

Check in, check up

With its world-class and luxurious medical facilities at affordable prices, Asia may become as popular for medical tourists as it is for holidaymakers.

By PAUL EHRLICH. Illustrated by WASINEE CHANTAKORN



JOHAN HARTIGAN, A TOUR GUIDE from Killarney, in Ireland, decided to get a checkup at Bangkok's Bumrungrad International hospital during a 2004 golfing holiday in Thailand. Polyps were discovered and he remained there for treatment. Won over by the high level of medical care, Hartigan returned in December 2005 for hip surgery, which included a 12-day stay for physiotherapy in one of the hospital's adjacent luxury suites.

His reaction was like someone reviewing a resort: "I was over the moon. It would have cost three times as much in Dublin. But it wasn't the cost alone. The facilities, the treatment and the beautiful surroundings—it's incredible. Doctors would take time to explain in simple and clear language, enabling me to understand exactly what was going on. You walk out of the hospital completely at ease."

Hartigan, 65, now returns to Bumrungrad for annual checkups, often leading groups of people from his hometown for various medical procedures. This year, he's leading a group of 24.

Like Hartigan, a growing number of medical tourists are boarding planes to visit hospitals in Asia that offer high-quality treatment at discount prices. Last year, about 1.3 million international visitors flew to Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Korea and India for medical treatment.

"Medical tourism is growing rapidly, with the number of medical tourist visits to many countries swelling by 20 to 30 percent a year," says Brett Henry, the vice president of agency marketing for Abacus International.

That's healthy news for Asia's medical centers. American-accredited Bumrungrad treated 430,000 foreign patients in 2006 alone, according to Kenneth Mays, the hospital's marketing director. In 2006, some 410,000 tourists visited Singapore specifically for health care. And most of these patients didn't travel alone—about 89,000 people accompanied their visits. "Beyond the revenue from providing health-care services, patients and their traveling companions also spend on hotels, transport, dining and, of course, shopping," says Dr. Jason Yap, director of Healthcare Services for the Singapore Tourism Board.

It's not just nose jobs, facelifts and tummy tucks that are bringing people to Asia for medical care. Increasingly, patients are arriving for complex heart surgery, cardiovascular and neurosurgical procedures, prostate surgery, hip replacement and other major treatments. And the reasons many people are willing to fly—sometimes thousands of kilometers to a country they've never been before—isn't difficult to diagnose: value for money.

An angioplasty in Thailand or Singapore is about US\$13,000, compared to an eye-popping US\$57,000 in the United States. A knee replacement in Malaysia is a bargain at US\$8,000, compared to US\$62,000 in the United States, while a hip replacement is US\$65,000 in the United States,

compared to US\$16,000 in Thailand. Medical bills are also smaller in this part of the world because more efficient hospitals are able to discharge patients sooner, allowing people to return to work earlier.

"We can often do everything a patient needs in a few days, compared to the weeks it can take for appointments, tests and treatments back in their home country," says Bumrungrad's Mays.

While the lure of low cost is a draw for some patients, the assurance of good quality health care is equally important. "The hospitals and medical institutions catering to the tourist market are among the best in the world," says Henry, from Abacus International. "In many respects, Asia is an ideal growth environment for medical tourism, with competitively priced, quality health-care services in major tourist cities, and is connected by extensive global travel networks."

Indeed, cost alone should never be a deciding factor. "We shudder to think how some facilities are marketing medical treatment like they are hawking shampoo. And sadly, there are too many desperate people who might be tempted to put their lives on the line simply due to price," says Lum Hean Choong, group vice president for marketing and chief market officer of Singapore-based Parkway Health, which operates three Joint Commission International-accredited hospitals. "We believe that the main reason people should travel for cost savings is only when they know that the medical care is reputable."

According to Josef Woodman, author of *Patients Beyond Borders: Everybody's Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical* »

Medical Advice

Josef Woodman, author of *Patients Beyond Borders: Everybody's Guide to Affordable, World-Class Medical Tourism*, advises the following when planning a medical trip in Asia:

➤ **Ensure language and cultural compatibility** Singapore is well suited to Americans and Indonesians; Korea caters to Japanese and Russians; and Malaysia attracts patients from the Middle East. Be sure your hospital and surgeon communicate well in your language and check for amenities like special cuisines.

➤ **Check quality and price** Costs of surgeries vary by country and procedure. Always place quality above price. Malaysia, Thailand and

India offer good deals on orthopedics and heart procedures. Singapore is known for its quality care, although hospitals here are somewhat pricier. South Korea and Taiwan specialize in low-cost, comprehensive health screenings.

➤ **Managing flights** Try and book an aisle seat so you have maximum freedom to move around the cabin, or spring for a business-class seat instead of economy.

➤ **Recover in style** Chennai boasts five-star recovery hotels along its beautiful coastline; Kuala Lumpur's Sunway Hospital is a full-blown resort and health complex; and Thailand has a plethora of wellness spas and relaxing beach resorts.

