

# HEALTH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: SPA, WELLNESS AND MEDICAL TREATMENT

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## Abstract:

Health tourism is a trend in the tourism market that has received considerable attention worldwide. In line with this development, the paper will explore three main segments of the health tourism market which are the health spa, the wellness attraction and the medical care. Besides these three segments, the paper will review health tourism development in Malaysia, in particular the segment that has received special attention by the officials in the country, medical treatment. As the relationship between health and travel is not a phenomenon that has just developed recently, among the main issue that will be highlighted in the paper are factors that has contributed for health tourism to emerge as one of the leading trends in the tourism industry nowadays. An overview of health tourism concept and its development throughout the world will also be presented. Lastly, challenges and opportunities in positioning Malaysia as one of the prime health tourism destinations will also presented.

*Keywords: Health tourism, health spa, wellness tourism, medical tourism*

## INTRODUCTION

Health tourism is an emerging niche market that is projected to have a great potential in the tourism industry as the demand for health tourism has been flourishing all over the world. These days, there are more and more countries offering and promoting their health products and services to people outside their countries. Overall, health has become the main concern of the modern society in many developed countries and the trend has been on the rise in the Asian region. One of the reasons for the growing importance of this segment has been attributed to the paradigm shift from health treatment to disease prevention in many parts of the world. In line with the development, choosing destinations that offer health benefits is a popular trend among individuals that are concerned with their health. Weiermair & Steinhauser (2003) noted that health has become the dominant motive for vacation. A study conducted in Europe found that 30.4% of Germans who were interviewed in the year 2000 as tourists in the "Reiseanalyse 2000" mentioned the

importance of doing something for their health in their holiday (Lohmann and Aderhold 2000; in Weiermair & Steinhauser, 2003). Similarly, a Louis Harris Survey (1992) reported that 77 percent of all Americans at home or work participate in some regular exercise activity and 56 percent of all Americans consider the availability of health facilities important when planning their vacation (Rusbruskin-Goldring Research, 1992; in Spivack, 1997). Bennett et al. (2004) stated despite being a niche market or special interest market, health tourism makes a significant contribution to the economy in a number of countries. They added that the industry contribution has been recognised by many authors who studied on countries like Austria, Caribbean, Cuba, German, Hungry, Israel, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, Hawaii, and the USA. Currently, Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, India and Indonesia are also aggressively promoting their health tourism products. Among the factors that contribute to the development of health tourism according to Bennett et al. (2004) includes: aging populations, stress among the working populations, a move in the medical perspective towards prevention and alternative practices like homeopathy, increased interaction between health and health psychology and the shift from mass towards more customised travel experienced.

## **HEALTH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

Among scholars who provide the development of health tourism are Hall (1992) and Ross (2001). According to Ross (2001), the earliest form of health tourism is visiting mineral or hot springs, in which the trend can be traced back to the Neolithic and Bronze ages in Europe. On the other hand, Hall (1992) mentioned that the taking of waters at mineral spas and hot springs has occurred since Roman times. During the Middle Ages, the belief of the curative powers of thermal springs was widely accepted (Ross, 2001). Spivack (1997) mentioned two important individuals in history, Plato and Hippocrates who also have been associated with the curative powers of waters. It has been said that Plato's illness were cured by hot sea water baths and Hippocrates had observed that ocean had cured many diseases. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries visiting hot springs had become part of the social life for the English, French, German, and other Europeans. Furthermore, enhancing one's health through traveling such as cruising or a change of climate, has long been a motivation for travel (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Wright, 1988; cited in Hall, 1992). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the industrialisation many urban middle class yearned for the healthful benefits of fresh sea or mountain as a cure to the overcrowding and pollution. "Health farms" or "fat farm" is another health form which identified by her that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Visiting spa for the mass market only started to gain attention in the late 1980s (Ross, 2001). During

the time Hall wrote the article in 1992, he mentioned health tourism had developed as a small, but tremendously important special interest market in some of the countries such as Austria (Ender, 1989), France (Guignand, 1989; Mesplier-Pinet, 1990), Germany (Carone, 1989; Godau 1989), Hungary, Israel (Bar-On, 1989; Niv, 1989), Italy (Becheri, 1989) and Switzerland (Lanquar, 1989). Ross (2001) also stated that only recently had some organisations taken a forward step in making hospitals more like spas and spas more like hospitals. Presently, health tourism has expanded to include the concepts of wellness, medical treatment, alternatives treatment, fitness and others.

