



# Nature as a place of longing in the digital performance society

White Paper United Kingdom

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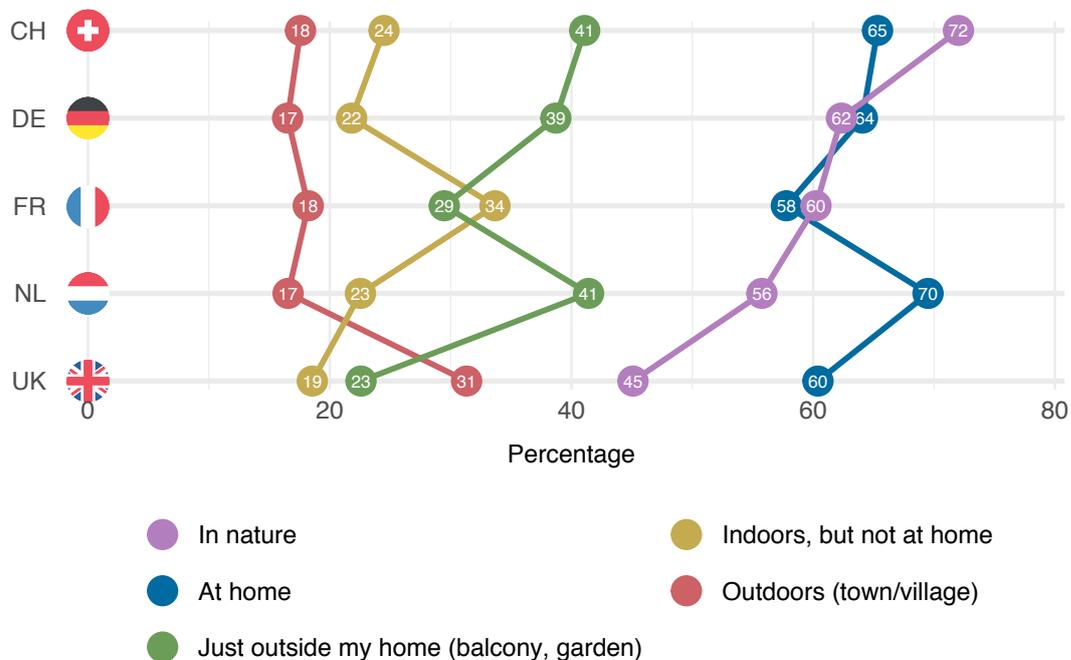


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Always being reachable, always being compared and judged, all while striving to achieve under stress – these are the familiar hallmarks of today’s society. Hiking is becoming an ever more important way to offset all this. What similarities and differences emerge between the United Kingdom and other countries in Northwest Europe in terms of how nature is seen as a place of relaxation and recovery? In March 2019, Zurich-based research agency sotomo surveyed 5,340 individuals in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, asking them about the day-to-day significance of nature for them and how they engage with it. The representative online survey conducted on behalf of Switzerland Tourism enables a representative comparison of the countries for the first time.

