

The Top 10 Medical Travel Destinations

Many vacationers already know Chennai, India, for its long sandy beaches and Costa Rica for its rich, tropical landscape. But both places are also among the top 10 destinations for medical tourism. Approximately 400,000 Americans and more than two million international citizens travel abroad each year to take advantage of affordable health care services, treatments and surgeries.

For example, a Wisconsin small business owner saved nearly 75% in costs by going to India for a successful double hip resurfacing procedure that would have cost \$55,000 in the U.S. And that 75% saving included his airfare and accommodation in India. A California woman who was quoted \$6,600 for extensive dental work received the same treatment for \$2,600 in Costa Rica. Her dentist there was a U.S.-trained oral surgeon who had all the essential state-of-the-art equipment and materials on hand.

Nearly every standard medical procedure is available overseas. And—depending upon the country and the type of treatment—cost savings can range from 15% to as much as 85%. Orthopedics, cardiovascular surgery, dental care, cosmetic surgery, and cancer diagnosis and treatment are among the services patients most commonly seek overseas. However, U.S. patients also travel abroad for specialty treatments, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and bariatric surgeries, as well as for therapies not yet permitted in the U.S., such as certain stem cell treatments.

Dramatic Cost Comparisons

In almost every instance, the cost savings are dramatic. A heart bypass surgery in the U.S.—typically running anywhere from \$70,000 to \$133,000—will cost \$7,000 in India or \$22,000 in Thailand. Hip replacement in India, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand can run as low as one-fifth the cost for the same surgery back home. A facelift, costing \$10,500 to \$16,000 in the U.S., is \$5,500 to \$6,500 in Brazil, as low as \$2,400 in Thailand and \$4,000 to \$8,000 in Singapore, South Korea and Mexico.

The same is true for dental procedures and surgeries. For example, sets of upper and lower dentures usually cost \$5,000 in the U.S. They run less than a third that much in Hungary and Costa Rica. More expensive crown and implant procedures often run less than a third of U.S. cost for this work. And inlays and onlays in Costa Rica, Hungary, Mexico and Thailand—countries well known for their high-quality dental work—are less than a quarter of U.S. cost. These figures not only reflect the cost of procedures but also the hospital stay in a private room. To get a ballpark estimate of total costs, patients should add about \$5,000 for themselves and a companion. This amount is based on airfare costs and hotel rooms averaging \$150 per night. When considering medical tourism as a health care option, use \$6,000 as a rule of thumb. That is, if you're quoted at least \$6,000 for a procedure in the U.S., the chances are pretty good that you can get the same procedure and quality for less in at least one of the top 10 international destinations—even if you include the cost of travel and lodging.

Many hospitals and treatment centers in the top countries for medical tourism already have Joint Commission International (JCI) accreditation. For a medical facility to be accredited, the JCI requires it to meet rigorous U.S. health care standards. The standards are applied comprehensively to medical staff, procedures, medical equipment and instruments, and administrative infrastructure. Even hospitals that are not yet JCI-accredited must satisfy or exceed strict standards imposed by their own countries.

But don't stop after checking what type of accreditation a hospital has. Study your doctor's or surgeon's educational background, certification and affiliations. The JCI website carries lots of information about all accredited institutions.

Top 10 Destinations

Here are the top countries for health care travel. In each of these countries, medical tourism services are gaining ground: The number of reliable agents, recovery accommodation and travel support services expands each year.

Brazil: Home to the highest per capita number of practicing cosmetic doctors in the world. Brazil attracts tourists not only to Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but also to smaller cities, including Porto Alegre and Santos. Common procedures, such as tummy tucks, breast augmentations, facelifts and rhinoplasty, run \$3,000 to \$6,500.

Costa Rica: Nearly 15% of international tourists visiting this ecological paradise take advantage of its medical services, mainly cosmetic surgery and dental care. San Jose and its surrounding area are home to hundreds of board-certified doctors, surgeons and dentists. Costa Rica is one of the top five medical tourism destinations for Americans.

