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New breed of tourists

Thailand's hospitals and clinics make a name for themselves by attracting foreign travellers in need of medical and aesthetic treatments

Story by JARUNEE TAEMSAMRAN

Gillian de Marchi flew all the way from Sydney, Australia, stopped overnight in Bangkok for a dental check-up at Bangkok Dental Spa Clinic, before continuing her journey the next day.



"I came here because the clinic and Thai dentists are famous in Sydney. People back home are talking a lot about coming to Thailand for dental treatment," she said.

Located on Sukhumvit Road, the clinic is also Bangkok's first dental spa. Mrs Marchi was impressed by its professional expertise and caring staff.

"More than that I can get everything at half the price I would be required to pay in Sydney. The service and expertise of doctors are of the same standard. I can't be happier," she said.



Tourists can return home with not just good memories but with a better health as well.

Mrs Marchi is one of the several thousand Australians who come to Thailand for medical treatment every year.

Not only Australians, in recent years, people from around the world have been coming to Thailand for medical treatment and surgery. It is estimated that more than 300,000 people from 145 countries have travelled to Thailand for surgical procedures.

Even Singaporeans, whose government has been strongly promoting medical

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tourism in the island country, choose Thailand for medical treatment.

"Because it's cheaper and the quality of service is on par with Singapore," said Dr Chow U-Jin, managing director of Health Aesthetics, a Singapore-based medical retreat consultancy. "And they can combine it with shopping and travelling around Thailand."

Dentistry, lasik, plastic surgery, breast enhancement, sex transplant, facial and beauty treatment are particularly popular among foreigners. And the other reason they come to Thailand is that they can keep it private and remain anonymous.



Medical check-up has become an integral part of the travel itinerary.

"Some people don't want others to know if they are having surgery so they travel to Thailand on holiday and get the job done here," Dr Chow explained.

John Uittenbogaard, managing director of Australia-based International Medical Tours, says that quality, affordability, anonymity and accessibility to medical procedures are the main reasons why Australians choose to travel to Thailand.

And mind you, it's not just them but a growing number of Americans and Europeans have been coming to Thailand for the same reason.

In some European countries, the cost of medical treatment is high, much higher than in Thailand, and there is usually a long waiting period before patients can see the doctor. By coming here they can cut medical costs and receive treatment at a time of their choosing.

Word of mouth and the Internet

Most foreign patients know about Thailand from word of mouth, usually from friends and relatives who have received treatment in Thailand, or from the Internet.

"A lot of my customers heard (about Thailand) from friends or relatives, but there were others who learnt about us from the internet," said Dr Watchareewon Porncharoen who found her dental spa a year ago and posted it on the Web site. The same goes for Bangkok Phuket Hospital.

The good thing about the Internet is that patients can contact directly with the hospitals or clinics and compare the quality and price range of services they offer. Travel agents also play a part.

Given the current boom, very soon we should be seeing a new breed of travel agents specialising in medical tours.

Apart from the normal airline booking, hotel accommodation and devising tour packages, they will be required to advise travellers about the medical services available at destinations they are visiting.

"It's an area that normal travel agents can't do because it requires special expertise or doctors who can address the problems and offer consultation to customers," said Dr Chow, who helps Health Aesthetics locate doctors in Thailand.

These so-called medical tour agents would be required to work directly with doctors and hospitals, arrange appointments for customers and follow it up with thorough counselling before and after the treatment or surgery.

Some hospitals are already moving in this direction. For example, Phuket Health and Travel, a subsidiary of Bangkok Phuket Hospital, was set up in 2000 to cater to the medical and leisure travel segment of the market. It works and cooperates with regular travel agents who are one of its main sources of clients.

Bangkok and Phuket top medical destinations

For most tourists visiting Thailand, Bangkok is usually the starting point from where they proceed to other destinations around the country. But when it comes to medical service, Bangkok remains the top choice followed by Phuket.

There are more than 400 hospitals and clinics in Bangkok catering to expatriates and foreign tourists, and many of them _ like Bangkok General Hospital, Bamrungrad, BNH, TRSC International Lasik Centre and St Carlos Medical Spa, to name a few _ have made a name for themselves overseas.

Some hospitals offer packages which combine physical check-up, medical and spa treatment lasting one day to a week.

In Phuket, the Bangkok Phuket Hospital is spearheading the trend in medical tourism. Dr Suraphong Lookhanumanjao, its managing director, said Phuket has the potential to become the regional hub for health and medical tours, given its vast tourism potential, and besides, it's blessed with world-class resorts, spas, hospitals and clinics.

"Medical and health tourism is a new niche market for Phuket.

It adds value to its tourism industry," he said.

Phuket has seen 70% drop in tourist arrivals as a result of the tsunami last December, but the effect on medical tourism was less severe. Actually, the number of patients checking into the province for medical and health treatment rose 20% in May, and the trend is likely to continue as an increasing number of Thais and foreigners are subscribing to packages devised by Phuket Health and Travel and other operators in the resort province.

According to Dr Suraphong, the number of patients checking into Phuket has risen 400% since 2000.

Medical and health tourism

Medical tourism is a small part of the bigger overall picture that we know as health tourism.

Medical tourism refers to people or patients who, after consultation with physicians or specialists, come to Thailand and check into hospitals or clinics for treatment or surgery.

Dr Suraphong classifies them into three categories:

- There are those who don't have physical problems but suffer from mental illness and seek ways to relieve stress.
- Those with physical problems and need to see a doctor, and
- Those who need to enhance their personality through various procedures such as plastic surgery, breast enhancement, anti-aging and weight-loss treatment and dentistry.

To these can be added a fourth group comprising retirees from developed countries who travel to Thailand and stay here for long periods of time.

Dr Suraphong said Thailand is famous for its hospitality and as such it has certain competitive advantages over its neighbours like Malaysia and Singapore, and even India, even though they may have better technology.

He called on the government to make a concerted and systematic attempt to promote the sector because it has immense potential and could herald a new era for the tourism industry in Thailand.

Dr Chow said, "If promoted properly, it could turn the country into a regional hub for medical and health tours."

Dr Watchareewon of Bangkok Dental Spa said, "This is a sector that can tap high-yield customers and bring in quality tourists and foreign exchange.

"People coming to Thailand for treatment spend at least two weeks in the country. Most of my customers stay in five-star hotels. So you see there are spin-offs for other sectors as well. The entire tourism industry stands to benefit as a result."

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