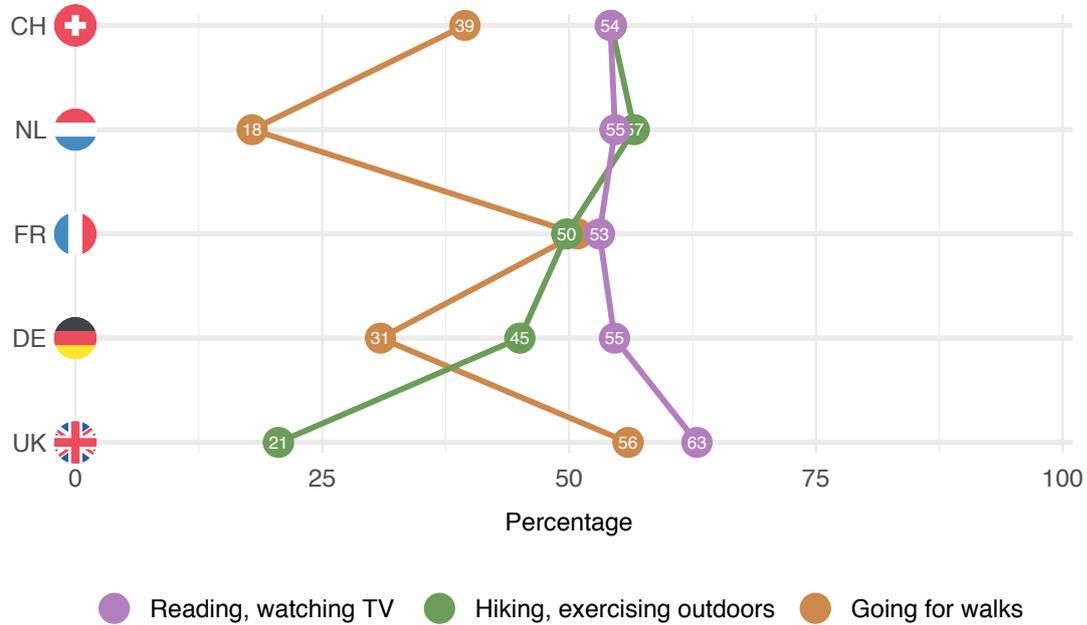
## 1 Nature and stress



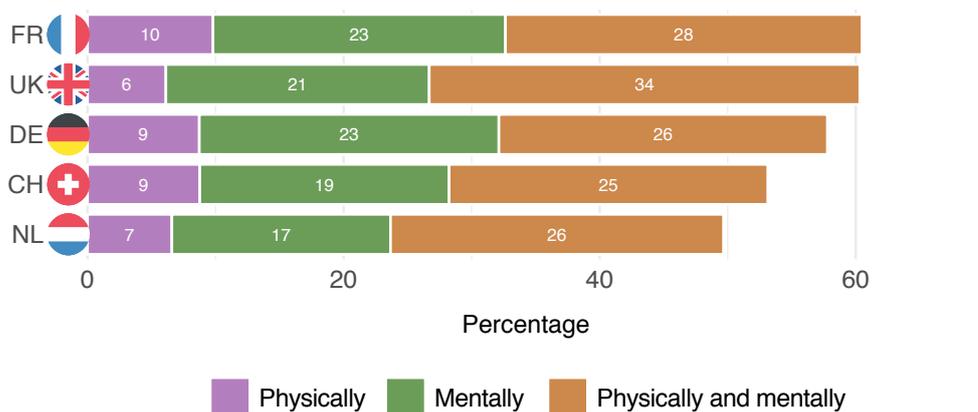
**Figure 1:** Environments that enable those surveyed to recover from the pressures and stress of life.

The study shows that people in Northwest Europe long for nature as opposed to the digital performance society. In all five countries, nature is extremely important for restoring emotional balance. Alongside the home, it is considered the best place in which to recover from stress. However, it is striking that being outdoors in their own town or village is significantly more important for people in the UK than in the other four countries (fig. 1). While hiking and being active outdoors surrounded by nature are generally among the most popular activities

in Northwest Europe, respondents in the UK prefer to take things a little easier. After reading or watching TV, going for a stroll or short walk is the most popular activity here. However, even in the UK, hiking is more popular as a recuperative activity than playing a sport or meditation (fig. 2).



