

Contemporary Health Tourism in Muslim-Majority Jurisdictions: Best Practices and Innovations

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is well known as a popular tourist destination for its natural, cultural and historical destinations and is also recognised as a fledgling hub for medical tourism. Malaysia has built a strong reputation as a safe and trusted global destination for healthcare over the past 10 years, with visitors from across the world coming for a range of treatments. This industry will continue to focus on treatment services such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF), cardiology, oncology, orthopaedic, neurology, dental, aesthetics and general health screening, while unleashing the full potential of the industry, covering the areas of preventive treatments and healthcare. The government has taken numerous steps to make Malaysia a reputable choice for medical travellers. For instance, the inception of the Malaysian Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) in 2005. The MHTC is an agency under the Ministry of Health (MoH) tasked to “facilitate and promote the healthcare travel industry of Malaysia by coordinating industry collaborations and building valuable public-private partnerships, at home and abroad.” Through their efforts and initiatives, Malaysia seeks to establish itself as a leading medical destination for medical travellers from all over the world. The country’s efforts were even recognised numerous times, including its win of the “Health and Medical Tourism: Destination of the Year” title at the 2020 International Medical Travel Journal (IMTJ) Medical Travel Awards. This study will elaborate on the factors influencing the growth of healthcare tourism in Malaysia as well as best practices of said industry. This study focuses on the present market scenario and also the Malaysia Blueprint of Healthcare Tourism Industry 2021-2025.

Introduction

Tourism is among the largest and fastest developing sectors of the global economy (Roman M., Roman M., Grzegorzewska E., Pietrzak P., Roman K. 2022). Healthcare tourism which is also called medical tourism is a huge and booming industry spanning the entire globe. In 2020, the value of the global health tourism sector was around US\$54 billion, and by 2027 it is expected to almost quadruple in size to US\$207 billion. It has become a popular tourism product globally (William Cooper, in today’s world that usually means travel to foreign countries for a wide range of medical procedures from elective surgeries like liposuction and

rhinoplasty to advanced care for complex medical conditions like cancer and fertility treatments. People have been travelling to other countries of their choice seeking for more affordable, sometimes higher-quality care. It is a multibillion-dollar market that continues to grow with globalisation (Nicole F. Roberts, 2023). Medical tourism – also called health tourism – is a huge and booming industry spanning the entire globe. In 2020, the value of the global health tourism sector was around US\$54 billion, but by 2027 it is expected to almost quadruple in size to US\$207 billion.

In Malaysia, today with the country (Malaysia) now entering the endemic phase, Malaysia's medical tourism is set to see a much-needed revival. With 1.22 million medical travellers in 2019 alone and having some of the lowest healthcare costs in the world, Malaysia looks set to welcome a much higher number from 2022 onwards. The Malaysia Healthcare Tourism Council (MHTC) aims to elevate the healthcare travel industry through exemplifying best experience from all aspects, by having an active ecosystem, strong Malaysia Healthcare brand and market strategies. In the year 2021, the MHTC unveiled the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Blueprint 2021-2025 with its aspiration to achieve RM1.7 billion in healthcare travel revenue by 2025. Its key strategies will focus on strengthening Malaysia's reputation as a quality healthcare destination, by improving the quality of medical care given; moving towards digitisation of medical processes; and continuing the provision of affordable healthcare.

What is Healthcare (Medical) Tourism?

Generally, there is not one specific definition for the term healthcare (medical) tourism. Literature review revealed that the term healthcare tourism and the term medical tourism are interchangeably.

Health tourism refers to travelling across international borders to obtain healthcare services. It has proliferated in recent years due to factors such as high treatment costs in wealthy countries, long waiting lists, affordable air travel, favourable exchange rates, and the availability of well-qualified medical staff (Büyüközkan, G.; Mukul, E.; Kongar, E, 2021).

The term, "health tourism" or "medical tourism" has been used since the

17th century (Yusof et al., 2019). In fact, health tourism, medical tourism and wellness tourism are commonly used interchangeably, and perhaps it is essential to note that each of the terminologies is, in fact, different (Wong and Musa, 2013). Health tourist, thus, in this context, is defined as a tourist who travels elsewhere to seek and receive health, medical and/or wellness services for different reasons (Brian Kee Mun Wong, Sarah Alia Sa'aid Hazley, 2020).

According to the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Glossary of tourism terms, health tourism covers those types of tourism which have as a primary motivation, the contribution to physical, mental and/or spiritual health through medical and wellness-based activities which increase the capacity of individuals to satisfy their own needs and function better as individuals in their environment and society (UNWTO,2008).

William Russel, a blogger, defined medical tourism, otherwise known as health tourism, is when people travel for medical treatment to another country. He is of the view that medical tourism is often associated with people from lesser-developed countries with poorer health systems travelling to more advanced countries to receive high-quality medical care. In addition, he is also of the view that with the cost of healthcare increasing exponentially in recent years, medical tourism has started to become more common for people in developed countries, who travel to less-developed countries to receive low-cost medical treatments (William Cooper).

