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Medical Tourism in Korea

Enhancing your outlook in life

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Medical tourism (or medical travel) - the practice of traveling to another country for healthcare reasons (usually at substantial cost savings while acquiring quality if not superior medical expertise) and enjoying a holiday at the same time is without doubt, one of the most sought after economic driver that countries with advance medical infrastructure and capabilities are looking at developing. Most countries offering medical tourism lures potential customers by offering cost effective yet complex medical procedures and specialized surgeries such as cardiac surgery, joint (knee/hip) replacement, dental surgery and cosmetic surgeries.

In Asia, the most common destinations for medical tourism would unquestionably be exotic locations like India or Thailand although countries like Singapore and Philippines are fast catching up ¹ but one country in particular deserves special attention – South Korea, “The Land of Morning Calm”. South Korea’s culture and holiday landmarks are rapidly gaining popularity and this sudden interest is fueled though an interesting channel – Korean Dramas. Equipped with romantic stories involving mostly love triangles or love comedies with handsome actors and gorgeous actresses, scenic backdrops or historical settings, these Korean dramas have been translated in various languages and exported all over Asia (and to the USA as well), converting tons of ‘die hard fans’ to the ‘Korean Wave’, arousing deep interest in the country’s language, culture and landmarks where popular Korea drama filming took place ².

In addition to the ‘Korean Wave’, South Korea has always been renown for their health conscious ethos, nutritious diet and high standards (yet extremely affordable) of cosmetic surgeries, which is not surprising given South Korean’s ‘obsession’ with one’s appearance. A straw poll conducted by The Chosun Ilbo back in October 2009 ³ revealed that nearly 90 percent of Korean women would undergo plastic surgery to ‘feel better’ about themselves (the last time I check, it wasn’t only the women in South Korea getting cosmetic surgery done) and as if serving as testimonial to South Korea’s expertise in cosmetic surgeries, actors and actress in Korean dramas always appears to be on top of the beauty chains, effecting advertising the countries forte in ‘beauty enhancement’.

South Korea's determination for establishing itself as a sought after destination for medical tourism is by no means 'skin deep'. Attaching approximately 40,000 foreign patients with an estimated revenue of US\$48 million from medical tourism in 2008, the South Korean government has announced this revenue generating industry as one of its 17 next-generation growth engines and made plans to develop more health care cluster catering for to it. ⁴ While the country's main language of communication is Korean (their native tongue), major languages like Mandarin and Japanese are commonly spoken due to historical reasons (Korea was previously a vassal state of China and a colony of Japan), of course, English is fast catching up due to economical trade. The language assimilation has steered the geographical segment towards medical tourists from mainly Japan and countries where Chinese is spoken (e.g. China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and even Singapore) and to aid in uplift the medical tourism industry, the South Korean Government has launch several initiatives including;

- **Council for Korea Medicine Overseas Promotion (CKMP).**

The government-private joint initiative to promote Korea Healthcare to international patients, it is the official organization for Korea Medical Tourism supported by Korea Government as well as the "acting body" for a series of national policies in regard to medical travel to Korea.

Website: <http://www.koreahealthtour.co.kr/eng/index.jsp>

- **Visit Korea website.**

Provides an overview of Korea's medical tourism, a step-by-step guide to medical tourism services, information on medical service providers, and an advanced search system to help travelers select the appropriate medical institution.

Website: <http://asiaenglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/mt/tourism.kto?cmd=main&md=ena>

In addition to providing web portals available in major languages (English, Mandarin and Japanese), medical tourism information booths have also been established in the Tourism Information Center at Incheon International Airport to provide first hand information, a lounge catering to the needs of medical tourist is also made available, equipped with refrigerators for medical tourists visiting Korea to store their medication as well free internet connection to browse for information on medical service providers and travel agents.

For the 'doubtful' or 'uncertain' medical tourist with language concerns, rest assured as there at least are 12 health facilities in Seoul official designated to provide 24/7 medical services in English, Japanese and Mandarin;

1. Seoul National University Hospital
2. Severance Hospital
3. Seoul Asan Medical Center
4. Samsung Seoul Medical Center
5. Gangnam Severance Hospital
6. Soonchunhyang University Hospital
7. Hanyang University Hospital
8. KyungHee University Hospital
9. Seoul St. Mary's Hospital
10. Chung-Ang University Hospital
11. Chung-Ang University Yong-San Hospital
12. Migrant Worker's Hospital

So what does the sterling testimonials of good-looking actors/actress, top rated physicians, and value-for-money medical services provided by South Korea translate to for providers in the medical devices and healthcare informatics sector? For starters, hospitals in South Korea also happen to be fast adopters of state-of-the-art medical equipment and health information technology.

Termed as one of the four 'Asian Tigers' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) South Korea is the 4th largest economy in Asia (and the 15th largest in the world) and process the highest healthcare expenditure out of the 'Asian Tigers' with over 50% estimated to be funded by the public sector ⁵, although South Korea process strong domestic manufacturing capabilities, the country still depends largely on foreign imports for their modern (high-tech) medical devices and South Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA) signed in 2007 ⁶ have substantially improved bilateral trades, procedures governing trade the regulatory environment, making it 'easier' from the regulatory and legal point of view.

Fuel with the government's backing in developing the country's medical tourism infrastructure and sector, local governments like Jeju Island, Daegu, Busan and Gangwon-do already have plans in the pipeline to build or beef up their health care clusters to cater for the medical tourism boom. ⁴ so it may be worth our while to explore a little further than cosmetic surgery for South Korea.

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