**Figure 2:** Activities that enable those surveyed to recover from the pressures and stress of everyday life.



**Figure 3:** Perceived health problems related to stress – country comparison.

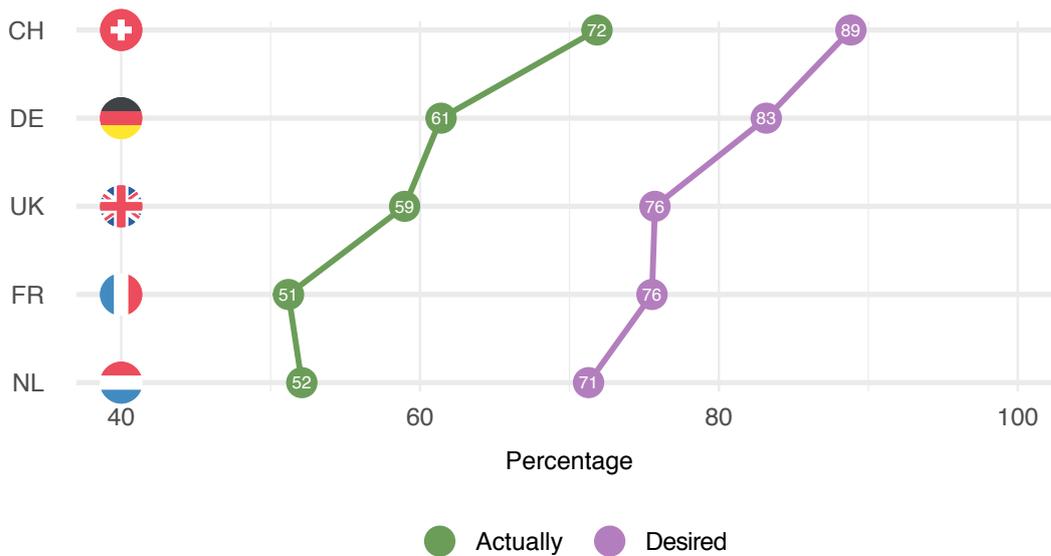
A comparison of the five surveyed countries in Northwest Europe shows that people in the UK tend to feel stressed less often, although the proportion of respondents who experience stress in their day-to-day life here is still quite high

at 70%. However, a high percentage of Brits report that they experience health problems related to stress (fig. 3).

However, not all stress is equal. The statistical analysis shows that while people who spend time outdoors in nature several times each week are not automatically less stressed, they do suffer from stress-related health problems significantly less often. In comparison with people from other countries in Northwest Europe, the UK certainly has some catching up to do in this respect.

## 2 Longing for tamed and “natural” nature

People in Northwest Europe would like to spend more time amongst nature in their day-to-day lives. The desire to be outdoors amongst nature at least once each week is strongest in Switzerland and Germany. However, even in the UK, three out of four respondents would like to get outdoors amongst nature at least once each week, while 59% actually do so (fig. 4).



**Figure 4:** Getting outdoors amongst nature at least once each week – desire versus reality.

As well as the frequency of getting outdoors, the type of nature sought out was important for respondents. Brits go to parks (48%) and forests (32%) most frequently. However, they would like to go to mountains, moors, national parks or natural bodies of waters more often. A comparison of the five countries surveyed shows that respondents from the UK are least satisfied with the nature in their immediate surroundings, although they are more than happy with the nature in other parts of the country (fig. 5).

