

TRENDS NEW CONCEPT

Enticing Medicine



"Is the medical spa the convergence of health care and luxury

hospitality or just another marketing tool? And is the Middle East ready to be placed on the map of medical spas?" KARIM ASMAR

The key word in the travel industry for the last decade has been wellness. Travelers are increasingly seeking wellbeing in a life filled with stress and pollution. Medical and paramedical expenses have soared, while medical tourism is becoming a key travel segment.

Browsing the Internet one easily comes across travel packages associating vacations with medical treatments in exotic destinations such as Tunisia, India, Jordan, China and Thailand. These destinations promote state of the art medical techniques at a lower cost combined with that little twist of exotic flavor needed for a vacation. Europeans are flocking abroad to relax, have a check up and even surgery. While there is a predominance for plastic surgery, there is also an increasing number of vital surgical, dental, ophthalmologic and physiotherapy treatments being carried out in these destinations. The Discovery Thailand website promotes state of the art medical technology at a lower cost to patients coming from industrialized countries.

Looking back at the development of tourism across history, one can find the same categories as in the modern world. As early as antiquity, people traveled for religious, business, leisure and medical purposes. Today the same categories still exist yet the offer has changed. The traveler is more demanding and the technology more supportive to innovate. Medical tourism has not escaped this trend.

Modern world requirements for each category of tourism have drastically changed and thrust a challenge on professionals to better understand their customers and provide adapted solu-



tions. Medical tourism has witnessed the most significant change of all. With countries such as the US spending more than 15% of the GDP on health care and second tourist spenders with around US\$60bn in spending, medical tourism has a strong potential.

Language culture

Germany is classed as the number 1 tourist spender with US\$67bn and second in medical spending. Noticeably German tourists are considered an important source of income for establishments on the

Dead Sea in Jordan where brochures are in German and the staff speak the language.

Two in one

While the priority of medical tourists is medical care, they are looking more and more to combine leisure and care. Establishments famed for their breathtaking and isolated locations, are to a greater extent being sought after for the medical treatment they offer. In a recent survey by Conde Nast traveler magazine, the number one Destination Spa listed

was "Clinique La Prairie" in Switzerland. Associating vacation and clinic is no longer shocking.

Coming together

The increasing merger between the medical and leisure industry can be seen clearly in an analysis of vocabulary evolution of the luxury hospitality sector on one side and the health care sector on the other. These are then listed under Medical spa, which itself is a combined result of the two sectors. In hospitality "guest" and in health care "patient" becomes

"health-conscious guest". Likewise "leisure" in hospitality and "medical" in health care becomes "wellbeing".

The current trend in health care is into preventive medicine. While insurance companies and other health care financing establishments have been tardy at grasping the importance of preventive medicine and its cost advantage on the long run, the now customer are pressuring for such solutions. An executive check up is now part of the first-class insurance package, and in response, medical spas are offering this kind of service. The association of leisure and check-up is also becoming more common.

Increasingly, spa brands are offering a combination of treatments that constitute a travel experience for the guest. The "Cinq Continents" Spa brand aims at finding legitimacy in geography offering treatments that are derived from Asian, European, Arab and North African techniques. And with the development of the lifestyle approach, most establishments are currently developing a line of cosmetics so that the guest can initiate or pursue his treatments away from the center. Not only is it a significant source of revenue for the center but it also helps developing brand awareness.

In the Middle East, although there are no destination spas, there is a renowned medical expertise in Lebanon and in Jordan. The latter is also tagged with having the most natural spa: The Dead Sea. Other countries in the Middle East such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are investing

heavily into hospitals and medical centers, to respond primarily for the increasing needs of the local populations and the resident expatriates.

In Lebanon, spa activity remains very commercial and leisure oriented while on the medical level, hospitals and clinics offer state of the art know how. However, the link between the two approaches is still very loose, and a medical spa has yet to see the light.

Jordan on the other hand, is thriving at structuring its medical industry, and has already gained a regional fame as a medical destination after Beirut. With the continuous political turmoil in Lebanon and the exploitation of the Dead Sea area now open for commercial development, Jordan is securing its space as a regional medical destination. So far, only two establishments claim to be medical centers, while all hotels have spas. Nevertheless, the Dead Sea does not host a destination spa.

Other countries such as Syria and Egypt are also racing to build their medical infrastructure and body of experts; Egypt could easily diversify into a medical destination, and become a world player on this market.

In an environment savvy in novelty and discovery of relaxation techniques, Middle Eastern culture has a lot to contribute to the world of spas. Will modernized hammams and steam baths, offering traditional Arabic medicine techniques, become the next number one destination spa?

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A unique spa experience

Situated in the ultimate hospitality complex of Le Royal Hotel Beirut, there are many elements that make the Royal Spa unique. To begin with, the spa has been awarded as Best Spa by the MENA Travel Awards, boasting the only authentic Turkish hamam in Lebanon, and directly overlooking the Mediterranean. It also offers a fabulous swimming pool, modern gym and a variety of treatments such as body wraps, facials, slimming programs and unique massages.

The latest offering at the spa is its state-of-the-art swimming program, which includes toning and shaping initiatives, enhanced through the very latest in fat reducing equipment, lymphatic drainage and thermolipolysis. In addition to Thermojet techniques, the Royal Spa is arguably the only one in the region to feature the revolutionary Starvac slimming system, which burns and drains fat while toning muscle tissue to shape the whole body quickly and efficiently. Equally important, it reduces cellulite to create a healthier, more confident person.

On the fitness side, the Royal Spa offers a complete range of fitness equipment and programs that ensure a fit, toned body, in combination with the swimming pool, sauna, steam therapy and Jacuzzi that all contribute to general wellbeing and stress relief. Meanwhile, treatments such as the hot stone massage removes tension, while the hydromassage with rose petals enhances relaxation. A beauty salon with talented staff adds value to the overall spa.

As part of its benefits, the Royal Spa has teamed up with Bank Audi, under Le Royal's Diamond Life spa membership programme.

