

## **MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND: A CASE STUDY OF THE BANGKOK METROPOLITAN AREA**

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*This research aims to explore the current state and potential of medical services in Thailand. The researchers applied a qualitative approach to study the current situation of medical tourism in Thailand. Data collection for this study was carried out between May 1, 2022 and June 15, 2022 using purposeful sampling. The sampling criteria for this study were as follows: 1) individuals with a minimum of three years of direct or indirect experience in*



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# MEDICAL TOURISM IN THAILAND: A CASE STUDY

*medical tourism, such as those working in medical service or hospitality management teams; 2) foreign tourists who have been treated in Thailand.*

*Overall, medical tourists have significant potential for the Thai medical service industry. They demonstrate a willingness to spend more and face fewer problems during their medical journeys. In addition, most medical tourists appreciate the quality of Thai hospitality and medical services. The study also indicates that the private sector has a large market share in the medical tourism industry. It is believed that private medical facilities and service providers are better equipped to meet the needs and preferences of medical tourists.*

**Keywords:** medical tourism; Bangkok; Thailand

## Introduction

Thailand is located in the center of Southeast Asia, one of the best tourist destinations, with a variety of social uniqueness, breathtaking scenery, and rich cultural heritage.

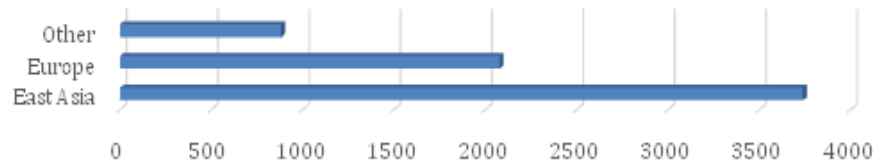


Figure1 - Number of foreign tourists in Thailand in 2020, by region of origin (in 1,000s) (statista.com, 2021)

In 2020, Thailand received approximately 3.74 billion foreign tourists from East Asia (Fig.1). During the same period, the total number of foreign tourists visiting Thailand was about 6.7 billion (Manakitsomboon, 2021).

However, the tourism industry in Thailand suffered a severe impact from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The lockdown measures implemented during this period resulted in a significant decline in medical tourism revenue, with no revenue reported in 2020-2021 (Phoonphongphiphat, 2021).

However, the Thai economy is projected to grow by 3.5 to 4.5 percent in 2022 (The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021). Medical tourism is projected to bring around 150 billion Baht in revenue to the country by 2037 (Sustainable Development, 2021).

Thailand has the potential to attract a larger share of the global medical tourism market. This, in turn, can lead to increased foreign investment, job creation, and revenue generation, which will positively affect the economy as a whole.

Medical tourism refers to international travel to receive medical care (Rogers, 2015). The study report on medical tourism in Thailand highlights several research gaps in the existing literature.

These gaps include a lack of investigation into the factors influencing the decision-making process of medical tourists choosing Thailand, insufficient research into the experiences and satisfaction levels of medical tourists, limited understanding of the

economic, social and cultural impacts on local communities, and a lack of research into the challenges and opportunities faced by healthcare providers and industry stakeholders. Addressing these research gaps is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of medical tourism in Thailand and for informing future studies in the field.

By investigating these areas, researchers can contribute to a better understanding of the decision-making processes, experiences, and impacts associated with medical tourism in Thailand, as well as identify challenges and opportunities for healthcare providers and stakeholders in the industry.

### **Research objective**

To investigate the current state of medical tourism in Thailand, including factors influencing the decision-making process of medical tourists, their experiences and satisfaction levels, and the challenges and opportunities faced by healthcare providers and stakeholders.

### **Literature review**

Thailand is a leading destination for medical tourism, supported by its highly developed tourism industry and low-cost, high-quality treatment services (Fitch Solution, 2022). Medical tourism generally involves transporting patients from developed countries to developing countries where they can get treated at a lower cost. These patients generally have greater purchasing power than most in destination countries. Most developing country governments, including Thailand, see medical tourism as an opportunity and strongly support it (Thukral, 2009).

Travel motivation is an internal psychological force arising from an unsatisfied need, which subsequently pushes individuals to engage in a specific behavior or activity (Schiffman, 2004). The research shows that motivation is a significant force in compelling tourist behaviors (San Martín H, 2008).

Psychosocial motivations in tourism behavior can be divided into 'push' and 'pull' factors forcing individuals to travel. Motivations in medical tourism differ from the motives in tourism based on the specific needs of these travelers.

