



# MEDICAL TOURISM

## a prescription for new profits

With all of the controversy surrounding our current national debate on healthcare reform, there's probably no better time for awareness on the more than obvious fact medical procedures for most Americans are so far beyond reach, it's become a national disgrace.

It's no wonder then, that these exorbitant surgical and dental costs have driven thousands of Americans across our national borders seeking affordable and oftentimes superior care in countries that not too long ago were considered third world. In fact, medical tourism from the U.S. to countries such as Malaysia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama and India is a market segment that's growing substantially from year-to-year and is one that should no longer be ignored by mainstream travel agents.

Basically, the industry is driven by the following factors:

**Cost savings:** Affordability is a primary driver of medical tourism. According to most market research, most surgical procedures in foreign countries can cost approximately one-third of the going rate in the United States. And cost savings surveys even take into account lodging while abroad and travel expenses getting there.

**Quality care:** Not all concerns of medical tourists are about cost. Equal consideration is directed to the quality of service, facilities and medical practitioners in a foreign country. Associations such as the **Joint Commission International** and the **Medical Tourism Association** have made great progress in certifying and accrediting international hospitals that serve foreign patients.

**Accessibility:** Medical travelers are often looking for immediate care for which they would have to wait weeks or months in their home country.

Consider the fact that medical tourism to Malaysia alone has tripled over the past six years; Brazil caters to more than 50,000 foreign patients seeking mostly cosmetic surgery, while thousands of foreign patients seeking high-quality dental surgical and cosmetic procedures, in-vitro fertilization procedures and more flock to Costa Rica and Panama each year. India probably offers the broadest menu of high-quality surgical, dental, cosmetic and alternative healing practices available anywhere in the world today and patients from around the world—the U.S. included—are traveling there by the thousands each year to take advantage of high-quality medical care that's available for as little as 10 percent of the cost here in the United States.

Most importantly, you'll find in the following pages an enormous source of reputable and knowledgeable medical service organizations out there who can not only assist agents in helping your clients find the best quality healthcare available in Brazil, Costa Rica, India, Malaysia and Panama, but they can also assist you in earning good commissions for booking accommodations, transport and vacation services for patient clients and their families, pre- and post-medical and dental procedures.

Pre-operative, medical tourism clients have ample opportunities to explore their chosen destination, be it Costa Rica (opposite page) or Malaysia (below).

# MALAYSIA'S HEALING POWERS

sergio ortiz

For centuries, Malaysia has been a choice destination for legions who come answering the call of the tropics, the exoticism that envelops the Malay Peninsula, its astounding beaches and mountains, and even the faded colonial glories of the British Empire.

Few leave without deep feelings about the beauty that lies within it: from sprawling Johor Bahru in the south—where Malaysia seems to plunge into the Straits of Singapore—to Penang to the north, where the country seamlessly blends its exceptional culture with Thailand's. Indeed, the Malay Peninsula is a wonder.

Today, an ever-growing number of medical tourists are also setting their bearings for Malaysia.

Due to considerable advances in higher education and medical facilities, when it comes to medical tourism, the country appears on the brink of rivaling India, Singapore and Thailand, places that long have held a solid grip on Asian medical tourism.

With its natural wonders, history and flair, Malaysia is not only a great vacation destination, but its emergence as a healthcare provider for foreigners saw an increasing number of its private hospitals copying the model of other Asian countries by tailoring packages, deluxe accommodations and even air travel aimed specifically at attracting foreigners.

It has succeeded beyond early projections. Medical tourism to Malaysia is increasing at such a high rate that those arriving in this magical land for medical treatment have more than tripled in six years—from less than 100,000 in 2001, to 341,288 in 2007.

The figure is still skyrocketing. Statistics released by the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia (APMH) show that more than 282,000 foreigners sought medical care during the first three quarters of 2008, adding a substantial amount of foreign currency to the country's coffers.

Despite those impressive numbers, those figures are lower than originally predicted due to the economic downturn that stunned most of the world.

Dr. Chan Kok Ewe, director of the **Island Hospital** in Penang—a popular Malaysian health treatment facility for foreigners—and chairman of the **Penang Health Association**, prefers to look at the bright side: “Yes, [the figures] were less than encouraging,” he says, “but we should use this slack period to prepare for the next growth phase. To do this, we have to cultivate new markets with a structured strategy and guided investments.”

