

Tourists flocking to Goa for a makeover now



HEALTH TRIP

Lower costs are luring many visitors for cosmetic surgery here

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GILLY is elated. After much deliberation she opted for a full facelift surgery in Goa and result has been marvellous. "Many of my friends have now gone to see the doctor. They plan to get treatment done next season. They love the work on me," says an overjoyed Gilly, as she gets set to bask in the warm afternoon at Candloim beach far from the grey chills of her hometown London.

A new look combined with the sun and sand — that too at down to earth prices? Well that's what many foreigners are now looking for in Goa.

The past few years have seen a large number of foreign tourists visit for cosmetic treatments — be it a surgery or corrective procedure. "People mainly come for face-lift, body rejuvenation and weight loss, we also get patients for Botox, rejuvenation of eyes, neck and breasts," said Dr Mohan Thomas, consultant cosmetic surgeon, Vintage Hospital in Panjim.

Statistics show that India's medical tourism industry is worth \$333 million (Rs 1,450 crore); a study by CII-McKinsey estimates country could earn Rs 5,000-10,000 crore by 2012 while reports also suggest medical tourism is growing by 30%

every year. Adds Dr. Thomas who is a member of the Council on Tourism, Government of India, "Indian doctors are known for their medical skill and expertise, that's an advantage in terms of trust. Goa has good infrastructure and an international appeal; it has potential to become hub for cosmetic treatments."

It currently faces competition from locales like Malaysia, Thailand and South Africa. But with cosmetic treatments growing 50%; the state is set to become a hub for beauty treatment. Patients come mainly from Britain and other European countries, which also forms the major Charter segment. Says Edna Noronha, manager-marketing & PR, Apollo Victor Hospital "We've already performed 50 operations since the hospital started last October. Goa being a tourist destination, enquires are increasing. We hope to do large numbers this year." The hospital has tied up with facilitators of Medical Tourism abroad like Euro Medicals, Med De Tours, Taj Medicals, Sahara Global and now plans an arrangement with hotels to provide a complete package from the airport to stay and return.

So what's triggering this boom? Low-priced direct chartered flights coupled with economical packages are attracting tourists, according to marketers. Cosmetic surgery bills

are much cheaper compared to western countries. A full facelift in USA costs \$20,000 (about Rs 9 lakh), the same is available at about Rs 1 lakh in Goa. The average charges for surgery ranges from Rs 1-1.5 lakh which is one-fourth the rate for similar treatments in European countries, say doctors.

Improved communications through broadband, Wi-Fi and internet enable tourists to gather information and contact doctors/patients. "The internet and e-mail help to keep in touch with my patients, it's also increased business, we are getting a lot queries. I once had a patient from Europe who promised to send more people from his country. And he has been sending patients since," says Dr Jawaharlal Henriques director St Anthony's Hospital at Anjuna. But for most foreigners getting treated, familiarity with Goa is a major factor in making the decision.

Adam C has been visiting the state for more than a decade now. For him, undergoing a weight loss treatment seemed an obvious choice. Like him, many regular visitors to the state are asking tour operators to extend their stay from the average two weeks package, for a date with the scalpel.

Adds Nicola who recently had a Mamoplasty done here, "It's been a wonderful experience. I feel good about myself, besides the service has been very satisfactory". She's now eagerly waiting to flaunt her new, improved look back home.

Apart from being hospitable, scenic and peaceful the state also offers privacy, say medico-tour operators. It's an obvious choice over a metro, foreigners like it there, they say. Agrees Gilly, "So many people want to come to Goa now, I'm afraid the prices will go up."