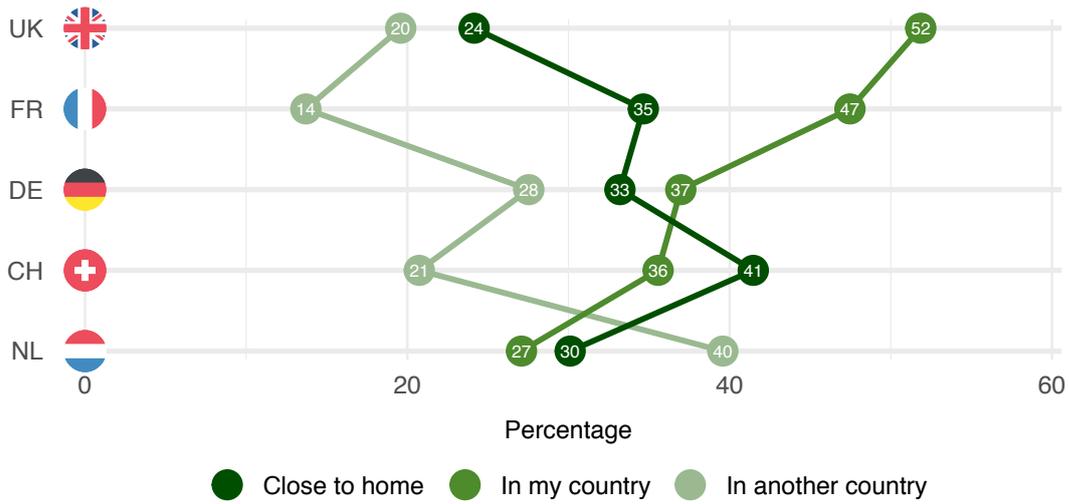


Figure 5: Where nature appeals most.