Travel agents are expected to play a large part in this strategy, as most Malaysian institutions will rely heavily on their services to customize medical travel.

Generally, travel specialists arranging medical trips are advised to contact Malaysian healthcare facilities—which normally do not pay commission—to begin the process. The bulk of profits are generated through booking side services, such as arranging accommodations and planning excursions for patients and traveling companions.

With the expected surge in medical tourism, Malaysia is shifting into high gear to attract foreigners seeking health care.

In May 2010, Kuala Lumpur will host more than 1,500 trade visitors, delegates, sponsors and exhibitors from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and the U.S. to the *Asia Medical Tourism and Wellness Congress (GLOW 2010)*.

The event aims to provide networking opportunities for travel specialists and others contemplating entering the field. *Glow 2010* will focus on how health industries reach out to foreigners and clarify the ►

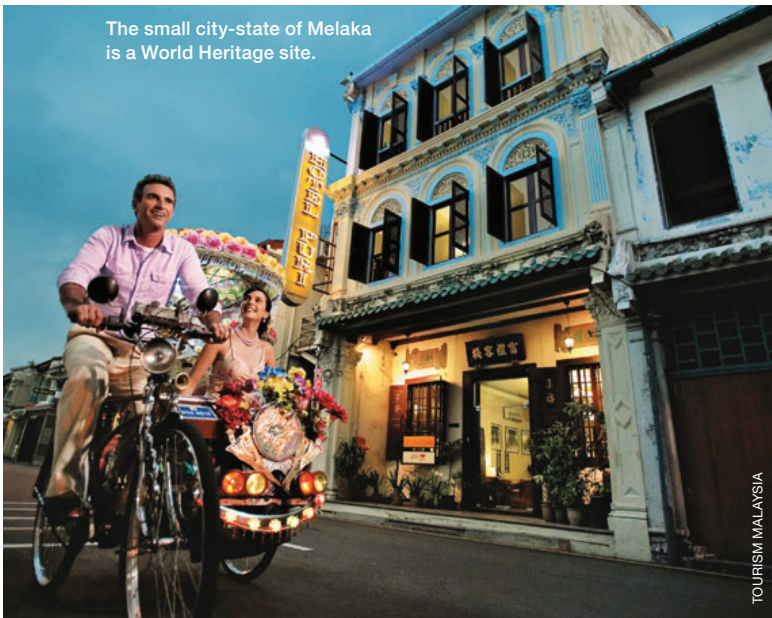


TOURISM MALAYSIA

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Dr. Chan Kok Ewe, Director, Island Hospital in Penang

The small city-state of Melaka is a World Heritage site.



intricacies of medical tourism, while demonstrating new developments and technology.

The congress has the potential of proving profitable for American travel agents willing to dip their toes into medical tourism.

In addition, the Malaysian Health Ministry recently unveiled an international website as part of its concerted efforts to attract health travelers.

Health minister Seri Lio Tiong Lai says the website, “Is a gateway for potential patients and visitors to explore what the Malaysian healthcare sector offers in terms of medical treatment options, state-of-the-art health facilities and general information about Malaysia to benefit those interested in traveling here for care. Thirty-six private hospitals have been chosen to participate in the healthcare travel program, and we hope more [hospitals] will join in.”

“The multiplier effect of health tourism,” adds the minister, “would be a boost for other tourism-related industries such as hotel, transportation and touring because foreign patients are usually accompanied by family and friends who would also use these services.”

Most of those seeking treatment in Malaysia come from Indonesia, Japan, India and Europe, but a government-sponsored study shows Americans are swiftly discovering that Malaysia also offers excellent treatments at a fraction of U.S. costs.

The same study reveals that the most active Malaysian medical destinations are Penang, Malacca and Johor Bahru—with Kuala Lumpur showing a considerable increase.

According to Frost & Sullivan, an international growth partnership company with long experience in Malaysia, medical tourism revenue in the country is estimated to reach \$590 million by the end of next year.

