

Medical Tourism, a Booming Form of Luxury Travel Is traveling for surgery and medical care safe, & could it work for you?

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What is Medical Tourism?

Medical tourism has become a recent travel buzzword. In a nutshell, medical tourism refers to travel in the pursuit of various medical treatments and procedures.

Medical travel is typically to overseas destinations, but can also refer to domestic travel to less expensive cities, hospitals, and doctors away from your home in the U.S.



Medical tourism in 1948.
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Let's Get this Out of the Way: Does Health Insurance Cover Medical Tourism?

Overseas: **sometimes:**

- When you choose your insurer's global network option
- Or if you seek treatment in foreign branches of U.S. hospitals

Domestically: **yes**

Who Pursues Medical Tourism, and Why?

Medical tourists may be citizens of countries with national health programs, such as the U.K. or Canada.

- They do not want to endure the frequently very long wait for surgery and other specialized treatments

Medical tourists may be citizens of countries where private medical plans are the norm, such as the U.S.

- Even for patients with health insurance, surgery will be much cheaper and often as good overseas
- Medical tourism furnishes a feasible way for uninsured individuals to get the care they need at a lower price

Medical tourists are also in search of:

- Forms of medical care that are a specialty of the destination
- Sometimes, more advanced care than they can get at home
- Cutting edge or experimental procedures that are not yet sanctioned in the medical tourist's own country

Medical Tourism Destinations Often Offer Western-Trained Doctors and Superior Nurses

Many overseas hospitals and clinics that market to medical tourists are staffed by:

- Physicians and surgeons who have been trained and/or certified in North America, and are English speaking
- An example: Bangkok's world renowned Bumrungrad Hospital claims over 200 surgeons who are board-certified in the U.S.
- Superlative nurses; nursing is a peak profession in many nations

Still other countries are renowned for their excellent medical education and superb doctors. A partial list:

- Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, France, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, South Africa, Singapore, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey

Another trend in medical tourism: overseas hospitals with strong ties to U.S. medical centers.

- [Johns Hopkins Singapore International Medical Centre](#) is a branch of Baltimore's prestigious Johns Hopkins University

How Can You Trust the Hospital and Doctor?

There is a US-based vetting organization that accredits foreign hospitals that provide medical care to non-citizens: the non-profit, independent [Joint Commission International](#), or JCI.

- JCI's stated mission "is to continuously improve the safety and quality of care in the international community through the provision of education and advisory services and international accreditation and certification"
- JCI has accredited healthcare organizations in 54 countries all over the world
- These providers include hospitals and clinics, laboratories, long term and rehabilitation facilities, primary care, home care, medical transport, and more
- JCI is itself accredited by The International Society for Quality in Health Care (ISQua)

Where are Medical Tourists Going, & for What Kind of Care?

Medical tourists seek a variety of medical care abroad. Expensive surgical procedures are the most sought-out. Medical tourists' most-wanted medical procedures include:

Cosmetic procedures:

- For the face: facelift, rhinoplasty, fillers like Botox and Restylane, etc.
- Popular destinations include Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico)
- In the USA, elite plastic surgeons in New York City and Beverly Hills attract domestic medical tourists plus foreign visitors
- Park Avenue cosmetic surgeon [Dr. Sam Rizk](#) goes one farther: his office helps his patients plan cushy recuperative stays in Manhattan luxury hotels
- For the body:
- Popular destinations include Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico)
- In Brazil, famed for butt lifts, cosmetic surgery is done in specialized hospitals

Surgery:

Medical tourists travel for surgery of all kinds. These surgical procedures range from straightforward Lasik eye surgery to intricate neurological procedures to organ transplants to fertility treatments to sex-change operations.

- As an example, Pamplona, Spain is an international destination for neurosurgery and cardiac surgery at its *Clínica Universitaria de Navarra*
- Read Guest Author Maureen Jenkins's report on [Pamplona's appeals, including medical tourism](#)

Dentistry:

- Dental insurance often refuses to cover mainstream yet expensive procedures such as [implants](#) and crowns, considering them "optional" or "cosmetic"
- Overseas, these procedures can cost as little as one-tenth of what you'd pay in the U.S
- Popular dentistry destinations include Central Europe and Eastern Europe, where dentists are very highly trained
- These countries include Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania

Do Medical Tourists Make all the Arrangements Themselves?

Medical tourism is a complicated undertaking that involves:

- Researching and booking the medical treatments
- Making all the usual travel arrangements (visa, flights, hotel, etc.)

Medical tourists typically *do not* take on the research and planning themselves.

Numerous packagers – akin to medical travel agents – offer their services to traveling patients. If you Google "medical tourism packages," you will see hundreds of entries.

- The package price usually includes the medical procedure

Enterprising hotels are beginning to offer medical tourism packages.

- Fairmont Le Château Frontenac in [Quebec City](#), Canada, offers a package complete with room, breakfast, couples' massage, and an appointment and transfers to Quebec's famed radiology clinic, RIMC. (Medical fees are not included)
- In Bangkok, four hotels cater to medical tourists: Intercontinental, JW Marriott, The Peninsula, and Conrad. Their deals include an appointment and transfers to a variety of top rated Bangkok healthcare facilities

What the U.S. Medical Establishment Says About Potential Risks of Medical Tourism

Surprise. Many American doctors are wary of patients' seeking medical care abroad.

- Potential risks involve physician training and shortened postoperative care
- You can read sensible recommendations in this 2009 [statement by the American College of Surgeons](#)
- A preview: the ACS urges medical tourists to be sure to gather all their records and to vet the foreign facility to the best of their ability