Another writer, medical tourism is the term commonly used to describe international travel for the purpose of receiving medical care. Medical tourists pursue medical care abroad for a variety of

reasons, including decreased cost, recommendations from friends or family, the opportunity to combine medical care with a vacation destination, a preference to receive care from a culturally similar provider, or a desire to receive a procedure or therapy that is unavailable in their country of residence (Matthew Crist, Grace Appiah, Laura Leidel, Rhett Stoney, 2024).

Why is Malaysia the Best for Health Tourism?

Malaysia's healthcare travel industry brand, "Malaysia Healthcare", was created in 2011, with its own logo and tagline, 'Quality Care for Your Peace of Mind'. As a leading healthcare destination, Malaysia has grown over the years from being recognised as the Hidden Jewel of Asia, to being crowned the Destination of the Year for healthcare travel thrice-in-a-row from 2015 to 2017 and in 2020, positioned as the Fertility and Cardiology Hub of Asia, and today, known as The World's Healthcare Marvel. Malaysia Healthcare comprises government ministries and agencies, premier Malaysian private healthcare facilities, airline companies, travel agencies, hotels and many more (MHTC).

There are several reasons that contribute to the success of healthcare tourism in Malaysia. Amongst it is that, Malaysia is constantly keeping up with the newest breakthroughs in medical technology. For instance, the National Heart Institute's (IJN) successful implantation of the Micra AV pacemaker, used to treat irregular heartbeats, in 2020. IJN would be the first hospital outside of the United States to perform this surgical procedure (Calvyn Ee).

Moreover, health personnel (doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals) working in Malaysia are all highly trained individuals, many of which have credentials

from both local and foreign universities and institutions. In addition, medical specialists covering a wide variety of fields can be found in a majority of healthcare institutions around the country (Calvyn Ee).

To ensure healthcare given to care recipients is of the highest quality and health care professionals maintain ethical standards set by the government (and as per the Hippocratic Oath), and consistently improve their practice through continuous learning and research, the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) and the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) ensure that all healthcare professionals are to be registered with the government.

Above all and most importantly, clinical trials in the country are overseen and supported by various organisations such as the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MoH), the National Committee for Clinical Research (NCCR), and Clinical Research Malaysia. The NCCR's role is to "establish policies and plan clinical trial activities for the short, medium and long-term in Malaysia" by finding ways to strengthen medical infrastructure and promote good clinical and laboratory practices. As a result, the combined efforts of these organisations, clinical research participation has increased significantly through the years, further bolstering Malaysia's position as a growing medical hub for conventional treatments and the research of new methods that can help deliver better quality healthcare for everyone (Calvyn Ee).

Malaysia is also pursuing a larger share of the Muslim market through halal treatments, which exclude products forbidden under Islamic law, such as those derived from pork. Hospitals are also using sutures manufactured by a local firm made from lambs slaughtered under Islamic law

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(Alarabiya,2014). Besides, there have also been formal agreements with Kazakhstan, Libya and Oman to send their medical tourists to Malaysia, as part of efforts to bolster our country's medical tourism sector (Alarabiya, 2014).

Halal pharmaceuticals and medical treatments are becoming more and more prevalent in recent years, especially in Muslim majority countries like Malaysia. The Malaysian Standard (MS) 2424: 2012 Halal Pharmaceuticals – General Guidelines was developed and implemented in 2012, becoming the world's first Halal pharmaceutical standard. The MS 2424 describes the general guidelines in the manufacturing and handling of halal pharmaceuticals. It serves as a basic requirement for halal pharmaceuticals in Malaysia (Department of Standard Malaysia, 2012). Later in 2019, another Malaysian standard (MS) 2636 MS2636 standard for halal medical devices was published and this further widening the net for Muslim-friendly medical tourism in Malaysia (Department of Standard Malaysia, 2019). This has helped to draw in Muslim medical tourists from places such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Malaysia has also created halal-certified medical products of its own, including the GranuMas synthetic bone graft which is also internationally recognized. The innovative calcium phosphate-based synthetic bone cement which can be used for orthopaedics, cranio, dental and maxillofacial applications has been given a halal certification by the Islamic Development Malaysia Department (JAKIM) as well as being registered with the Malaysian Medical Device Authority (Azalea Azuar, 2022). Last but not least, despite the proceeding factors, most importantly Malaysia has adopted a low

price-more patients strategy to establish a concrete base for its Medicare industry.