Hungary: Long known for its mineral springs, lakes, baths and spas, Hungary has more dentists per capita than any other country. They are found not only in Budapest, but also in a small town of 30,000 (Mosonmagyaróvár) near the Austrian border, which has 160 dental offices. Many European Union visitors come here for major dental care, including cosmetic oral surgeries, full-mouth restorations and implants.

India: More Americans travel here for cardiac and orthopedic procedures than for all other treatments combined. India offers top private hospitals, especially in the larger cities of Bangalore, Delhi, Chennai and Mumbai. Medical travel to India is growing by 30% a year, thanks to increasing numbers of Americans, Canadians and Europeans—especially those seeking expensive cardiac and orthopedic surgeries. These often cost tens of thousands of dollars less here than in their home countries.

Malaysia: With more than a quarter of a million medical travelers each year, Malaysia compares favorably to India, Thailand, and neighboring Singapore in terms of its medical facilities, skill and costs. As well as having special burn treatment centers, Malaysian hospitals have created “well-man” and “well-woman” packages that include extensive, low-cost physicals and tests promoting preventive care. A battery of tests, including blood work, bone density scan, chest X-ray and treadmill, usually runs just \$340, compared to \$2,500 in the U.S.

Mexico: Its convenient location is the top draw for most Mexico-bound health travelers. More than 70% of Mexico’s U.S. patients reside in California, Texas or Arizona. Patients from San Diego, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Tucson and Brownsville make the two- to six-hour drive across the border to a clinic, stay a couple of nights in a hotel and then return Stateside. Many come each year for check-ups, dental cleanings, physicals and other treatments that cost much less than in the U.S. The added benefit, of course, is minimal travel.

Singapore: A medical tourism veteran, this tiny Asian nation—with a population of four-and-a-half million—has a health care system that the World Health Organization ranks as the best in Asia and sixth best in the world. It’s no wonder that Singapore attracts many international patients. Singapore’s specialties cover a broad range, including cardiology and cardiac surgery, gastroenterology, general surgery, hepatology, neurology, oncology, ophthalmology, orthopedics and stem cell therapy. Recent additions include the \$300-million Biopolis, a seven-building, 2-million-square-foot biotechnology research center that opened in late 2003. The Biopolis includes a stem cell bank, thanks to Singapore’s liberal laws on using human embryonic cells for research.

South Korea: One of the world’s most technologically and scientifically advanced nations. South Korea has earned a reputation for spinal surgeries, cancer screenings and treatments and cosmetic surgeries. Many South Korean hospitals are fully digitized, with electronic health records as the standard. Daegu, in the center of the nation, hosts a well-known herbal medicine market dating to the 17th century. On the southern seacoast, Busan attracts many medical travelers to the local Hanyang University Medical Center for low-cost, comprehensive health screenings.

Thailand: An established leader in cosmetic surgery, with an excellent medical infrastructure. Thailand turned the crash of its *baht* currency in the late 1990s into economic opportunity by attracting patients from nearby Japan, Vietnam, China and South Korea. Eventually, Westerners joined the flow to Bangkok and Phuket, primarily for elective surgeries whose low cost more than makes up for the long flight and other travel expenses.

Turkey: Medical tourists may be surprised to know that this Eurasian country is home to more JCI-accredited health care facilities than any nation outside the U.S. Health care costs compare extremely well even to those in Asia, and the medical system has plenty of doctors who are Western-trained and fluent in English. The Turkish government enforces strict quality standards in every area of medical technology, facilities and personnel. Dunyagoz, in particular, is a center for ophthalmology.

For more information about medical travel, see: www.patientsbeyondborders.com. For information about JCI accreditation, see: www.jointcommissioninternational.org.

Date: 1 June 2010

Source: <http://internationalliving.com/2010/06/the-top-10-medical-travel-destinations/>