

## A brief history

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Now, in ancient times the Greeks honoured their god of medicine, Asclepius, with the Asclepia Temples; people travelled far and wide for the cures that these temples offered, and thus started the first few medical travellers. But this was just the beginning; Medieval Japan adopted a similar tradition with their hot mineral springs that were thought to have healing properties – external warrior clans were known to travel to these springs to bathe and heal their battle-wounds, which is not dissimilar to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans and Americans who would travel the world looking for spas that could cure tuberculosis.

This growth continued until, jumping forward, medical tourism became much more of a widespread idea across the world, so much so that the American Board of Medical Specialties was established in 1933 and developed educational and professional policies which formed the basis of standards worldwide. This provided the infrastructure for the industry to take off, and so when medical costs got to a point of no return in the 1980s, Americans realised their best bet for affordable healthcare was to consider offshore options, and often looked into places like Cuba for eye surgeries and cosmetic procedures etc. These places were held to a particularly high standard by the Joint Commission International from 1997 onwards, leading to countries like India, Singapore, and Thailand forming hubs for medical tourists. The figures for these tourists have continued to rise from the once-record breaking 300,000 Americans in 2007, and the rest – some might say – is history.



## Medical Tourism: Current Trends

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So, as with many things, 'trends' form and things tend to go in and out of fashion. Medical tourism is no different, and it seems that times are changing in the industry. Recently, dental tourism has become a huge incentive for people travelling to Mexico, where costly procedures are reduced by 50-75%. Similarly, patients travel for hours to Singapore – ranking sixth in the world for its advanced health systems – as the heart surgeries performed there are some of the best in the modern day. But, medical tourism isn't just for those seeking life-saving medical care, as can be seen with Thailand's new status as a leading destination for cosmetic surgery; the low-cost treatment and accredited healthcare services have ensured a thriving income for the country.

However, all of these treatments seem somewhat obvious when looking at this topic; it is India and their medical care that has evoked a new age of medical tourism. Things like meditation, yoga, and allopathy are among many of the newfound medical 'attractions', and have served India well in catapulting them to the heights of the industry.

More common (and expensive) procedures are also available in India for a particularly reduced price. A heart bypass sits at a hefty \$130,000 in the U.S., but is significantly cheaper in India, costing as little as \$7,000.<sup>1</sup> If this isn't enough, then perhaps the difference between a hip replacement in the U.S. and India is in showing just how much more accommodating medical tourism can prove to be. Who would rather pay \$43,000 instead of \$7,020<sup>2</sup> for the exact same treatment? It seems as though India and its medical tourism have more than proven their cost-effectiveness.