## **Health Tourism Concept**

According to Hunter-Jones (2005), in general, the relationship between health and vacations represents one of the most neglected areas of research in tourism even if it is one of the earliest forms of tourism. Bennett et al. (2004) states that, it was not until the early 1980s that the concept of healthcare tourism emerged as a focus for academic research. According to these scholars, the concept started as medical tourism, evolved into healthcare tourism, and finally became health tourism.

## **Definitions**

There are several definitions of the concept of health tourism available in the literature. One of the earliest and widely cited definitions of health tourism was provided by IOUTO (1973:7), where health tourism was defined as “*the provision of health facilities utilizing the natural resources of the country, in particular mineral and climate*” (in Hall, 1992). An expert in the field, Dr. George Alleyne, the Director of the Pan American Health Organization, defined health tourism as that which “*recaptures some of the pristine motives of tourism related to physical well-being*” (Alleyne, 1990; in Spivack, 1997). Ross (2001) defined health tourism as people traveling from their place of residence for health reasons. Health tourism is also explained as the promotion by a tourist destination of its health care facilities and services. (Goodrich and Goodrich, 1987). Based on a broad perspective, Laws (1996) defined health tourism as “*leisure taken away from home, where one of the objectives is to improve one’s state of health*”. Similarly, using a very liberal definition, Bennett et al., (2004:133) defined health tourism as “*any pleasure-oriented tourism which involves an element of stress relief*”. Based on several definitions stated above, health tourism is a broad concept which may take on a broad or specific definition depending on the party whom defined it.

Even though, it has been noted by economists that a decision to spend money on a specific product will reduce the ability to buy other goods and services, factors perceived by the consumers that influence one's health may have a higher order of priority than most consumption decisions (Law, 1996). Therefore, the development of health tourism products has a promising future as more people place health as their highest priority and vacation can be one source of comfort during times of illness.

## **Health Tourism Segments**

Van Slipen classified the health tourism market into five specific market segments (Goeldner, 1989, in Hall, 1992). These categories are:

- (i) sun and fun activities;
- (ii) healthy activities where health is not the central motive (adventure and sports tourism activities such as hiking, cycling, and golf);
- (iii) principle motive for travel is health (e.g. a sea cruise or travel to a different climate);
- (iv) travel for sauna, massage, and other health activities (spa resort); and
- (v) medical treatment.

Based on his classification of health tourism, the three important segments of health tourism sub-segment which will be highlighted in the paper are health spa, wellness tourism and medical treatment.

## **Health Spa**

One of the more popular types of spas is the natural hot springs. Hot springs are formed by natural waters that emerge from the bowels of the earth. Many of the early and famous spas were built around natural hot springs or mineral water pools. According to Smith and Jenner (2000), the precise definition of the word spa is "*a mineral spring or a place or resort where such a spring is found*" (Collins, cited in Smith and Jenner, 2000: 42). Spa is derived from the Latin word "*solus per aqua*" or "*health by water*" which is a resort or hotel with mineral springs (Loverseed 1998:48). He states that the term spa is used more loosely in North America as it can describe everything from a whirlpool bath to a full-service health centre offering therapeutic treatments. Moreover, the tradition of spa therapy or the term called 'medical hydrology' in Europe has continued into the modern world to a point that the curative aspects of water are practically accepted as a separate branch of medicine, or 'social medicine' (Spivack, 1997). It is also believed that

spa traditions are the antecedents of the demand for relaxation and health provided by the modern resorts (Bennett et al., 2004).

Goodrich and Goodrich (1989) mentioned that there were many countries that owned healthcare tourism facilities like Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, USA, UK, and France. In fact, according to him, many cities or resorts in these countries had developed around thermal springs and were linked with health facilities. One of the countries which has been identified to explore the spa industry is Israel. The Israeli government has identified health tourism as a segment of the industry that deserved special development (Law, 1996). For example there are a variety of different modern treatments offered at spas in the Galilee Sea and the Dead Sea for rheumatism, arthritis, dermatological conditions, and respiratory ailments at the desert town of Arad (Law, 1996). In fact, to preserve the spa industry in that country, the national tourism plan provided zoning legislation that was designed to protect spas from nearby developments and from pollution (Niv, 1989; Law, 1996). In addition, among the factors that contributed to the success of the health tourism industry in Israel are good natural resources, stable and comfortable climate throughout the year, progressive medical system and attractive scenic locations which have a calming effect on patients (Niv, 1989; Hall, 1992).