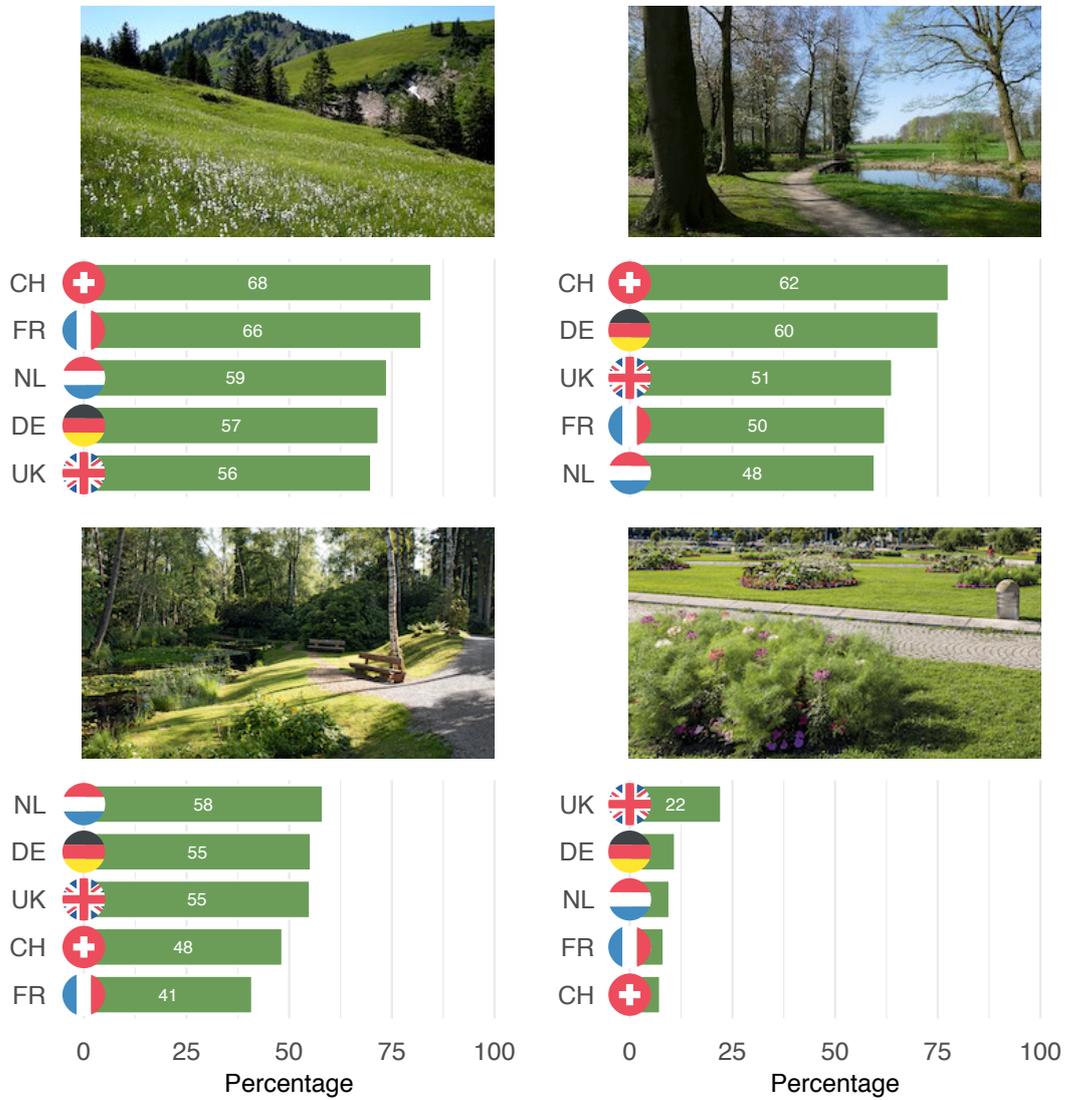
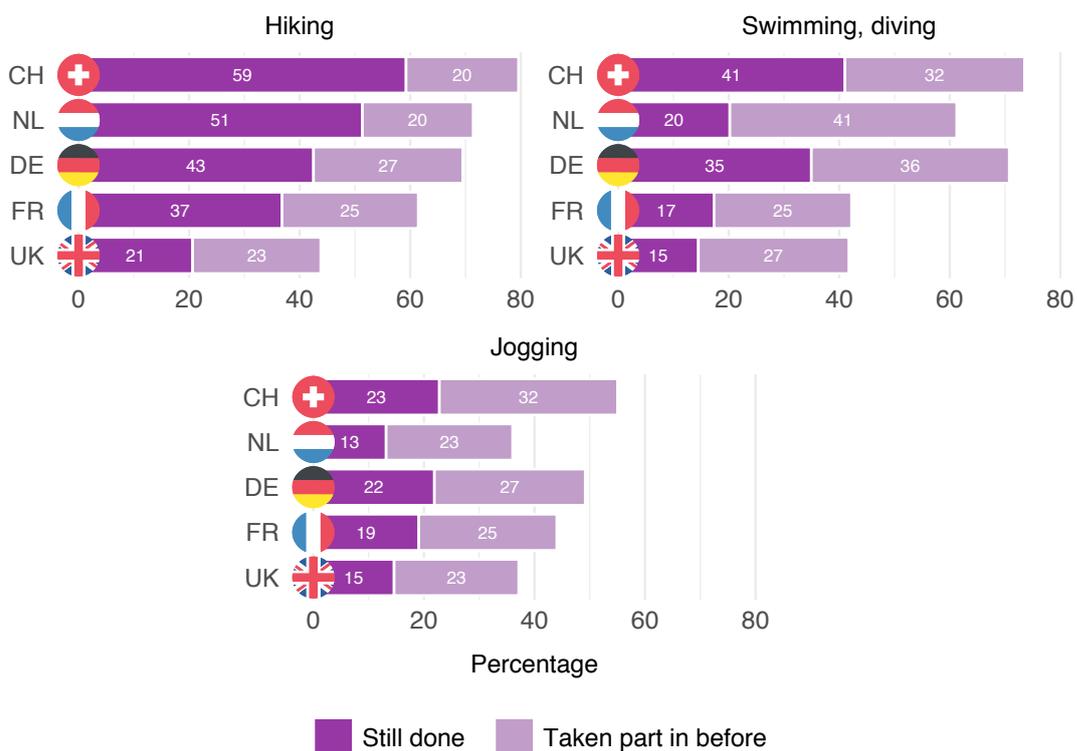