This has prompted two of the premier Malaysian medical facilities—**Gleneagles Intan** and **Pantai Medical Group**, both in Kuala Lumpur—to set up international patient departments specifically designed towards admitting and treating foreigners.

Dr. K. Kulaveerasingam, chairman of the Malaysian committee on database and medical tourism, is convinced that “even the economic slowdown will have little impact on Malaysia.” He foresees a 15 percent increase on medical receipts for the current year.

Everything Malaysia offers will awe those considering medical treatment here. English-speaking, foreign-educated doctors and staff are eminently qualified, with access to state-of-the-art facilities equipment and ultra-modern diagnostic and therapeutic centers.

Medical tourists will find that most Malaysian private hospitals offer accommodations ranging from comfortable rooms supervised by full-time nurses, to luxurious suites manned by personal butlers. Most provide room and board for traveling companions.

In the United States, **MedRetreat**, based in Vernon Hills, Ill. and with its strong ties to Malaysia, may be the premier American-owned and -operated medical tourism company.

The company is a crucial bridge to healthcare for those seeking treatment overseas. Its affiliated facilities in Malaysia are among the best. MedRetreat also operates in 10 countries, from Argentina to Turkey, and from India to Mexico.

Patrick Marsek, MedRetreat’s managing director, says, “Malaysia has been a very popular medical travel destination for [our] clients since 2005. We’ve been able to best guarantee successful outcomes by offering service to Penang and Kuala Lumpur through **Joint Commission International**-accredited hospitals like the **Penang Adventist Hospital**, a member of the Adventist Health Network based in the U.S., and **Gleneagles Hospital**, a member of the prestigious Parkway Group located in Singapore.”

According to Marsek, Malaysia is very well qualified to accept medical travelers from North America for two primary reasons: English is widely spoken and its highly qualified surgeons have received training in either the U.S., the United Kingdom or Australia.

MedRetreat also uses first-class accommodations for patients and their families during the recuperation period.

“As far as post-op accommodations are concerned,” he adds, “some of the best hotels in Southeast Asia are in Malaysia—from the quaint and charming **Eastern Oriental**, established in 1884, to the newly built **G Hotel**, featuring a contemporary, nouveau style. Malaysia has comfortable options for everyone.”

He is convinced that Malaysia “and the value it provides,” will remain a popular medical travel destination for years to come.

But perhaps the most appealing part of Malaysia is its wonders. Patients have ample opportunities to bask in beach resorts, explore the country, or just spend a relaxing recuperation period in modern, pampering health facilities.

Malaysia’s government-managed medical tourism program emphasizes that treatment should focus primarily on recovery, but that it should also be an “enriching experience for the medical traveler.”

A look at some of the leading medical institutions catering to foreigners in Malaysia reveals this to be so.

Adhering to the guidelines set by the Health Ministry, **Malaysia Health Care** bills itself as “a one-stop destination for all medical tourism needs.”

It’s one of the leading facilities in the country rivaling—and often exceeding—those in more developed countries. It relies on top-notch hospitals working alongside travel specialists to provide what it calls “treatment holidays.”

Aside from general surgery, Malaysia Health Care has long been a trendsetter in cardiology, gastroenterology, orthopedics, ophthalmology and even cosmetic procedures.

Another facility earning sterling marks in treating foreigners is **Wellness Visit**, with eight healthcare facilities specializing in complete care.

It boasts of solid partnerships with travel agents to tailor packages for medical tourists. These include a wide choice of facilities for medical procedures and an equal number of destinations to make recuperation a pleasant experience.

The cost will appeal to Americans burdened by soaring health costs. For example, a \$130,000 heart bypass operation runs approximately \$12,000 in Malaysia, while a \$40,000 knee replacement in the U.S. is a mere \$8,000 in Wellness Visit facilities.

Those are staggering savings—as staggering as the beauty within Malaysia. ■

#### contact information

**Gleneagles Intan:** gimc.com.my

**Glow 2010:** glow2010.com

**Island Hospital:** islandhospital.com

**Malaysia Health Care:** malaysiahealthcare.com

**Malaysian Health Ministry:** myhealthcare.gov.my

**MedRetreat:** (443) 451-9996; medretreat.com

**Pantai Medical Group:** pantai.com.my

**Wellness Visit:** wellnessvisit.com



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