According to Law (1996), in certain conditions, spa is an alternative to medical treatment. Countries such as Denmark, Germany, and Austria pay or refund the medical elements of a spa treatment and may pay for a companion to accompany patients, particularly children. He also mentioned that there are several advantages of spa treatments when compared to medical treatments. Among the positive benefits that can be gained at the natural spa are relaxation and enjoyment at a new site, different activities with new friends, novel food and drinks, and escape from a European winter (BarOn 1989:12; in Law, 1996).

There are many reasons of why people visit spas in the modern world. According to Loverseed (1998), people who visit spas fall under three main categories:

- (i) holidaymakers who just want to relax at a resort and use spa facilities from time to time;
- (ii) those who take a trip with the specific purpose of improving their health and altering their lifestyles;
- (iii) dedicated spa visitors who attend spas several times a year.

Among the goals of visiting spas are related to stress release, to look more youthful, to tone their bodies, to improve their fitness level, to lose weight, and to improve the quality of life through the integration of the mind, body and spirit. In general,

the term spa today encompasses not only mineral springs but other aspects of health like sports, fitness, therapies, and others.

## Wellness Tourism

Another important segment of health tourism market is wellness tourism. According to literature, the decline in health spa market in some countries has led to the shift into wellness tourism. The concept of wellness was actually developed by an American physician named Dr. Halbert Dunn in 1961. The term wellness originated from a composition of the words “wellbeing” and “fitness” (Weiermair and Steinhauser, 2003). However according to Mueller and Lanz Kaufmann (2001:2) the concept along with its philosophy was developed in 1959 when Dunn “*wrote for the first time about a special state of health comprising an overall sense of well-being which sees Man as consisting of body, spirit and mind and being dependent on their environment*”. Dr. Dunn identified this condition of great personal contentment as “high-level wellness” (Mueller and Lanz Kaufmann, 2001). They also mentioned that the fundamental constitutional elements of wellness are the balanced state of body, spirit and mind, including holistic aspects and dimensions such as self responsibility, physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition, relaxation, mental activity and environmental sensitivity. Hertel (1992) comes to a conclusion based on the numerous definitions of the concept of wellness which are available in the American-English language region as sharing certain common features:

- (i) the key importance of life style;
- (ii) self responsibility for health;
- (iii) the multi-factoral roots of health;
- (iv) the exploitation of our potential for a better quality of life.

(cited in Mueller and Lanz Kaufmann, 2001)

In general the philosophy behind the concept of wellness is more than just the well being of both mind and body. In the context of tourism, wellness vacation has been identified as the type of vacation that can cater for the need of modern tourists as they placed more interests in health aspects. Among the reasons as why wellness vacations can satisfy the modern tourists are:

- (i) wellness is the adequate method for health prevention and preservation in an aging society;
- (ii) wellness supports the trend of individualization, because wellness helps to discover one’s own personality and the ability to spend time with oneself and his/her appearance;

- (iii) wellness, in its holistic aspect, can offer a wide range of different services. Multi optional consumers can choose between relaxation, mental training, different kinds and intensities of sport offerings and beauty;
- (iv) wellness tourism as can constitute an opportunity to combine fun, entertainment and adventure with health care and/or with the goal of building up strengths for everyday life;
- (v) wellness may be considered as an opportunity to find a desired balance between family, job and environment.

(Horx, 2001; cited in Weiermair and Steinhauser, 2003)

Finally, Mueller & Lanz Kaufmann (2001) point out that the main problem in developing the suitable facilities for wellness holidays is the shortage of information relating to demand for this segment of the market. Moreover, it has been proposed that, so far the prime target group is the high-income middle-age women. Yet, very little research has been done to study the wellness product users and their preferences.

## **Medical Treatment**

Medical tourism is one of the lucrative markets in the tourism industry. It is a big business looking from the perspectives of monetary and number of visitor arrivals. Many countries around the globe are competing to get foreigners to come for medical treatments in their countries nowadays. This type of tourism that has been given considerable importance in Europe, South Africa, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand (Mitra, 2005). In some countries like Singapore, it is estimated that 250, 000 patients per year visit the country for medical reasons and nearly half of them from the Middle East (Hutchinson, 2005). She projected that nearly half a million of foreign patients will travel to India for medical treatment.