According to the theoretical model of medical tourism decision-making explores the factors that influence individuals' choices to engage in medical tourism. Travel motivation is a crucial aspect of this model and comprises several key components. One such component is cost saving, which motivates individuals to seek medical treatment abroad to benefit from lower treatment costs, affordable healthcare services, and favorable exchange rates compared to their home country. Another factor is the desire to access modern procedures that may not be readily available domestically. This includes seeking cutting-edge technologies, innovative medical techniques, and specialized procedures that are more advanced or less common in one's home healthcare system.

High quality services also play an important role as people are interested in higher quality health care than what is available in their home country. This includes the perception of health facilities and providers in the country of destination as offering expertise, state of the art facilities and overall excellence in health care delivery.

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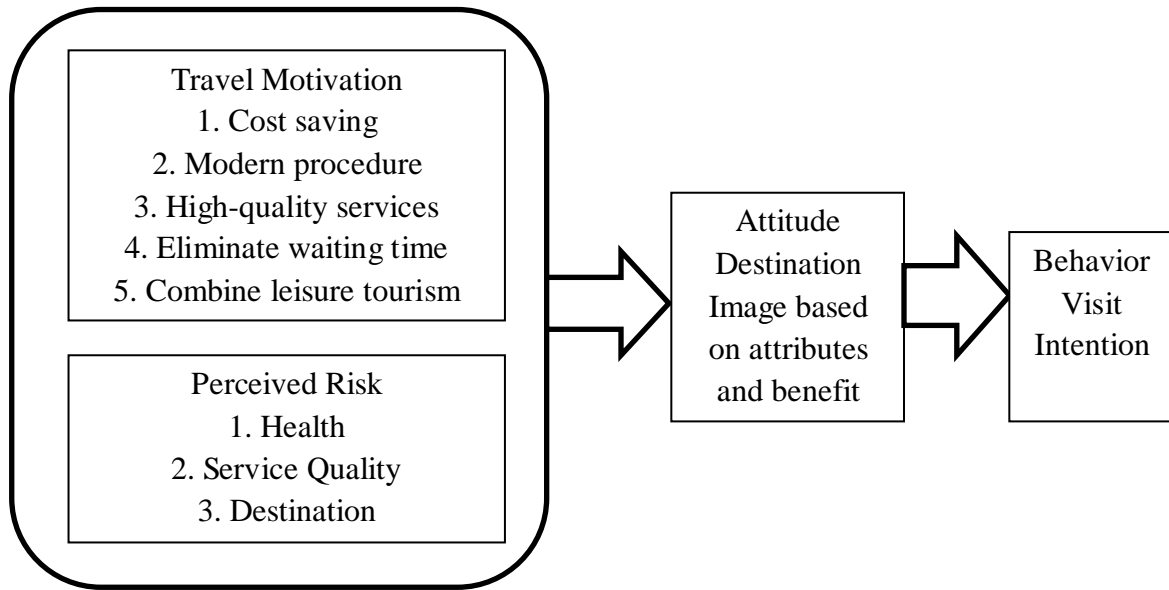


Figure 2 - The theoretical model of medical tourism decision-making  
(Source: Khan, 2017)

In addition, the motivation to reduce waiting time encourages people to seek medical care abroad as they prefer to avoid or minimize long waiting times for medical procedures that may be common in their home healthcare system.

A key factor is prompt and timely access to medical services, including consultations, diagnostics and surgical manipulations.

The desire to combine medical treatment with leisure tourism activities is an important factor. This allows individuals to enjoy a vacation, explore tourist destinations, engage in recreational activities, and experience the local culture while undergoing medical treatment.

### ***Perceived risks***

The perceived risk refers to the perception of the adverse results or consequences that may occur while travelling. When tourists take perceived risk into account when deciding on a destination to visit, it becomes a determining fact (Ruan, 2017).

When making travel decisions, the greatest influence on the destination is the perceived risks (Sönmez, 1998). Medical services are seen as a trustworthy commodity because their quality cannot be accurately determined even after use.

Thus, the risk of using the clinical benefits is high.

### ***Destination image***

Destination image plays an important role in understanding the behavioral intentions of tourists and making decisions (Afshardoost, 2020). The behavior of tourists and the image of the destination are significantly influenced by tourist perceptions of safety and risk (Casali, 2020). The attributes and benefits combine two important factors that form the overall image of a destination.