Figure 6: Environments that enable those surveyed to relax and recover from stress.

Despite longing for more nature and more natural landscapes, respondents shy away from nature that is too rugged or wild. Only a minority like the idea of sleeping outdoors in a tent or under starry skies. When asked what they would miss most in a remote location far from civilisation, most respondents said a shower, hot water and a comfortable bed. In keeping with this, when shown pictures of various different landscapes and asked to choose the most “natural”, most respondents selected those they considered the most relaxing. It is this ideal of “natural” and yet tamed nature that prevails in the minds of people in Northwest Europe (fig. 6).

### 3 Hiking without any pressure to achieve

Hiking is the favourite activity for those who exercise outdoors amongst nature. Among respondents in the UK, 44% have been hiking and 21% do so regularly. In comparison with the other countries in Northwest Europe, the UK is therefore by no means the top nation of hikers, but hiking is nonetheless the most popular outdoors activity here (fig. 7).

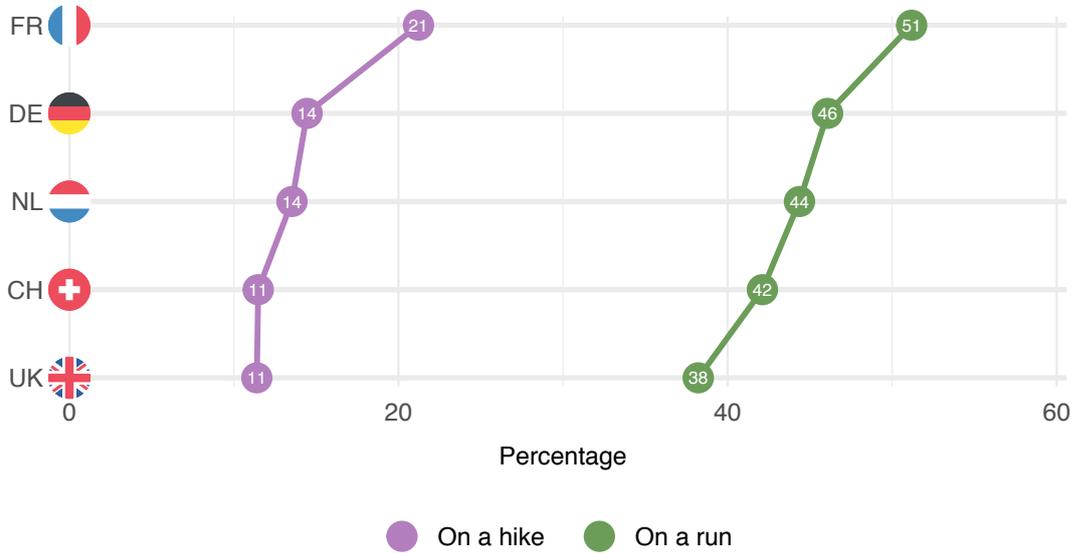


**Figure 7:** Top 3 outdoor activities.

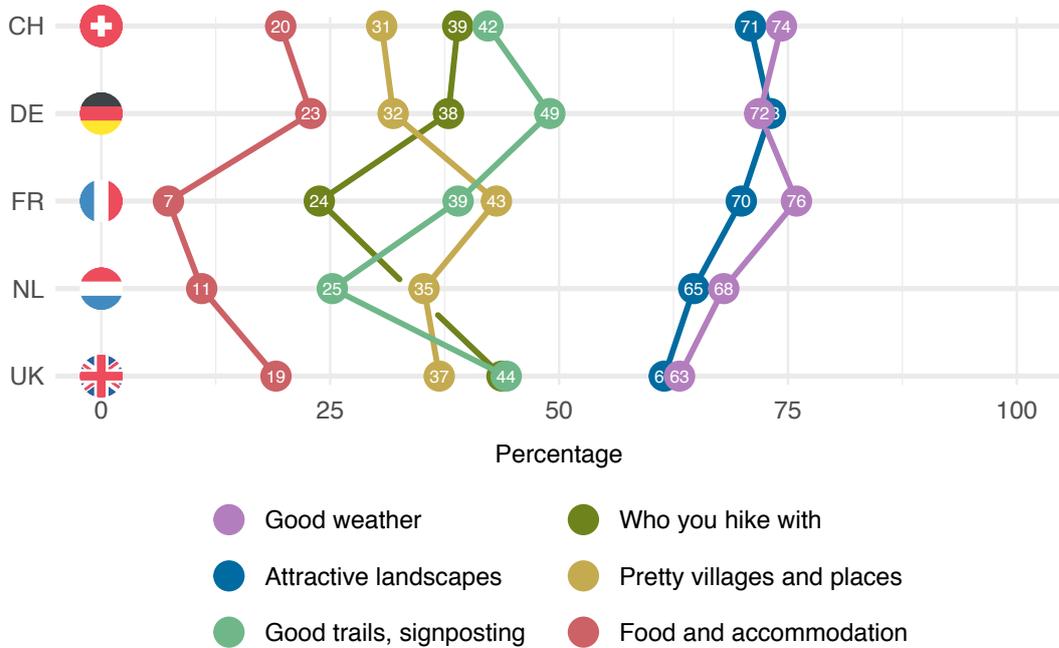
For the majority of respondents, hiking represents a stark contrast to the logic that underpins the performance society. Unlike with running, only a small minority of