Tourism, Asia can knock 60 to 90 percent off the sticker price of similar surgeries conducted in the United States and Europe. In addition, medical costs in places like Japan and Hong Kong, combined with limited or poor facilities in other Asian countries like Laos, Indonesia, Vietnam and China, are contributing to a burgeoning inter-Asian medical travel industry.

“We get a lot of patients, such as senior government officials, upscale business people and VIP’s from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Burma,” says Mays, from Bumrungrad.

Consider Tran Thi Tuyet, a 40-year-old Vietnamese mother who lived with excruciating back pains for 15 years. Some mornings she couldn’t even get on her feet, such was the pain. “The pain would shoot down my legs and I ended up on the floor crawling,” recounts Thi Tuyet, who lives in Vinh Phuc province, about 50 kilometers from Hanoi.

Patients RAVE about the top-tier treatment, often equating their hospital stays to time spent in a luxury hotel

Desperate for a cure, she traveled with her husband to overcrowded and understaffed hospitals and clinics throughout Vietnam. Told she had a debilitating spinal disease, the best the doctors could offer were painkilling injections that only temporarily alleviated the pain.

A sign of hope came late last year. One of her husband’s business partners, returning from

Singapore, told how he was expertly treated for stomach cancer. So Thi Tuyet contacted OliveMed, a Singapore-based health-care travel consultancy firm, which links overseas patients to various health-care options in the city. In September 2007, she and her husband flew to Singapore. OliveMed had taken care of all arrangements, including a translator waiting at Dr. Li Yung Hua’s clinic at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.



Thi Tuyet was diagnosed having *ankylosing spondylitis*, a disease that causes stiffening of the spine. Dr. Li performed a successful seven-hour operation at Parkway’s Mount Elizabeth Hospital. While Thi Tuyet needs continued treatment and medication, her posture is permanently normal, says Dr. Li. “For so long I was in agony 24-7,” said Thi Tuyet. “I expected to come here to find a relief for my pain but what Dr. Li gave me is a new lease of life. I feel like a new person and [not] like a hunchbacked old lady.”

Patients rave about the top-tier treatment they receive, often equating their hospital stays to time spent in a luxury hotel. “I couldn’t believe my first visit,” says Irishman Hartington when describing Bangkok’s Bumrungrad. “It was like checking into a resort.” The five-star style extends to postoperative treatment, which can combine health care with holidays. Analysts see a growing collaboration between medical facilities and the travel industry in developing full-service packages for clients. Many of the top hospitals work with travel agents, enabling patients to recover at beach resorts or mountain hideaways. Parkway has suites that include a butler and a concierge. Bumrungrad has its own airport lounge to meet and greet patients.

Other deciding factors are location. “A country’s tourism ambience often melds with a hospital’s environment,” says Mays, from Bumrungrad. Travelers enjoying the idea of recovering at an exotic beach might choose Thailand, while Singapore appeals to those preferring an urban environment. Malaysia, with its Muslim majority, is a favorite destination for patients from Indonesia and the Middle East.

The most recent hospital to join the regional ranks is Prince Court Medical Centre in Kuala Lumpur, which opened in October 2007. The 286-bed private medical facility—with its high-tech modern design and landscaped gardens—looks more like a place to go for a holiday than an operation.

Another trend is the bundling of modern health-care services with alternative treatments. Thailand is promoting its ancient herbal remedies, while India is providing yoga and naturopathy as part of recuperation. The Wellness Centre at the Apollo Hospital in Chennai offers aromatherapy, Pranic healing, Ayurveda and a nutrition program as part of post-op and recovery.

“Medical travel is often seen as adding medical services to the usual tourist experience,” explains Henry. “As a result, there is an expansion of choices for patients on where they can get their health care. So the stakes are higher for medical travelers; a bad experience can result in long-term scars and suffering. We must not forget that these are patients we are looking after, not just the hale and hearty traveler.” +



GUIDE TO ASIA’S BEST HOSPITALS

THAILAND

Bumrungrad International
33 Soi 3, Sukhumvit Rd., Bangkok; 66-2/667-1000; www.bumrungrad.com.

BNH Hospital A full-service spine center, gastroenterology and liver clinic, and a women’s health clinic. 9/1 Convent Rd., Bangkok; 66-2/686-2700; www.bnhhospital.com.

SINGAPORE

Mount Elizabeth Hospital
3 Mount Elizabeth; 65/6737-2666; www.parkwayhealth.com.

Gleneagles Hospital Specializes in cancer and heart treatments. 6A Napier Rd.; 65/6473-7222; www.parkwayhealth.com.

West Clinic Excellence Center
Offers screening packages for cancer. 1 Orchard Blvd., 15-00 Camden Medical Centre; 65/6565-6888; www.westexcellence.com.

INDIA

Apollo Hospital Best known for orthopedics and cardiology. 21 Grems Lane, Chennai; 91-44/2829-3333; www.apollohospitals.com.

MALAYSIA

Prince Court Medical Centre
Services include lung and heart, oncology, urology, pediatrics and a burns center. 39 Jln. Kia Peng, Kuala Lumpur; 60-3/2160-0000.