Destination attributes are of paramount importance for forming the image of the destination. The evaluation of a destination is multidimensional, and both general and specific characteristics are important for its promotion (Stepchenkova, 2008).

The benefits associated with a destination can sometimes led tourists to destinations with negative characteristics (Nadeau, 2008). In one study, individuals reported that they liked one country and disliked another, even though the two countries were very similar.

### ***Behavior: visit intention***

Visit intention refers to a decision to go to a destination, formed as a result of a complex process. The higher the travel motivation of a tourist, the better destination image and the higher the intention to travel (Hasan, 2018).

By understanding travel motivation, we can learn the factors that significantly influence the intention to choose a travel destination (Chu, 2018; Hasan, 2018).

Moreover, the motivation of tourists satisfied with push and pull factors may be related to their intentions to visit or revisit the destination in the future (Lemy, 2020). Destination marketers should focus on the motivations of tourists as they can also help explain the intentions of tourists (Jang, 2009).

### **Research methodology**

The researchers apply a qualitative approach to study the current situation of medical tourism in Thailand. Data is collected in Thai and English from May 1, 2022 to June 15, 2022. Sampling for this study is based on the following criteria:

- 1) individuals must have at least three years of indirect or direct experience in medical tourism, for example: in as a medical service team or hospitality management team;
- 2) foreign tourists who have undergone medical treatment in Thailand.

Table 1 - Demographic and background information of the interviewees  
(results of co-authors survey)

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	15	55.55
	Female	12	44.45
Age	Between 16-30	8	29.63
	Between 31-45	8	29.63
	Between 46-60	9	33.33
Education	High school/Vocational School	12	44.45
	College/bachelor's degree	9	33.33
	Master's Degree and above	6	22.22
Experience	Medical Service	10	37.03
	Hospitality or Tourism Management	17	62.96
Position	Operational Team/Medical professionals	17	62.96
	Middle-level Management	7	25.93
	Top management	4	14.81

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Table 2 - Demographic and background information of the interviewees: foreign tourists who experienced medical service in Thailand  
(results of co-authors survey)

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	7	35
	Female	13	65
Age	Between 16-30	5	25
	Between 31-45	11	55
	Between 46-60	4	20
Education	High school/Vocational School	9	45
	College/bachelor's degree	9	45
	Master's Degree and above	2	10
Nationality	East Asia	2	10
	South Asia	7	35
	Europe	5	25
	America	6	30
Experience	Ambulance services or paramedic services	5	25
	Dentistry services	12	60
	Cardiac medical service	2	10
	Cosmetic Surgery service	5	25
	Orthopedic medical service	7	35

In research, data are divided into primary and secondary. The primary data is the data that the researchers have collected through in-depth interviews with specific knowledge about medical tourism. The researchers apply respondent validation to improve the validity of the data. Besides, for added reliability, the interview guide used in the study will also be attached to reproduce the interviews in accordance with the discussions in this study.

Ethical thinking and considerations should always be a part of a qualitative study to ensure that it does not cause any harm if followed throughout the entire survey process (Brinkmann, 2015). The ethics committee approved the semi-structured interview form.

The research team asked the interview objects of consent to share this information in the research; recordings of the interviews are confidential and only to be used for analysis for this research.

The researchers collect the secondary data by gathering information from previous research, articles, books, and web pages (Bryman, 2011).

This study will be based mainly on primary data as well as secondary data to create the theoretical framework in which the study operates.

## **Research result**

### ***The current situation of medical tourism in Bangkok, Thailand***

The idea of going to Thailand for travel and medical services has been around in Thailand for a long time. From the day the team collected the information from the interviewees, who were most hospital personnel, also agreed that there were still a lot of foreigners interested in the medical service in Bangkok, Thailand. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the number of tourists has dropped dramatically.

Since the improvement of the Covid19 situation, most of those surveyed have noticed a growing trend towards an influx of foreign tourists on holiday, including those interested in medical treatment in Thailand. The clients come from different parts of the world such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Europe, and America. Private and without health insurance patients receive medical services in Bangkok, Thailand.

A study of medical tourism in Thailand produced several significant findings. Firstly, the study confirmed the validity of the theoretical model of medical tourism decision-making, which highlights the key factors influencing individuals' choices to engage in medical tourism. These factors include cost-savings, access to modern procedures, high-quality services, elimination of waiting times, and the ability to combine medical treatment with tourism activities.