hikers set themselves performance targets. Just 11% of UK hikers set themselves a goal to achieve, compared with 38% of runners (fig. 8).

For respondents, the two key factors for a successful hike are good weather and beautiful scenery. Once again, we see here the longing for tamed and tended nature (fig. 9).



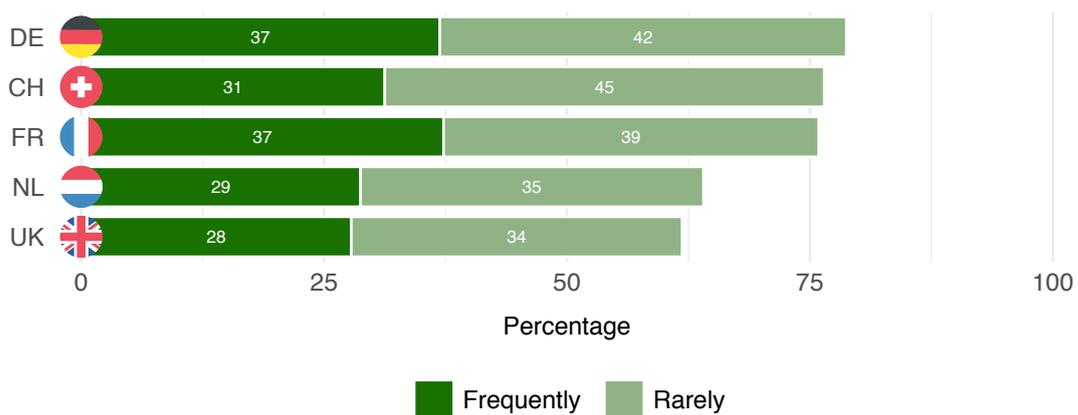
**Figure 8:** Outdoor activities for which respondents set out to achieve or exceed performance targets.



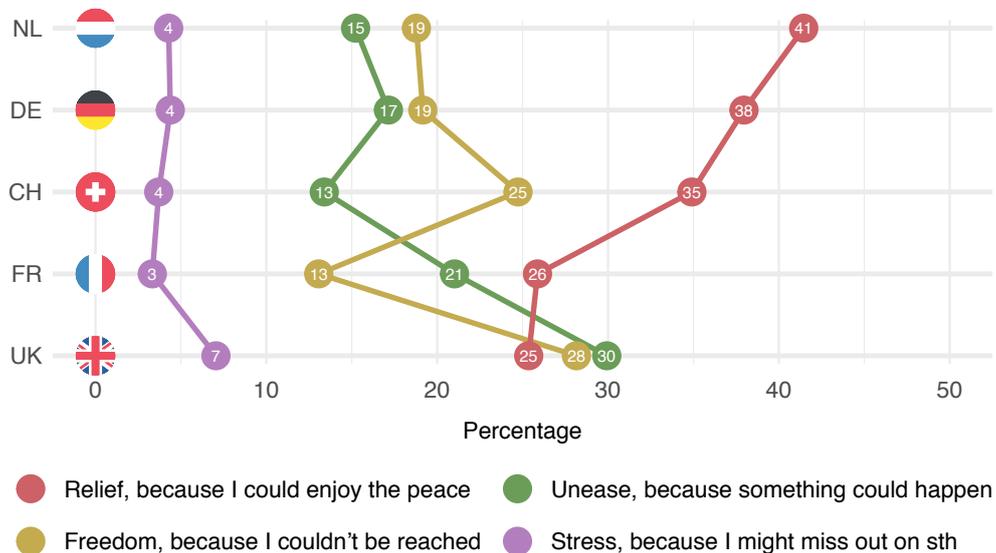
**Figure 9:** Important factors when planning a hike.

