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## FEATURE

# Doctor Thailand Lures the Jet-Set Patients

By Ellen Boonstra

First-class facilities, competitive rates, and the conspicuous absence of waiting lists have sparked a boom in medical tourism in Thailand.

*Weekender's* correspondent in Thailand, Ellen Boonstra, consults the country's two largest players—Bangkok Hospital and Bumrungrad International—about their special appeal to their Japanese clientele.

A couple of years ago while my mother was visiting Thailand, she was diagnosed with an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm—a large and potentially life-threatening one. I was horrified to learn that that if left untreated for too long, the condition could result in a rupture of the aorta, often with fatal results. As unfamiliar as I was with the disease, I was very familiar with the notoriously long waiting lists back home in the Netherlands and decided to have her admitted to one of Bangkok's international hospitals as soon as possible.

Like most people I'm no big fan of hospitals, but I was duly impressed by its luxury hotel-style facilities. My mother's hospital room easily rivaled a smart studio apartment in Hiroo: a DVD-equipped TV, comfortable sofa for visitors, bathroom as well as mini kitchen with microwave. Not that she was expected to cook her own food of course—an extensive room service menu provided a choice of Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Western fare. There was even a Starbucks in the hotel-like lobby.

### "If we didn't offer the best medical services available while treating patients as 'guests,' we'd go bankrupt."

Besides 'accidental tourists' like my mother, a rising number of Westerners are finding their way to Thailand for medical treatment. Japanese tourists have discovered that Thailand is not only for sun and sand, but for cosmetic surgery as well. Moreover, plane loads of patients from the Gulf States, who once would have traveled to the US and Europe, are arriving every month due to both the pathological condition of Western medical services and the unfavorable political climate.

Up until three years ago Singapore and Malaysia were the preferred destinations, but now Thailand is the leader in Asian medical tourism.



### Consultation Number One

In terms of sheer quantity of their foreign patients, there is one single organization that can call itself the world's number one destination for healthcare: Bumrungrad International. Located in Bangkok's bustling business, entertainment and shopping district, this medical institution serves over a million patients annually, of which close to 400,000 are international.

"There's no other hospital which attracts more international patients than we do," says Ruben Toral, Bumrungrad's Group Marketing Director.

Indeed, walking around the facilities one could be excused for thinking you were at the United Nations. The hospital draws patients from over 190 countries, including both resident expatriates as well as medical tourists. Classified by country, the United States occupies the first place and for several years Japan ranked second. Lately, however, it has been surpassed by Europe and the Middle East. "Especially in our Middle Eastern markets we've seen phenomenal growth," Toral says.

The number of Japanese patients seeking treatment at Bumrungrad remains a steady 40,000 to 42,000 a year. Most are local expatriates from Thailand's thriving Japanese community, while others are regional Japanese expats from neighboring countries Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, where medical facilities are inadequate or substandard.

Southeast Asia's largest private hospital has made ample provisions to accommodate their Japanese clients and ensure all communication can be done in their native tongue—from a special Japanese patient counter and translators, to Japanese-speaking doctors. Interpreters can be

Thai nationals who've majored in Japanese at one of Bangkok's universities, while several of the Japanese speaking doctors have graduated from medical schools in Japan.

The number of overseas Japanese who travel specifically to Thailand for its medical healthcare is relatively modest for now. Yuko Tamura, Director of Japanese Services at Bumrungrad, explains why: 70 percent of medical expenses are covered by national insurance, making it financially unattractive for Japanese to seek medical treatment abroad.

However, there is one exception—cosmetic surgery. Unable to find the same level of expertise or value for money back home, patients are heading en masse to Bumrungrad. "Our growth in this area is about 35 percent a year," says Toral. The cosmetic operation most in demand by Japanese patients is liposuction. Other popular elective procedures include Lasik laser eye surgery and dental treatments.

Tamura expects the number of overseas Japanese

Left: The staff at the world's number one medical tourism destination: Bumrungrad International. Bottom left and right: Bangkok Hospital, Thailand's most technologically advanced facility.





