



medi-spas get a facelift

writer **Emily Tobin**

As spa treatments steadily gain currency in mainstream medical circles, a new, more-sophisticated form of medi-spa emerges to cater to consumers seeking all-encompassing health and wellness.

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The notion of medical tourism is not a new phenomenon. Think back to the seaside retreats of the 18th and 19th Century when the French and British elite would pack up their parasols and head to coastal towns to make the most of the therapeutic sea air, or even earlier when pilgrims pounded the streets of medieval Europe in their quest for holy waters.

200 years later and our desire for aesthetic perfection and physical wellbeing has not wavered. And with the Medical Tourist Association estimating that 1.3 million Americans travelled abroad for health care and medical procedures in 2008, (a figure that looks set to double this year), this is a consumer trend ratified by centuries of tradition.

Until recently, spas restricted their dalliances with medicine to the odd chemical peel or botox injection; similarly hospitals might contract certified professionals once a week for the occasional dermatological consultation or post surgery massage. Today physicians are expanding their outpatient facilities to embrace a more holistic outlook, and at the same time spas are partnering with traditional hospitals and surgeries. No longer characterised by nose jobs and breast enlargements the medical spa industry merges seemingly disparate attitudes towards health under the umbrella of integrated medicine.

MEDI-SPAS DEFINED

As more and more patients look for alternative cures to chronic illness, the medi-spa is becoming an ever-bigger melting pot of clinical diagnostics and holistic therapies. Although the parameters of what defines a medi-facility are continually stretching, the one common denominator is that they must operate under the supervision of a certified medical professional. "There's a great deal of confusion in the marketplace and from

country to country about what a medi-spa actually is," points out Keith Pollard, of Treatment Abroad (www.treatmentabroad.com). "In some countries, it is a centre for beauty and aesthetic procedures while in others, it is focused on preventative treatments managed by a doctor."

What is clear is that spas are no longer the mainstay of those just seeking out and out pampering. Like their more traditional spa sibling, the medi-spa does provide a therapeutic approach to beauty, health and wellness, however with an arguably greater emphasis on physical results and new technology. Clients expect more from a facility that calls itself a medi-spa than from a day spa. Capitalising on our desire to look and feel good for as long as possible and driven by savvy consumers wanting to invest wisely in health and beauty, the medi-spa offers something more tangible to the baby boomers, their desires have evolved and they want to see results regardless of whether they have just had cosmetic surgery or a facial. And, as they comprise 28 percent of the US population and 50 percent of the US economy, theirs is a voice worth listening to.

"Medi-spas should be an arena where integrative medicine is provided to guests in an active and healthy environment synonymous with pleasure and relaxation, versus a hospital setting," says Dr. Paulo Malo of Malo Clinic (www.maloclinics.com). Malo's health and wellness clinic in Macau is a perfect illustration of this. Laying claim to six operating theatres and 47 spa rooms and suites across 12,000 square metres, it performs clinical treatments in a spa-like setting. "We've merged diagnostic and clinical services with spa treatments and wellness care all under one roof," says Dr Malo. "We believe in the powerful synergy of the latest scientific advances in conventional medicine and the profound wisdom in alternative treatments."



THIS PAGE: Treatment at Murad Medical Spa; and the forum orchard at theDRx Medispa. OPPOSITE PAGE: Healthy Smile © istockphoto.com/ Chris Granly.

PATIENTS BEYOND BORDERS

Approximately 200 medical spas opened across Asia over the last two years and although still in its infancy, the hybrid offspring of the wellness and medical industries is proving popular. "With the Asian spa scene proliferating at a spectacular rate it is unsurprising that Asia-based spa owners and groups are interspersing deep tissue massages and exfoliating facials with blood and urine analyses, stress tests and genomics," says Josef Woodman, author of medi-tourism guidebook, Patients Beyond Borders (www.patientsbeyondborders.com). If achieving complete physical, mental and emotional balance means seeking out innovative practices beyond the traditional spa or hospital setting then so be it.



THIS PAGE: Blood check at Chiva-Som Thailand; and Terme di Saturnia Spa & Golf Resort Tuscany, Italy.

MEDI-TOURISM MATURES

As the medical tourism movement gains momentum, the affiliation between medispas and the global medical tourism industry are becoming progressively interlinked and the scope for effective healing even wider. When you consider the combined appeal of first-rate doctors, conventional medicine and top-notch technology teamed with the wisdom of alternative treatments, the exponential growth of this sector is unsurprising. Throw in some affordable plane tickets and the allure of an exotic destination and you have medical tourism's cost-effective recipe for success.

A more consumer-centric model for medical tourism is emerging as western consumers run out of patience for long waiting lines, exorbitant prices and inadequate service in traditional hospitals and clinics. "Patients are more educated than ever and are more and more willing to take their health – and healthcare – into their own hands," remarks Jonathan Edelheit, CEO of the Medical Tourism Association. "They are going online to research information and are travelling internationally to get the best quality care at an affordable price."

Woodman agrees that the traditional western medical blueprint is becoming increasingly insipid. "The prospect of alternative therapies, state-of-the-art technology, stronger accreditation programmes and an improving economy are powerful inducements for spa-goers and patients alike," says the author. Rapid growth has created a vacuum that is quickly being filled with organisations and professionals from a range of sectors: finance, travel, insurance, hospitality and health, all of which are looking to capitalise on the medical tourism boom. It is becoming less and less unusual to see western professionals practicing in eastern hospitals, the Malo Clinic is a clear illustration of this multiculturalism. "We have a multi-disciplinary fleet of medical experts and licensed healthcare professionals including pharmacists, lab specialists, physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritionists and wellness therapists recruited from Asia, Europe and America," attests Dr Malo.

THE FUTURE

There is no doubt that medical tourism is a consumer driven industry and as more and more people look beyond allopathic medicine to more holistic methods of

treatment, the future of the medi-spa looks bright. According to the Medical Tourism Association the value of global medical tourism has been forecasted to rise to US100 billion dollars in 2012 from US60 billion in 2006. Significantly, the medi-spa boom is not just restricted to Asia; with more and more hospitals teaming up with wellness resorts across the globe, patients are having their teeth capped in Costa Rica and heart transplants in Hungary.

Recuperating from a medical procedure in a spa-like setting rather than a clinical one holds huge appeal for many consumers, and as a result the hospitals of tomorrow are likely to have spas attached to their more traditional facilities. "The drivers are in place for extraordinary growth in the coming years," believes Woodman. With additional transparency offered by the internet and the increasing availability of all-inclusive medical 'packages', the boom is far from over. Health and therapeutic wellness are finally beginning to walk hand-in-hand, and in future physical healing, beauty treatments, psychological and spiritual retreats need not be mutually exclusive – whatever your ailment, the increasingly hyphenated world of medispas looks set to have the remedy. 🌿