Should You Go Abroad for Plastic Surgery?

If you’re considering cosmetic surgery but are put off by the price tag, you may want to consider having plastic surgery abroad, as so many others have. Medical tourism is a booming business, potentially growing at a rate of 15–25% each year. In many ways, it’s ideal for both patients and practitioners: doctors can expand their patient network globally, and patients can afford to combine their dream of plastic surgery with a nice holiday getaway.

The benefits of having plastic surgery abroad must be weighed against the potential risks. Benefits include, obviously, a savings in cost. While cost is certainly a factor, though, a larger consideration in making this decision will be finding the right surgeon with the right experience, qualifications and credentials to give you the best results. Detractions can include potential risks associated with long flights and travel after surgery, especially deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lungs).

Discretion is another benefit of going off to have plastic surgery abroad; this is by far the easiest way to ensure that no one will know (if that’s important to you). Or maybe you’re seeking a specialized procedure that is best performed by plastic surgeons trained in a specific country. Whatever you’re looking for, your health and safety should always be the first priority. Without first doing extensive research into the process of having surgery abroad, you risk making a choice that could mean lower standards of safety and training (which means poor results), greater risk of liability, or hidden costs.

Where to go?

According to Patients Beyond Borders, self-described as “the world’s most trusted source of consumer information about international medical and health travel,” the top destinations for plastic surgery span six continents and include Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, India, Iran, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, the United States and Venezuela.

South Korea is the number-one plastic surgery destination in the world, taking nearly a quarter of the global plastic surgery market share. Tourists are also drawn to the upscale shopping, restaurants and attractions in the Gangnam district, home to more than 500 plastic surgery clinics. Add to that the sheer number of excellent plastic surgeons and prices that are slightly lower than those in many other industrialized nations, and it’s easy to see why the Ministry of Health and Welfare reports a 500% increase in medical tourism since 2009. South Korea was also an early adopter of electronic health records, making the bureaucratic details of international medical travel (admission and discharge, insurance, visas, etc.) much more painless. The government is supporting efforts to attract half a million medical tourists by the end of next year.

Whom to go to?
Of course, top-quality aesthetic plastic surgeons practice all over the world. ISAPS offers the most comprehensive guide to choosing an aesthetic surgeon abroad. There are a few other online resources that will help you locate aesthetic plastic surgery societies in the Americas, Asia and Europe. Each professional society will have a list of member surgeons, which you can use to begin your research on specific doctors.

- You can narrow the long list of potential surgeons by first finding out what training they've have had, what their background is, where they went to medical school and did their residency, whether they hold professional certification, memberships, etc.

- In addition to knowing these basic facts about your surgeon, it's important to establish a doctor-patient relationship ahead of time. Whenever possible, try to meet the surgeon, visit the practice and inspect the facility before you proceed. This includes discussing the sensitive subject of what will happen if something goes wrong during the surgery, or if you develop post-surgical complications or are not satisfied with the results. Who will pay for revision surgery (if needed)? What sort of insurance does the practice have against liability or negligence? What are the local laws governing malpractice? What are the credentials and training of the other staff with whom you will interact? A skilled surgeon will be glad to answer all your questions without taking personal offense. If you feel reluctant to talk about this with a given surgeon, you may want to find one with whom you feel more comfortable.

- It will obviously be advantageous for you to be able to communicate fluently with the surgeon and staff. Be sure that at least one of you speaks the other one's language, or find a trustworthy professional interpreter.