Moreover, the study revealed significant opportunities for combining tourism with medical treatment in Thailand. It was found that most tourists were willing to spend more time and money in the country, indicating a strong demand for medical tourism combined with leisure. This presents an opportunity for the Thai government to promote and invest in the necessary infrastructure to support this growing demand.

Many individuals access medical tourism services through agencies and websites. This implies the importance of effective marketing and online platforms to attract and promote medical tourists.

Thus, the results of the study confirm the relevance of the theoretical decision-making model in the field of medical tourism and highlight the potential of combining leisure tourism with medical treatment in Thailand. The results indicate the need for government promotion and investment in infrastructure, as well as effective marketing strategies through agencies and websites, to capitalize on the opportunities provided by medical tourism in the country.

Overall, the private sector is significantly better equipped than the government sector.

In 2016, the Thai Department of health service support showed that there are 321 medical facilities in Bangkok, Thailand (Department of health service support, 2016).

The private sector in Thailand is significantly better equipped than the government sector when it comes to providing medical services to international customers. Large private hospitals in the Bangkok Metropolitan area offer a comprehensive range of medical services and have staff, including doctors, nurses, and support staff, who are fluent in English and Thai.

Interpreters are also available for patients who do not speak English for languages such as Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, and French.

However, Thailand faces a serious problem of inequality: there is a large gap between the rich and the poor. Public hospitals, while maintaining good standards, often have long waiting lists and are overcrowded. For individuals who rely on public welfare, accessing medical care may be challenging, and domestic care may not be fully accessible.

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Public hospitals may not be ready to serve the target market for medical tourism. On the other hand, individuals with moderate to high wealth and purchasing power who can afford private hospital services in Thailand enjoy satisfactory services and shorter waiting times compared to public hospitals. From the point of view of foreigners, access to private hospitals in Thailand is much cheaper compared to medical care in developed countries.

If the government supports medical tourism, private hospitals would benefit more than the public sector. Some public hospitals have recognized the potential opportunities and expanded their services to serve to the private sector. Examples include the Sirisaj Piyamaharajkarun Hospital, a part of the Siriraj Hospital network, and the Somdech Phra Debaratana Medical Centre at Ramathibody Hospital.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of tourist perception, medical care institutions in Thailand are highly regarded for the quality of their products and services. Global patients visit Thailand for top-notch surgeries, perceiving medical care establishments as providing a comfortable environment. The medical care professionals in Thailand are considered to be highly skilled and well-trained, and the healthcare system is viewed as affordable.

Medical care institutions in Thailand have the potential to offer more in terms of tourism, including leisure tourism activities, assistance with foreign exchange, interpreter services, and dietary needs.

They can also facilitate face-to-face contact with locals and collaborate with travel agencies to arrange tourism activities along with medical treatment. Some private hospitals in Thailand even provide additional services such as airport transfers, 24/7 assistance, and study tours of Bangkok. Patients can also schedule excursions, visit beaches, go shopping, and explore ancient sites.

Thailand is able to offer medical tourism services at competitive prices due to the lower cost of production, and the presence of competition helps to keep prices down. The value of the national currency, the baht, also plays a role in pricing. With the Baht being weak in international markets, Thailand remains highly competitive.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Recommendations for future research on the topic of medical tourism in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and Thailand include:

**Comparative studies:** Conduct comparative studies between the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and other regions or cities in Thailand to explore regional variations in medical tourism trends, infrastructure, and patient experiences. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the success of medical tourism in specific locations.

**Impact on local communities:** Examine the social, economic, and cultural impacts of medical tourism on local communities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Assess the benefits and challenges faced by residents, businesses, and healthcare providers, and identify strategies for mitigating any negative consequences.

**Sustainable development:** Explore sustainable development practices within the medical tourism industry, including environmental sustainability, ethical considerations, and



responsible tourism. This study can provide insights into promoting sustainable growth and minimizing the industry's ecological footprint.

Government policies and regulations: examine the role of government policies and regulations in promoting and regulating the medical tourism industry in Thailand. Review the effectiveness of existing policies, identify areas for improvement, and propose strategies to ensure the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the sector.

Market segmentation and targeting: Conduct research on market segmentation within the medical tourism industry to understand the specific needs, preferences, and motivations of different patient groups. This can help tailor marketing strategies and service offerings to effectively target specific market segments.

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