Patients from all over the globe take advantage of Thailand's medical services.

patients to rise. Like many Western countries the aging population is increasingly becoming a burden on the national scheme, and "this will be an opportunity for us to gain more Japanese patients".

### A Second Opinion

Over to Bangkok Hospital for a second opinion, where we spoke with marketing executive Kotaro Tanaka and Ralf Krewer, Marketing Director of the International Medical Center.

Bangkok Hospital ranks among the Asia Pacific region's top medical institutions and is touted as the most technologically advanced facility in Thailand. Part of a conglomerate of 14 hospitals, Bangkok Hospital alone consists of 16 specialty centers, offering every medical treatment imaginable.

They are the first private hospital in Asia to employ a PET/SC Scan for cancer screening, heart disease assessment and brain-tumor imaging. A 360-degree scan of the whole body is taken, enabling a physician to detect cancerous cells within an astounding 20 minutes. The Gamma Knife, also used in the treatment of brain tumors, is yet another state-of-the-art technology at patient's disposal. These ultra-modern marvels don't come cheap, but the expenditure is cut by saving on costly, lengthy hospital stays.

"There's no doubt we have the best equipment in Southeast Asia, that's our strategy," says Ralf Krewer. It's not surprising that patients from all around the globe flock to this hospital to take advantage of its high-tech facilities. Japanese medical tourists are making their way over for the hospital's state-of-the-art heart surgery and cancer treatment.

Thanks to its world-class facilities, Bangkok General is the number one choice for Japanese companies for their employees' annual medical check-up. By law, Japanese companies are required to have their employees medically examined once a year and Singapore was previously the country of choice. "Our Check-up Center is the best of all the hospitals in Bangkok," Tanaka says. Last year, 4,500 Japanese from 38 corporations were examined there.

Whether the patient's hospital visit is for a regular check-up or for a medical consultation, they need not worry about language or cultural barriers. Bangkok Hospital's slogan is 'We speak your language'. In 1997, it decided to establish an International Medical Center to cater to the large influx of non-Thai patients. The



Center has nationals from about 70 countries. Combined, they speak 30 different languages. This includes eight Japanese-speaking coordinators and interpreters, plus 16 doctors with medical licenses in both Thailand and Japan.

Tanaka has a few interesting comments on the widely held belief of his fellow countrymen that everything is better back home. He disagrees with

## Japanese tourists have discovered that Thailand is not only for sun and sand, but for cosmetic surgery as well.

the perception that Japan has the best medical care system in the world. "Perhaps the average level of care is high if you include the state-run hospitals in the countryside," he says. "But nothing beats a privately operated hospital in Thailand. If we didn't offer the best medical services available while treating patients as 'guests,' we'd go bankrupt."

The prognosis for Thailand's medical tourism is excellent. High-tech facilities, attention to detail, and affordable health care will soon see many more visitors leaving the kingdom in the pink. In Thailand, medicine has taken a global step forward. They've transformed the annual check-up into a five-star check-in. Even my mother was impressed. **W**

### The Japanese community in Thailand

Thailand boasts a thriving Japanese community. According to information supplied by the Embassy of Japan, there were 36,327 Japanese citizens registered in Thailand in 2005. The unofficial figure is estimated to be considerably higher, with the number of Japanese residents rising at a rate of 10-15 percent per year.

### About the writer

Ellen Boonstra ([ellen@2-mag.com](mailto:ellen@2-mag.com)) was happily living in Tokyo in the late 80s and early 90s when the economic bubble burst. She traded the Land of the Rising Sun for the canals of her native Amsterdam until she could no longer stand the depressingly cold winters and rude waiters. She successfully plotted her escape to the Land of Smiles, where she now spends her days (and nights and weekends) in bustling Bangkok as the editor of a lifestyle magazine. In her hectic schedule she manages to find time to write the occasional article for *Weekender*.

PHOTO RIGHT: Bangkok, Sep. 21, 2006, one day after Thailand's bloodless military coup—The writer inspecting the troops at Government House.



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