaches are beautiful, the people are super-friendly and there's so many young families in the area now."

Somewhat surprisingly, residents of Rodney — a district with low housing density even in its towns — reported the lowest sense of isolation in the Quality of Life survey. But don't go assuming all those Rodney credit cards are paid off. Well down the list from the comfortably off Wellingtonians, most Rodney residents said they were only scraping by — or in some cases, that they couldn't afford everyday costs. After all, there are some hefty mortgages in suburbs that rode the house price roller-coaster, and residents have to pay for those gas-guzzling trips to town. You'll find the emptiest piggybanks in Waitakere where, according to the draft TopSpots report, even more people were struggling to cover everyday costs — the worst result for any of the 12 communities.

Back at Westgate mall, Henderson architectural draughtsman Hamish Allot is rushing back from the supermarket clutching a pack of Home Brand toilet paper. Although Allot considers himself a happy guy, he's got a strong view on why wider Waitakere is miserable. "Day-to-day living costs [rents, rates, mortgages] are crippling



JOY: Ravishankar Ramachandran with daughter Mia.



CHEER: Sarah Wheeler can raise a smile at Westfield.



MORE MONEY: Angela Gussery knows what she wants.



FRIENDSHIP: Emily Boots likes a natter to neighbours.



GOOD SPIRITS: Mario and Lynette Holtrigter.



LIVING: Hamish Allott says the cost is "crippling" GETTY IMAGES

given the average income out here," he says.

Sure, they might be doing fine out in the green village of Titirangi, but there's no doubt the modest pay cheques in the urban sprawl of Henderson, Glen Eden and New Lynn are dragging down the ratings. That's despite the long hours they're clocking up: Waitakere also scored worst for work-life balance.

The man unhappiest about Waitakere's "unhappy" tag is mayor Bob Harvey.

"I strongly disagree with the findings. We're proud of our city and happy here," he says.

He believes TopSpots uses too few criteria and presents too simplistic a picture.

TopSpots Reports author Stephen Hart, a best-selling homebuyers' book author and presenter of TV2's *House Call*, explains that the research uses comprehensive, multiple-answer questions to reveal the places where residents are genuinely happiest — not just contented.

Certainly, Rodney Mayor Penny Webster is more than happy with the methodology used. Delighted "but not surprised" by the happiest place title, she cites Rodney's outdoor lifestyle, beaches, scenery, open spaces and strong community feeling as reasons for the happiness wave.

"Keeping things simple tends to bring the smile back to most people's faces."

DR SARA CHATWIN
Auckland Psychologist

Let's take a step back: what does make us happy? With a library of books on positive psychology (the science of what makes people happy), there's now an entire happiness industry out there. As Auckland psychologist Dr Sara Chatwin points out, happiness isn't a brief rush of ecstasy following a shopping high or other pleasurable experience; it's overall contentment with your lot.

And, believe it or not, money doesn't make us happy. Sure, poverty makes you unhappy but once basic needs are met there's little difference between the wealthy and the well-enough off.

Wealthy, successful-on-paper people are just as flush with problems as the rest of us, says Chatwin, who sees dozens of cashed-up clients and even celebrities at her psychology practice, Mindworks.

"I believe keeping things simple tends to bring the smile back to most

people's faces," says Chatwin. "It's too tough trying to be Elle McPherson so celebrate who you are rather than who you want to be."

Much like a child would, she says, concentrate on the here-and-now rather than the future. "Having huge goals doesn't do your happiness quotient any good."

So what are some simple, practical ways we can inject more happiness into our lives?

Believing everybody can train themselves to be happy, Chatwin advises prioritising commitment-free "me time", surrounding yourself with friends and family and casting off things, activities and people that are bringing you down. She suggests setting achievable goals and taking baby steps towards them, like phoning a good friend each week or taking an hour for yourself in the day. While they might seem silly or naff, little things like smiles, laughs, treats and tending a plant aren't just happiness-theory fodder, says Chatwin. "They really do work."

For more tips, University of Auckland happiness website calm.auckland.ac.nz (Computer Assisted Learning for the Mind) offers downloadable audio files with techniques to manage three sources of long-lasting happiness: mental resilience, healthy relationships and

HOW TO BE HAPPY

1 Get physical. Exercise for half an hour three times a week.

2 Count your blessings. At the end of each day, reflect on at least five things you're grateful for.

3 Have an hour-long uninterrupted conversation with your partner or best friend each week.

4 Plant something — even if it's in a window box or a container. Keep it alive!

5 Cut your TV viewing by half.

6 Smile at or say hello to a stranger at least once a day.

7 Phone a friend.

8 Have a good laugh at least once a day.

9 Make sure you give yourself a daily treat.

10 Do an extra good turn for someone each day.

Source: *Making Slough Happy*, BBC

finding meaning in life.

BBC series *Making Slough Happy* is also worth a look. One of the most miserable spots in Britain — even its name even makes you cringe — Slough was chosen by a team of psychological experts for a social experiment with an ambitious goal: to make the town's residents happier.

Bear in mind, this is the town in which comedian Ricky Gervais chose to set his comedy, *The Office*, about the soulless, grey, Monday-to-Friday existence of workers in the fictitious Wernham Hogg paper company.

Making Slough Happy set out to turn that around. The 2005 experiment's "keyword" was connectedness with other individuals and the community. After planting "seeds of happiness" in 50 volunteers, encouraging them to laugh, exercise and cut back their TV viewing, the exercise set a ripple of happiness washing through the town.

Given the success in Slough, the *Herald on Sunday* decided to find out whether any of the techniques used there would work on shoppers in Waitakere. Saying hello to a stranger (one) who was proffering a treat (two) in the form of a Roses chocolate, and laughing at a joke (three) did (according to most people surveyed) make them a smidgen happier, if only for a second.

Chocolates aside, Emily Boots reckons the key to lifting her spirits is nattering to the neighbours in her Henderson retirement home.

Massey veterinary nurse Angela Gussery thought more money and fewer hours at work would do the trick. And Henderson Heights software engineer Ravishankar Ramachandran, 37, said "financial freedom" and a promotion would give him a boost.

Of course, for his 4-year-old daughter Mia, all it takes is an icecream at the mall to make her day — and she beams a smile of what looks like unqualified happiness.

Perhaps that's the answer.