

Guatemala's Medical Tourism Sector

What is medical tourism?

Medical tourism occurs when patients travel internationally with the intention of obtaining privately funded medical care. Our research team, based at Simon Fraser University (in British Columbia, Canada), studies medical tourism from a number of perspectives.

What trends are occurring in Guatemala's medical tourism industry?

Located in Central America, Guatemala lies south of the Mexican border and has strong trade ties with the United States (US). Medical tourism in Guatemala remains in a nascent stage, although it is actively promoted by tourism agencies and business associations – government involvement and investment is minimal. Despite macroeconomic stability, a sizeable market, and a favorable geographic location, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Guatemala's tourism sector has been slower than comparable economies in the region, deterred by violence, a shortage of hotel beds, weak key governmental agencies and difficulty in accessing secure land titles. This has impacted the development of medical tourism. Despite minimal FDI, migration trends such as Guatemala's robust diaspora in the US have produced a rooted history of cross-border medical care.

What our research reveals about medical tourism in Guatemala:

Through our qualitative research we have identified several trends in cross-border care and medical tourism in Guatemala.

- Expatriates living in the US significantly influence Guatemala's medical tourism industry. Not only do Guatemalans living abroad represent a sizeable proportion of patients who visit Guatemala for medical and dental procedures, but they build long-term doctor-patient relationships and refer other patients from abroad. Furthermore, Guatemala is the top remittance recipient in Central America, which contributes substantially to GDP and finances the medical treatments of relatives living in Guatemala.
- Guatemala's health care sector is comparatively larger than that of Southern Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras, which has produced a category of patients from those proximal countries who find it convenient to regularly travel to Guatemala for medical and dental procedures. Meanwhile, health services in Guatemala are unevenly distributed in the country; clinics and hospitals are heavily concentrated in wealthy and metropolitan areas, in particular Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango, while indigenous and deprived regions remain greatly underserved.
- Medical tourism is acknowledged and promoted by the Ministry of Tourism but presently has no association with the Ministry of Health or any other governmental organization. Although no dedicated medical tourism facilities exist currently, initiatives are emerging from the private sector that are actively promoting Guatemala as a medical tourism destination abroad.

For more information: www.sfu.ca/medicaltourism/

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