

Dr Mohan Thomas, a cosmetic surgeon at the Cosmetic Surgery Institute, explains, "There has been a marked increase in the number of patients coming to India every year from various countries. I get at least 60 to 70 patients a year coming to me seeking surgical enhancements. The more sought-after procedures include face lifts, breast reconstruction and body lifts."

Agreeing with him is Dr Vandana Kamat, a reputed cosmetologist in Delhi who besides consulting at various hospitals also runs her own private practice, "One of the trends that we've noticed is that people don't come here to get only the 'serious' surgeries done, for instance, a face reconstruction or an eyelid correction procedure, but increasingly there is a larger market for purely cosmetic-driven surgeries like breast enhancement or mole removal."

Cosmedical tourism

According to a recent report in Bloomberg Markets magazine, medical tourism could spell the next big boost for the Indian economy. Another Internet-based research has revealed that India could earn Rs 100 billion (US\$2.3 billion) through medical tourism alone by the year 2012. And it's no surprise that several organisations have been mushrooming, offering complete healthcare and tourism services. These companies cater to the complete 360 degree needs of a medical tourist — right from suggesting the best hospitals for treatments, providing a round-the-clock case manager, transportation, accommodation and even a visit to some of the most famous tourist spots are thrown in.

Another factor that's worked in India's favour is the reduced airfares to the country. Taking full advantage of all these factors are the medical tourists (as they are called) who don't think twice about combining a face-lift procedure with a trip to the Lake Palace in Udaipur.

Says Vishal K. Laroia, business head, medical tourism at Sahara Medical, a division of the Sahara Group, "India is accessible from any part of the world these days. This is why packages often include the cost of treatment, airport transfers, medical concierge service and hotel arrangements." He adds, "Since cosmetic surgery is not life-threatening and needs a longer recuperation period, combining it with a holiday makes it a very attractive deal for medical tourists. We offer a cosmetic surgery package, along with a tour of the backwaters or beaches."

But it's not just surgical procedures that are luring tourists; even ayurvedic treatments are finding a lot of takers. Says a spokesperson from Ananda Spa, one of India's premier spas located in the Himalayas, "Over 70 per cent of our guests are from the US, UK, Germany, France and so forth. Guests come here for different reasons. Some of them come to relax and get rejuvenated, some to lose weight, some for a detoxification programme, others for anti-ageing programmes. But one common thread is that everyone seeks wellness and they come here to acquire a mind, body and soul balance."

However, despite the demand and advantages to this trend, there is a downside to it too. According to experts, India faces stiff competition from other South East Asian countries like Thailand and China, which also offer world-class facilities at an economical rate.

Another thing that tarnishes India's image among medical tourists is the hygiene and sanitation factor. "The lack of hygiene is the main concern among our international patients. This is also one reason why they prefer checking into premier hospitals in the metros rather than going to a specialised, private clinic —because they know that at these hospitals a lot of attention is paid to cleanliness and other details and they can be assured that the care that they receive will be on par with any other facility across the world," explains Dr Kamat.

Which is possibly why Dr Thomas chooses to put things in perspective with — "Our challenges are more from within the country than from other foreign influences. For one, we need to make the entry and exit procedures very smooth and in addition to this, we need to ensure that the foreigners who come here for medical treatment, whatever kind of surgery it may be, are treated as equals."

He cautions, "On their part visitors should be alert and careful not to fall prey to the numerous touts in the country. A little bit of research on their part about the kind of hospital, the doctors' qualifications and the standard of care provided will go a long way towards making their experience a very satisfactory one."

Hotlist of cosmetic surgery procedures

For the face