Figure1



Table 1

Table 1

YEAR	Healthcare Volume:	Traveller	Remarks
2022	850,000		The volume of health trav was decreasing due to the pandemic Covid-19
2021	561,000		
2020	689,000		
2019	1,220,000		
2018	1,200,000		
2017	1,050,000		
2016	921,000		
2015	859,000		
2014	882,000		
2013	881,000		
2012	728,000		
2011	643,000		

Statistic: Malaysia Health Tourism Council (MIHC)
<https://www.mhtc.org.my/statistics/>

Table 2

Table 2

YEAR	Healthcare Revenue	Travel	Remarks
2022	MYR 1,300,000,000		
2021	MYR 600,000,000		The healthcare revenue was badly affected due to global pandemic Covid-19
2020	MYR 800,000,000		
2019	MYR 1,700,000,000		
2018	MYR 1,500,000,000		
2017	MYR 1,300,000,000		
2016	MYR 1,123,000,000		
2015	MYR 914,000,000		
2014	MYR 777,000,000		
2013	MYR 727,000,000		
2012	MYR 603,000,000		
2011	MYR 527,000,000		

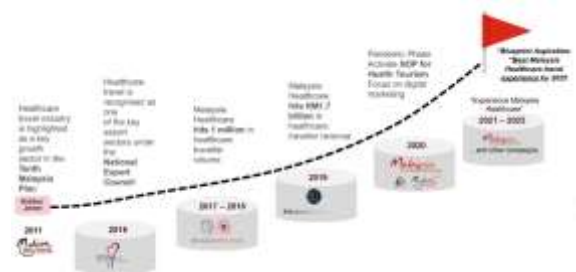
Statistic: Malaysia health Tourism Council (MHTC)
<https://www.mhtc.org.my/statistics/>

Malaysia Health Care Travel Council (MHTC)

Apart from all the existing factors that support the growth of healthcare tourism in Malaysia, the increasing demand in healthcare tourism in Malaysia initiated the idea that a special and dedicated agency is needed to spearhead the Malaysia health tourism. As a result, the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) was established by the Ministry of Health, Malaysia (MOH) in 2005. MHTC is responsible for advocating the healthcare travel industry in Malaysia, coordinating industry collaborations and building public-private partnerships at home and abroad. Under this agency, the Malaysia Healthcare brand was introduced in 2009 with its own logo and tagline, "Quality Care for Your Peace of Mind". In 2011, MHTC was corporatised as an independent entity to coordinate Malaysia's healthcare travel sector. MHTC is responsible for the

Promotion of Malaysia Healthcare globally and facilitating the industry sustainability as shown below (MHTC, 2024).

Figure 2



Services (treatments) sought after in Malaysia

Figure 3



Top Treatments Sought After in Malaysia
 Source: Malaysia Health Tourism Council (MHTC)
<https://www.mhtc.org.my/statistics/>

Malaysia Healthcare Travel Industry Blueprint 2021-2025

Malaysia has built a strong reputation as a safe and trusted global destination for healthcare over the years, with visitors from

across the world coming for a range of treatments. Nonetheless, Malaysia's health tourism sector has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic beginning at the end of 2019 to 2021. The health tourism industry suffered a significant decline in healthcare travel revenue from RM1.7 billion in 2019 to RM 777 million and RM 585 million in 2020 and 2021 respectively (Bernama, 2022).

Henceforth, in addressing these disruptions, MHTC has developed a 5-year industry blueprint to chart out recovery and rebuilding strategies to continue growing the healthcare travel industry as one of the country's key export services. The blueprint maps out the strategies and framework for healthcare travel industry stakeholders until 2025. The primary aim of the blueprint is to focus on the continuous and sustainable industry growth by focusing on providing the 'Best Malaysia Healthcare Travel Experience' by leveraging three key pillars. Firstly, enhancing service quality and experience of care, secondly, Malaysia Healthcare Brand to increase brand cohesiveness across key touchpoints and amplify its brand equity in core markets, and lastly, to grow beyond primary markets and exploring more niche markets in order to strengthen their presence. In order to achieve these aims, MHTC will be enhancing these pillars through collaborations with local, regional and global stakeholders to create value for the entire industry (Bernama, 2022).

The MHTC Blueprint 2021-2025 was developed in collaboration with relevant government and commercial stakeholders through initial Focus Group Discussions and Industry Validation sessions. The blueprint aims to deliver the 'Best Healthcare Travel Experience by 2025' to all healthcare travellers and continuously position Malaysia

as the trusted and preferred healthcare travel destination.

Conclusion

Malaysia has built a strong reputation as a safe and trusted global destination for healthcare for several years. Although the health tourism had suffered significant loss due to Covid-19 in the year 2019 -2021, nonetheless, the Malaysia healthcare tourism has shown a positive sign of a stronger comeback propelled by the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Industry Blueprint 2021-2025. The recognition that Malaysia earns as among the world's best medical and healthcare tourism destinations promises well for the sector, which remains on a positive path with ample room for growth. A strong support from the government by signing an official agreement with certain countries to secure health travellers to Malaysia have greatly contributed to the prosperity and sustainability of the health tourism industry in Malaysia. Nonetheless, despite all the above-mentioned factors, it is strongly believed that a strong coordination and frequent inter face dialogue between the main stakeholders, i.e. the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) and Malaysia Health Tourism Council (MHTC) are necessary to ensure sustainability and continuous growth of the industry. Aside from that, the industrial player i.e. hospital authorities and service providers should maximise their service promotions especially on the social media platform. Last but not least, a significant highlight on halal pharmaceuticals, and Muslim friendly health related products and services should also be highlighted in the promotional contents as this could be one of the major factors that may attract more

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healthcare travellers from other Islamic countries.

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