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News from the Caribbean for Monday August 20, 2007



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### Commentary: The Greater Caribbean This Week: A novel tourism concept

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By Jasmin A. Garraway

With very few exceptions, the potential for specific niche tourism experiences such as health, wellness and spa tourism has not been fully explored in the Greater Caribbean.



**Jasmin Garraway is the Sustainable Tourism Director of the Association of Caribbean States**

Medical tourism for example, which can be modelled around the provision of either elective or necessary surgical procedures, provides patients with an opportunity to undergo recommended medical procedures earlier and at a lower cost than in their own countries.

Medical tourism has linkages to and benefits other industries and sectors including insurance, real estate, advertising and telecommunications. Social benefits include the upgrading of medical facilities and capacity building of medical care providers.

The economic impacts of this type of tourism are demonstrated not only in foreign exchange earnings through increases in the volume of tourists and the average daily expenditure, but also in the extended average length of stay, employment, and investments in health care facilities and ancillary health-related services.

The trade off, depending on the level of demand and available resources, is that medical tourism can contribute to the crowding out of nationals, and an exodus of public health care workers into the private medical facilities, which offer better salaries.

In Countries such as India, Singapore and Thailand, medical tourism has experienced tremendous growth as a private industry, as these countries have become known as low cost health care destinations.

In 2005, India hosted its first Medical Tourism Expo in London to promote the industry throughout Europe. It is now estimated that by 2011, medical tourism will contribute one billion dollars per annum to the country's GDP, and in Thailand and Singapore the industry is expected to generate between 2 and 3 billion US dollars by 2012.

Thailand's strategic location has made it the medical tourism hub of

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Asia. As a consequence of its expertise and advancements in medical research and development, the country has earned itself international recognition in the treatment of infectious diseases, bone related ailments, and cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, to name a few.

Several exemplary strategies are employed by Thailand to sustain the growth of its health and wellness tourism industry for example the Thai Spa Association and the State are collaborating to develop specific quality standards as well as legislation, certification and regulations for the Spa Industry.

Closer to home, Cuba is known as not only a destination for peace and safety but also for health and well-being.

The medical tourism product in Cuba has evolved over the last four decades. In 2005, there were 70,594 doctors, 21 medical schools, 14,078 medical clinics, 470 polyclinics, 255 hospitals, 13 medical research institutions and 165 stomatology clinics for the treatment of diseases of the mouth. The country currently collaborates with more than 80,000 institutions in 97 countries in the field of medicine.

Cuba's medical tourism products and services are disseminated by Cubanacan Tourism and Health, which provided care for a total of 19,670 tourist patients in 2006. As stated by President Fidel Castro Ruz, Cubanacan is based on the principle that "every person and every nation has the right to a healthy life and to enjoy the privilege of a prolonged and useful existence," and "Cubanacan Tourism and Health places at the disposal of all interested persons anywhere in the world, the advancements of the Cuban health system."

A successful medical tourism industry depends in part on efficient systems for information processing and for the pooling of equipment, patient assistance and post surgery treatment services; and accreditation processes of both the facilities and health professionals. Improved quantity and quality of professionals; linkages with wellness centers, insurance companies and tourism enterprises and ease of entry /exit procedures for patients and medical professionals are other essentials.

Another integral component in developing medical tourism is intra and inter-agency collaboration and co-ordination among ministries responsible for health, telecommunications, tourism, and foreign affairs. The private tourism sector, airlines etc. must develop and share a common vision and joint strategy and develop integrated plans, for product development, marketing and promotion.

*Jasmin Garraway is the Sustainable Tourism Director of the Association of Caribbean States.*

*The views expressed are not necessarily the official views of the ACS. Feedback can be sent to: [mail@acs-aec.org](mailto:mail@acs-aec.org)*

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