

Prescription Thailand

For a perfect mix of world class hospitals and five-star service, try Thailand, says **Janine Martin**



Think Thailand and immediately motley images of beaches, Buddhas, brothels and Bangkok spring to mind. But bypass surgery? Something just doesn't sound right or so you think! Thailand has always been known as the land of alternative healing, of spas and masseuses who could reduce even the likes of Mike Tyson to a cooing babe with a single touch. The face of Thailand we recently saw, however, was a far cry from all that predictable fluff and frivolity. What we observed were healthcare services that rival those anywhere else in the world; cutting-edge technology and the sharpest medical minds. Now that's a whole new different side to Siam of which we didn't know.



Within curative circles, Bangkok is considered the medical hub of South-East Asia. But Thailand's buzzing capital city isn't content with just that. It's looking to spread its wings and grab an even juicier chunk of the region's healthcare pie. What's more, it's also luring patrons from Western nations like Germany, Britain and USA. In 2004, more than 1.1 million foreigners were treated medically in Thailand. And the revenue raked in was sweet indeed — about Rs 24 billion. Small wonder then that the Thais are going all out to toot their trumpets and proclaim their land a premier healthcare destination.

But what's their secret? Why on earth would folks from the rest of South-East Asia, the Middle-East and even the West flock to Thailand for medical care above all things? The answer lies in a clever mix of the best medical technology and doctors out there, and top-notch hospitality, the latter Thailand's trump card. Remember Thai hotels rank among the top 20 worldwide. Therefore capitalising on their core competence, the Thais have gone ahead and created world class hospitals within the luxurious shells of five-star hotels.



Take Bangkok General Hospital (BGH) for instance, the largest private hospital group in South-East Asia. The imposing building is a study in sumptuousness. The lobby, the waiting rooms and even the suites have an amazingly expensive feel.

(From top): a deluxe suite at BGH; a radiology procedure in progress at Phyathai Hospital; the swanky entrance to Bumrungrad

Then there's Bumrungrad, a luxurious medical retreat that claims to have more foreign patients than any other hospital in the world — according to CEO Curt Schroeder, "over 350,000 foreign patients a year". The hospital itself comes fitted out with its own boutiques and restaurants, and the rooms resemble lavish hotel suites — no accident there. The clincher: treatment here costs about one-eighth of what it does in the US.

Even the Phyathai Group of Hospitals with its elegant lobbies and rooms looks like something out of the pages of a five-star flyer. Furthermore, the hospital also comes outfitted with its own spa, Raffles (a foot massage here is heavenly) and baby boutique.

Now red-carpet service and ultra plush environs are all very good. But the loaded question is — does the standard of medical knowledge and technology make the cut? "The medical institutes in Thailand are among the best in the world," says Dr Thanin Sonthirak of public health ministry. And when you delve deeper within the private hospital playing field, you're inclined to believe him.

Consider BGH. The institute is famed for its use of the Da Vinci Surgical System whereby a robotic arm is used to perform minimally invasive cardiotomy procedures. BGH is also the only hospital in Thailand to use the cutting-edge gamma knife technology for neurosurgery. It's done 1100 cases thus far — all successful. The hospital also has its own Hyperbaric Oxygen Centre (HOC) — a boon for those with diabetes. When patients are exposed to pure oxygen, tissue repair is accelerated. In fact, just after the tsunami, BGH flew in hundreds of victims with surface wounds and placed them in the HOC — thus preventing festering and possible amputations.

Equally impressive is the Phyathai Group's list of achievements. The institute was the first to use minimally invasive neurosurgery in Thailand and is also known for procedures using a navigator guide (a hi-tech tool that uses the Global Positioning Satellite system). If that's not impressive enough, consider this: Phyathai is affiliated to Harvard in Boston.

While the medical technology available in the country is top-class, the Thais don't believe in cutting back when it comes to add-on services. BGH for instance, takes care to cover the cultural aspects with in-house Buddhist and Muslim prayer rooms, *halal* food, Arab TV stations, and buses that take clients to mosques as well as on sightseeing trips. Why the emphasis on Muslim clients? That's because 25 per cent of their overseas patients are from the Gulf and Bangladesh. What's more, the hospital's International Medical Centre offers interpretation services in 28 languages.

Phyathai too, caters to every need of the expatriate or tourist patient at its One Stop Centre. Here patients can avail of services like interpretation, transportation, lodging arrangements, VIP concierge services for shopping, sightseeing and more.

But where does India figure in Thailand's medical expansion plans? After all, compared to rest of the world, Indian medical services are highly rated and easier on the pocket too. Almost all the top docs we spoke to in Thailand said they didn't consider India a competitor. "Thailand and India are situated close by, so perhaps with our hospitality strengths and India's technical knowledge, we can work together, offering combined packages," says Dr Sonthirak.

What exactly are the biggest draws at Thailand's 16 international hospitals? While cosmetic surgery, dental care and yes, even sex-change operations are raking in revenue, the regular health packages are the most popular. BGH's health packages range between Rs 1,780 and Rs 20,570. Compare that to Mumbai's Hinduja Hospital with its three main preventive healthcare packages (Rs 1,500 to Rs 5,500) and Calcutta's Apollo Gleneagles' packages (Rs 1,000 to Rs 6,100), and both the the Indian centres emerge favourable as far as price is concerned. Coming to the more critical procedures, a bypass at Phyathai would have you coughing up about Rs 4.5 lakh for a seven day package; at BGH, it would cost about Rs 3.5 lakh. Here in India, a bypass at Apollo Gleneagles would cost anything between Rs 1,30,000 and Rs 2,10,000 (for eight days). Again while at BGH, gamma knife surgery costs Rs 4 lakh, back here in India's Hinduja Hospital, it costs Rs 2 lakh. Thus more often than not, Indian prices turn out to be easier on the pocket. Yet throw in VIP service and a truly rejuvenating getaway, and the scales might just tip in favour of Thailand.

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The Telegraph

August 27, 2005