Medical tourism can be explained as a specific type of travel which covers health screening, hospitalisation and surgical operations in contrast to non-essential cosmetic surgery and the pampering and alternative therapies on sale at spas. (Henderson, 2004). Mitra (2005) explained that the concept of medical tourism is actually an ancient concept and it can be traced back as early as 3000 BC. She quoted that those with eye problems traveled to Tell Brak in Syria, where healing deities were believed to perform miracles. As stated by her, the concept has its roots in ancient practices but has been popularised and leveraged for revenue generation only in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the past, countries in the west were regarded as the best in providing healthcare services, however, the situation has changed slightly, as today more countries in the developing nations are able to

provide an outstanding services in terms of healthcare, technology, and comfort during recuperation with an affordable prices (Mitra, 2005).

Law (1996) states that health is often a motivational factor in the decision to purchase a holiday, but its importance varies in intensity. Two examples are people who travel to undertake a critical operation due to a fatal disease, and people who travel for cosmetic surgery or physical fitness, both of which certainly have difference in intensities. Relating to the medical aspect, Hunter-Jones (2005) states that during times of illness people turn to different sources for comfort and rehabilitation like the medical community and alternative therapies. According to him, vacations can be one of the sources of comfort for people with illness. The study also adds that it is difficult to measure the significance of the market because people who take vacations during times of illness represent a hidden population.

According Henderson (2004), healthcare along with education are new products which are developed and marketed in Singapore. She projects that health tourism will have a promising future due to the paradigm shift of the modern society. She mentions that the health tourism industry in Singapore basically focuses on medical centres rather than spas. Although there is increasing demand for city spas and traditional Chinese medicine, the market for medical services from foreign patients is still more dominant in Singapore. Mitra (2005) reveals that among the factors that lure people to seek medical services outside their own countries are lower medical cost and high quality services offered by a different country and a long waiting period in their own countries. In the context of Switzerland, O'Dea (2005) states that top quality medical treatment and spa facilities are not the only pulling factor for health tourists to visit the country but the long waiting lists for surgery and inadequate healthcare system in their own country are the main factors that attract them to the country. Besides the factors listed above among other factors that lured people to go out of their country for medical services are lower international airfares, expensive services in the home country such as dental procedures by insurance and internet access that makes it convenient for patients to compare and contrast services and prices and make an informed decision (Mitra, 2005).

In the context of medical tourism promotion, word of mouth and personal recommendation are among the key approaches in this industry (O'Dea, 2005). Moreover, she also mentioned that some agencies seek patients through a network of referring doctors, hospitals and health authorities and family representatives. Among the critical issue that need to be addressed in promoting healthcare to the international market is the ethical aspect. Governments of the countries that sell medical tourism needs to pay more attention to ethical matters. Henderson (2004)



suggests that advertising about healthcare services and products must be strictly monitored to prevent the unacceptable exploitation particularly to the vulnerable patients who lack medical knowledge.

## **HEALTH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA**

These days, health tourism is gaining popularity in the country. However, before the arrival of modern medicine, Malaysians had been dependent on traditional herbs for their medical treatment (Melaka State Government, 2003). As a multi-racial country, Malaysia is also rich with an abundance of medical practices brought over by migrants from different cultures and races. However, a new era of curative practices were brought into the country by the colonials started with Portugese invasion of Melaka (Melaka State Government, 2003). The history of western medicine started with the construction of the first hospital named Royal Hospital, followed by Pauper Hospital in Melaka (Melaka State Government, 2003). After the Dutch took over Melaka, they also continued the work of the Portuguese, and added a new hospital at Banda Kaba which was staffed by a senior surgeon and four junior surgeons. During the English rule, civil, military, and prison hospitals were built by them, as mentioned in the Straits Settlement Expenditure details in 1886 (Melaka State Government, 2003). Even though, not much information about the history of medical practices in our country is available except for Melaka, it can be said that all these early hospitals set up by the colonials in some way helped pave the way for the existing healthcare services that are available in the country.

Even though foreigners have been seeking medical treatments in Malaysia for long, the concept of health tourism was only introduced in Malaysia in the late 1990s. Recognising the importance of health as a mechanism for the nation's economic growth, the Malaysian government had organised programmes which combine healthcare and tourism activities (Minister of Health, 1998). In fact, according to Palany, health or medical tourism, which are promoted through many creative screening tests and procedures, was acknowledged by the government to be one of the segments that ensured sustainable revenue. Among the events that were promoted were sporting activities like trekking, cycling, jogging, and swimming, together with medical services like health screening and massages, spa and sauna (Ministry of Health, 1998). The idea of combining healthcare and tourism was a strategy in positioning Malaysia as a prime health destination in providing quality yet affordable health and medical services in the Southeast Asian region. In conjunction with that, a national committee for the promotion of health tourism was formed by the government in 1998 and the Director General of the Ministry of Health heads the committee. The Ministry of Health, Matrade and

Tourism Malaysia play active roles in promoting health tourism programmes in the international market.

