

Medical and wellness tourism



Global

Although difficult to calculate, the global health tourism industry is believed to have generated revenues of approximately USD 32.5 billion in 2019 – a CAGR rate of 17.9% for the period 2013 to 2019. It is expected to reach USD 207.9 billion by 2027, expanding at a CAGR of 21.1%.³⁶ According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), medical tourism comprises two segments: wellness and medical. Wellness tourism is an activity which aims to improve and balance overall wellbeing. The primary motivation is to engage in preventive, proactive, lifestyle enhancing activities such as fitness, healthy eating, relaxation, pampering and healing treatments. Medical tourism involves evidence-based medical resources and services which may include diagnosis, treatment, cure, prevention and rehabilitation.³⁷

Demand for healthcare services across the world is growing. The primary drivers are demographic factors such as increased longevity in general, and rising birth rates in certain regions. In fact, the percentage of the overall population aged 80 and above will more than double from the 2010 figure of 4% to nearly 10% by 2050, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).³⁸

UAE

Inbound medical tourism in the UAE has been growing steadily, with visitors seeking treatment ranging from major surgery to rehabilitation to cosmetic corrections. According to the latest Medical Tourism Index Ranking, Dubai and Abu Dhabi were ranked the 6th and 8th “best” global destinations for medical tourism, respectively.³⁹ The UAE’s potential as a medical tourism destination is further supported by the wider tourism ecosystem in the country, such as attractions, hotels, entertainment and the provision of world class aviation and transport logistics. The primary areas of emphasis for medical tourism in the UAE are dermatology, orthopedics and ophthalmology.

Low cost and the existing tourism infrastructure contribute to the UAE’s growing medical tourism industry. For example, the average cost of a hip replacement in developed countries such as the USA and Switzerland is USD 26,500 and USD 19,722 respectively; the same procedure in the UAE costs under USD 15,000.⁴⁰

However, the UAE exhibits higher costs of medical treatments and services offered compared with countries like India, Thailand, Singapore and others, which can lead to some local patients seeking treatment abroad.

Factors that make medical tourism attractive and efficient

In developing countries, medical tourism may contribute to modernization and expansion of healthcare facilities. The demand for treatment is fueled by an increase in the number of cases of lifestyle and chronic diseases, and complex surgery requirements, paired with rising medical costs in developed countries. Healthcare awareness amongst the general public boosts medical tourism for preventative care.

According to KPMG research, factors influencing medical tourism include:⁴¹

- Affordability: Costs act as enabler for people to travel across borders for treatments
- High-quality healthcare: Specialized doctors in internationally accredited hospitals
- Immediate service: Acute mobilization and access to health services

- Anonymity: Individuals can obtain treatment without questions from their immediate circle
- Improved communication: Procedures can be scheduled, and consultation received using the web
- Travel opportunities: Travelers may enjoy the opportunity to visit a new locale
- Affluent patients: Wealthy patients may be able to access technically advanced treatment options unavailable in their country of residence
- Despite the challenge of high treatment costs, factors such as medical expertise, high-end infrastructure and quality of treatment, help Singapore remain one of the top choices for foreign patients in southeast Asia. This is especially true for patients seeking world-class advanced medical care for complicated conditions. The country has expertise in advanced cancer treatment, major abdominal, blood vessel, bypass and minimally invasive surgery and robotic operations.

Case studies:

Singapore

Integrating diverse strategies with sound government policies and proactive management practices has helped Singapore reach a high degree of success in medical tourism over the last few years. According to the latest Medical Tourism Index Ranking, Singapore was ranked 3rd for medical tourism and 1st for quality of facilities and services.⁴² It receives approximately half a million medical tourists annually.

1. Key policies aimed at boosting medical tourism comprise strategic planning coupled with government and private partnerships⁴²
 - A national inter-agency initiative, 'Singapore Medicine', was set up in 2003. A strategic government-industry partnership, it aimed to sustainably boost the country's position as a global medical hub. Government agencies work closely with the private sector to promote healthtech innovation⁴³
2. High-quality levels of healthcare and world-class facilities make Singapore an ideal destination for medical travelers looking for modern infrastructure, a clean and structured environment and world-class, English-speaking medical professionals.

India

India's rapidly growing medical tourism segment is fueled by high-quality, affordable treatment options and improved infrastructure for travel and transport, supported by extensive promotion campaigns.

1. Medical visas and expansion of e-tourist visas
 - Medical visas are provided to those seeking long-term medical treatment in India
 - The e-visa includes short duration medical treatment and yoga courses for a period of 60 days
2. Medical tourism as a primary focus area in recently launched campaigns such as 'Incredible India 2.0'
 - The 'Make in India' initiative, established by the Modi government, promoted the development of hospitality and wellness centers across various tourist destinations in the country. This includes promoting curative and preventive treatment approaches such as ayurveda, yoga, unani, siddha and homoeopathy.^{45, 46}

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