## 4 Link to civilisation

One of the main reasons why people head outdoors into nature is to escape from the pressures of the performance society. This includes not always being contactable. For people in the UK this is less important than for the more frequently stressed Germans, Swiss and French. Even so, 62% of UK hikers have at least once left their phone at home or made a conscious decision to switch it off (fig. 10).



**Figure 10:** Percentage of respondents who consciously switch off their mobile phone or leave it at home to avoid being disturbed outdoors in nature.

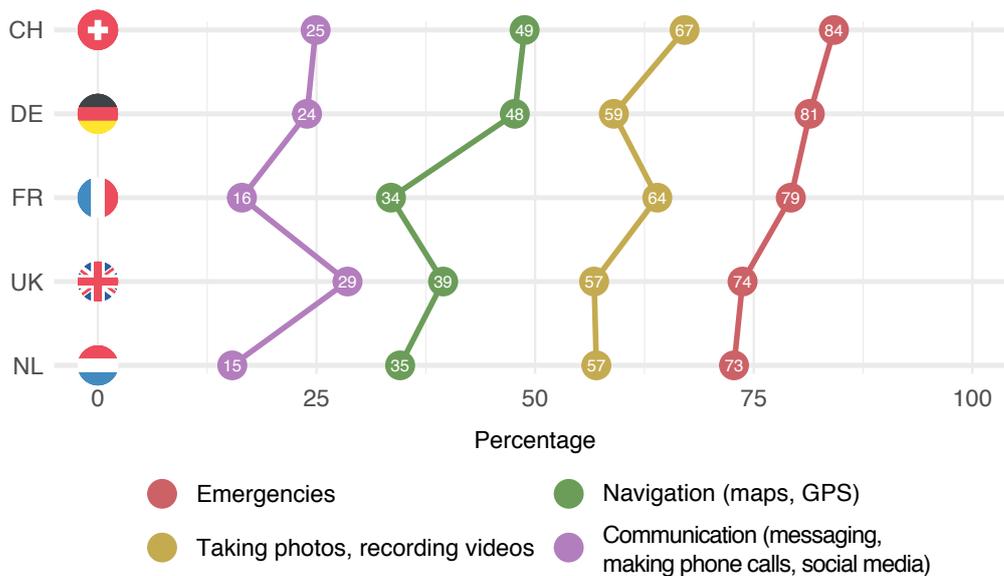


**Figure 11:** How respondents feel when they have no phone reception for an extended period while outdoors in nature.

When hikers find themselves in an area with no phone reception, they more often than not see this as a positive rather than a negative. A comparatively high percentage of UK respondents associated a lack of network with unease and risk (30%), however the sense of freedom at not being contactable was also highest in the UK out of all the countries (28%) (fig. 11).

Mobile phones have become a wireless link to civilisation. Interestingly, the ability to make phone calls and communicate with others while outdoors in nature is important to only a small percentage of respondents. Many have their phone with them for safety reasons and to take photos but do not actually want to be contactable (fig. 12).

This indicates that the notorious “fear of missing out” is not a big concern among hikers, with a “joy of missing out” prevailing instead. Spending time outdoors in nature therefore does in fact contribute to the digital detox. The popular pastime of sharing photos is not without impact. Almost half of Brits have felt envious after seeing photos of beautiful scenery that other people have posted. Hiking is a way of counteracting stress but can at the same time generate a new type of stress, namely, fear of missing out among those who have stayed at home.



**Figure 12:** Reasons why respondents take their mobile phone outdoors into nature.