In comparison with the neighboring countries, Malaysia is considered as a latecomer in health tourism industry. In his article, Palany mentions that there was a report by the special Advisory Services Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat (2002) on a hierarchy among countries in how they are perceived as healthcare providers. With the assumption that cost is not a problem, the perceived positioning within the region is Singapore is on the top followed by Thailand and Malaysia. He also adds that among the main issues attributed to the second positioning of Malaysia as a healthcare destination were lack of information and promotional activities rather than perceived lack of quality or technology. However, he reveals that the healthcare industry in Malaysia also has several advantages. Among others, two of the competitive advantages of health profession in Malaysia mentioned by Palany are: English is the medical and nursing 'lingo' and the medical curriculum and qualifications are generally UK-oriented.

In general, most states in the country have their government funded hospital/hospitals which have been established for decades and these hospitals are the main providers of healthcare services for the general public. However, nowadays there are more and more private hospitals offering their healthcare services in the country especially in the major cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Melaka. In the beginning these private medical centers mostly catered to the affluent Malaysians, but as the standard of living in the country increase, there are more Malaysian who can afford to seek services from the private medical centers. Now, the medical centers in the country have expanded their services to foreign tourists as well. Basically, many of the private hospitals are now well-equipped with latest medical technology and health professionals.

However, besides medical tourism, the country has to work hard to catch up with the big players in the wellness and health spa market Thailand, Indonesia and India. In fact, in Malaysia, there are some segments of health tourism products like natural hot springs and health spas that have not been marketed as health tourism products. Even though, in comparison with the western world, modern spa is relatively new to much of the Asian general public, there are some aspects of spa treatments that have been present in Asian cultures since the ancient kingdoms of Java, China and India. Besides the modern and sophisticated facilities that support sports and recreational activities, as well as fitness and cosmetic treatment facilities, the operators of spa businesses in Malaysia have been identified as offering a diversity of traditional massages, oil massages, herbal baths, and other types of baths based on cultural and traditional beliefs. All these products have great potential

to contribute to rural development and tourism industry. In order to develop our health tourism industry and attract more tourists, not only should more attention be given to segments of health tourism products but the quality of services provided should also be considered. As mentioned by Ogorelc and Snoj (1998), perceived quality and value of services are among the most important factors in the choice of a destination.

Although Malaysia has been regarded as late comer to the industry, the government has been making great efforts in keeping up with health tourism development. One of the main development is the formation of the Health Tourism Unit under the Ministry of Health recently which was announced by the prime minister during the budget speech for 2006. Tourism Malaysia, the official body for promoting tourism in Malaysia, considered the formation of the unit as a recognition that health tourism is being considered as one of main potential source of income for the country (NSTP, 2005). Moreover, this step taken by the government gave an indication that the government is going to take serious action to promote this segment of the tourism industry. In fact, there has been other development in health tourism industry in Malaysia since 1998, like upgrading the quality of health services, /obtaining international recognition, and promoting local private hospitals. The main objective of the steps taken by the government was to attract more foreigners to seek health services in Malaysia. One of the prime efforts in attracting more foreigners and strengthening health tourism segment in Malaysia is to provide quality services.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, traveling for health reasons has been present since ancient times, however, as the society is becoming more concerned with health aspects today, the trend of visiting health tourism sites and destinations is also gaining popularity. Besides hospitals and medical centers, spas and wellness attractions are also part of health tourism market. It is well-accepted that health tourism is one of the niche market in the tourism industry that has great potential and it is projected that the demand for this segment of the market will increase in the future. The booming trend of health tourism globally is associated with the movement from health treatment to health promotion and disease prevention among consumers in the modern world. In line with paradigm shift in the medical world, in the late 1990s, the Ministry of Health started to change the mindset of Malaysians, from a society that focused on looking for a cure when sick, to embrace the concept of wellness and prevention. The growing demand for health tourism products indicates that the expansion into this area may be beneficial for countries and destinations wishing

to diversify their tourism product. In fact, the failure of destinations or countries to recognise the market for health tourism products may preclude them from maintaining or increasing its overall tourism development. However, due to fierce competition of attracting tourists and visitors that come for health motives, focus should also be given to the quality of services provided by health service providers.

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