

What Is Medical Tourism?

As the name suggests, medical tourism is the practice of visiting a different country or part of the world with the express purpose of seeking medical treatment there. Of course, such trips can be combined with sightseeing or even business ventures, but taking advantage of elite and affordable healthcare services is the driving force behind the excursion.

In recent years, Abu Dhabi has emerged a leading destination for medical tourists. With world-class facilities, a plethora of healthcare experts and convenient travel links to countless destinations to both the east and west, the city is highly desirable for those seeking the best medical treatment outside of their own national borders.

Medical tourism on the up

According to research conducted by GlobalData, medical tourism has been increasing around the world in the last decade – and its popularity is only expected to swell further in the coming years. A combination of heightened medical costs at home, cheaper airfare and advanced technology has meant that those seeking specialist treatments can now partake of overseas alternatives with ease.

The UAE is in pole position to benefit from this increased demand. GlobalData predicts that the nation will be the biggest beneficiary in the Middle East and Africa region, as well as one of the largest ones worldwide. Along with Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand and Turkey, the Emirates are expected to enjoy high single- or low double-digit growth in the immediate future.

UAE already at head of pack

While those projections are obviously welcome, the UAE already has plentiful reasons to be proud of its medical tourism reputation. According to the Medical Tourism Association (MTA), the capital Abu Dhabi was the 8th most popular destination in 2020-21, coming in at 9th for quality of services and facilities.

It's not difficult to see why. A whole host of leading clinics and hospitals have a branch in Abu Dhabi, including King's College London, the Mayo Clinic and the Cleveland Clinic. Indeed, the latter received 1,380 medical tourists from over 90 countries in 2018, with the Clinic signing a special accord with Etihad Airways to try and keep costs down for clients as much as possible.

Preparing for the future

The current state of affairs and the predictions of experts for the years ahead are, of course, highly encouraging, but the Abu Dhabi authorities are unwilling to rest on those laurels. The

emirate's Investment Office (ADIO) provides a wealth of financial support and technical expertise to healthcare businesses and start-ups, with AED 2 billion (£440 million) earmarked for the healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors.

Meanwhile, the Abu Dhabi government is working hard to raise the profile of its medical tourism facilities even further. The emirate recently entered into an agreement with the MTA to increase the number of visitors coming to the country to take advantage of its cardiology and oncology expertise, with a particular focus on attracting Chinese, Russian and other Arab Gulf tourists to the city.