For many years, Malaysia was one of Southeast Asia’s best kept secrets: a warm, welcoming and beautiful location that also offered some of the best healthcare and wellness options for international tourists “in the know.” Increasingly, the region has become more vocal in telling its quality-of-health story to international audiences, a trend culminating with the first ever Malaysia International Healthcare Travel Expo (held this past November in Kuala Lumpur). Organized by the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC, established under the Ministry of Health Malaysia), this dynamic convening of global stakeholders underscored the nation’s dual heritage of hospitality and medical innovation, positioning Malaysia as the preferred healthcare travel destination in the region.

The three-day event proved to be a memorable experience showcasing the seamless healthcare travel experience that those seeking care across borders can expect, an audience that is sure to grow within the next five to ten years. In attendance were over 1,000 delegates, 84 exhibitors and approximately 5,000 visitors from across the globe including international companies, airlines, banks, government agencies, hotels, travel agencies, resorts, medical insurers, hospitals, recuperative and rehabilitation centers, retirement institutions, wellness and medical spas as well as traditional medical facilities.
The event culminated in a closing panel co-organized by SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN’s custom media division, and moderated by Jeremy Abbate, Publishing Director of SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN Worldview, a global innovation magazine. This panel brought together many of the related but disparate themes of medical tourism and explored the growing trend of making the sector more scientific and more integrated into the total global marketplace of health. Abbate reflected on the industry, noting that medical tourism is “more than just saving costs on treatment...it can be a fundamental driver of a nation’s medical infrastructure, its ability to participate in important clinical trials, and thus an important aspect of its total innovation climate.”

A List of Luminaries

Among those attending the event were author and medical tourism pioneer Josef Woodman, whose book series Patients Beyond Borders has become an indispensable compass for navigating the complexities of international health travel. According to Woodman, “Malaysia’s got such a robust economic infrastructure, massive patient flow, numbers that we have seen with 35% growth.” He predicts that “healthcare is going to be a huge part of Malaysia’s tourism and GDP for the next 10 or 20 years”.

“Healthcare is going to be a huge part of Malaysia’s tourism and GDP for the next 10 or 20 years” – Josef Woodman Founder, Patients Beyond Borders
Peter Greenberg, travel editor for CBS News, aired a live show from Malaysia and was overwhelmed by what the region had to offer in terms of its health infrastructure, as well as its friendly and welcoming residents. Asked to define “medical travel” in relation to other kinds of tourism, Greenberg suggested a new term — hospitality travel — to describe the complete social and medical experience of an intentionally voyaging patient.

Dato’ Dr. Jacob Thomas, president of Malaysia’s Association of Private Hospitals (APHM) remarked that the sense of calm and order that exists within the nation’s natural environment extends to the business and social climates as well. “These factors speak volumes for the health tourism potential of Malaysia,” he noted in his panel remarks.

Perhaps the most important individual at the expo was its host and originator, Dr. Mary Wong Lai Lin, CEO of The Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC). Known by her colleagues simply as “Dr. Mary,” her agency’s core mission is to promote the healthcare travel industry of Malaysia and position the country as the healthcare destination of choice in the region. Judging from the mood on the convention floor, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback from delegates, sponsors and attendees, it is undeniable that she succeeded in that task.

A Unique Value in a Growing Sector

Recent reports from firms such as Deloitte and McKinsey estimate a continued growth in the medical travel sector and predict that more patients will be coming from developed nations (the US and regions in Europe) and seeking care in developing nations (Southeast Asia and others) over the next few years. Countries that leverage their total “tourism” value proposition will no doubt benefit from these trends.

Malaysia’s holistic approach to tourism had surely made a global impact leaving an indelible mark in the sector of healthcare services and hospitality. The astonishingly low costs coupled with world class medical treatment has attracted patients from many neighboring Asian countries as well as from Europe and the United States. Along with a very favorable foreign exchange rate, and JCI-accredited hospitals with expert medical staffs, patients can also benefit from the warm climate and serene natural environment that the region offers. Language poses no barrier at all since English is widely spoken in the country in addition to Chinese, Bahasa Malaysia and Tamil; a wonderful consequence of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic heritage.

Feeling the “Breeze”

Most of the major hospitals offer fast and efficient health screenings. The KPJ Healthcare Network, with the most hospitals nationwide (23 across Malaysia as well as in Indonesia) offers competitive and state of the art health screening ranging from the most basic “General Executive Screening,” to the top end “Premier Man Screening.” The service has been streamlined and affords international patients, with little time on their hands, a seamless and efficient experience. Modern facilities and extremely service-oriented personnel make health screenings a breeze.
Malaysia: A Complete Wellness Destination

Driving north from Kuala Lumpur toward Penang, and a short detour off the main North South highway is “The Lost World,” one of the most unique and unusual theme parks tucked away amidst mountainous limestone cliffs and pocketed with ancient caves turned into Hindu shrines. Penetrating patiently past the theme park, in the cocoon of these towering green limestone ridges, The Banjaran (which means “ridges” in Malay) is a study in calm. Water features, abundant greenery and soothing music are the first things that greet you as you step into the 5-star luxury wellness retreat’s plush landscaped gardens and hot spring pools. Spa cuisine is taken to new levels under chef Abdelhak Bourenane’s take on vegetarian meals, with dishes as eclectic as gazpacho ice cream and black tofu on offer.

Harper’s Bazaar named The Banjaran winner of its Best Natural Wellness Retreats ranking. It is merely one example of the kinds of natural healing locations a traveler can find in Malaysia; places where the landscape intermingles with the service, expertise and personal attention that is a hallmark of Malaysian culture. With so many options for wellness care, a hospital system that is first rate, and a style of living that welcomes foreigners and embraces hospitality, it is no wonder that Malaysia is on track to take in the lion’s share of medical tourists in the years ahead.

Why Malaysia for Healthcare?

- Cost Efficient/Affordable
- World class doctors and standards
- Ease of entry
- Ease of communication
- Low cost of living
- Excellent infrastructure
- Great aftercare with abundant spas and recovery centers

For more enquiries, call MHTC Careline:
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