

# HEALING BEYOND BORDERS: THE ROLE OF *AYURVEDA* IN MEDICAL TOURISM

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Ayurveda, a centuries-old system of medicine, offers a holistic approach to addressing modern health challenges such as chronic diseases, stress, and lifestyle disorders. With the rising global demand for integrative medicine, India's rich Ayurvedic heritage provides unique opportunities for sustainable medical tourism and global healthcare innovation. **Methods:** This paper employs a multidisciplinary approach, analyzing the principles of Ayurveda and their applicability to contemporary health issues. Data from studies on the efficacy of Ayurvedic treatments, economic reports on medical tourism, and global health trends were reviewed. Strategies for scaling Ayurvedic healthcare globally were assessed while emphasizing authenticity and ethical practices. **Results:** The analysis indicates that Ayurveda can complement allopathic medicine through personalized treatments, preventive care, and stress management techniques. Ayurvedic therapies, such as Panchakarma, have shown efficacy in managing lifestyle-related disorders. Additionally, Ayurveda-focused medical tourism has significantly contributed to India's economy, attracting global tourists seeking wellness and integrative treatments. **Discussion:** Ayurveda's principles align with modern healthcare needs, promoting sustainable practices and addressing the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases. Integrating Ayurvedic care with allopathic approaches can enhance patient outcomes. However, scaling Ayurvedic healthcare requires addressing challenges such as standardization, global regulatory approvals, and maintaining authenticity in international markets. **Conclusion:** Ayurveda holds immense potential to address global health challenges while fostering sustainable medical tourism. By leveraging its holistic principles and complementary approaches to modern medicine, Ayurveda can contribute to global healthcare solutions. Strategic efforts to scale Ayurvedic practices internationally must prioritize quality, ethical practices, and cultural integrity.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda, Medical Tourism

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## Background

Globalization and the rapid expansion of international trade in goods and services have had a profound impact on human health. Over the past decade, advancements in medical technology, increased capital investment in healthcare infrastructure, evolving regulatory frameworks, and the international mobility of both patients and healthcare professionals have led to significant transformations in healthcare service production and consumption. As globalization and consumerism continue to shape various sectors, more individuals are seeking high-quality yet cost-effective healthcare solutions beyond their home countries.

This growing trend of patients traveling across borders for medical care, commonly referred to as Medical Tourism, has emerged as a vital component of the expanding global healthcare industry. Medical tourism is broadly defined as the practice of traveling to another country for the purpose of receiving medical treatment, with patients typically staying at least one night at their destination. The motivation behind such travel varies, with individuals seeking medical interventions that may not be readily available, affordable, or of comparable quality in their home countries.

Medical interventions sought through medical tourism can be categorized into three primary domains:<sup>1-</sup>

**1. Medical Treatment** – This includes conventional healthcare services such as surgeries, specialized treatments, and procedures related to cardiology, orthopedics, neurology, oncology, cosmetic surgery, and dentistry. Patients often pursue these treatments internationally due to cost disparities, shorter waiting times, or access to advanced medical technologies.

**2. Wellness and Rejuvenation** – Many individuals seek alternative therapies aimed at enhancing overall well-being, including spa treatments, detox programs, yoga retreats, and holistic healing approaches. These services are often found in regions known for their natural healing environments, such as mineral springs, coastal retreats, or tropical wellness resorts.

**3. Traditional Systems of Medicine** – Some travelers specifically seek treatments based on time-honored medical traditions such as *Ayurveda*, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Unani, Siddha, and Naturopathy. These holistic approaches focus on balancing the body, mind, and spirit through herbal medicine, dietary therapies, therapeutic massages, meditation, and detoxification therapies.

As medical tourism continues to grow, it underscores the importance of integrating diverse healthcare systems, maintaining ethical standards, and ensuring regulatory compliance to provide safe, effective, and high-quality medical services to international patients.

Medical tourism is increasingly being recognized under the broader term Medical Value Travel (MVT), which more accurately reflects the evolving nature of global healthcare-seeking behaviors. Unlike the traditional concept of medical tourism, which primarily focuses on patients traveling abroad for treatment, taking into account not only the medical procedures and healthcare services sought by patients but also the overall value derived from such travel. This includes factors such as the quality of care, affordability, access to advanced medical technology, and the holistic healing experience offered by the destination country. Furthermore, MVT highlights the broader economic impact of cross-border healthcare travel on the host nation. Countries that position themselves as leading medical tourism hubs benefit from increased foreign exchange earnings, job creation, infrastructure development, and the expansion of associated industries, including hospitality, wellness, and transportation. Governments and healthcare providers are increasingly focusing on enhancing their healthcare ecosystems to attract international patients by offering world-class medical facilities, skilled professionals, seamless patient experiences, and comprehensive post-treatment care by shifting the narrative from medical tourism to Medical Value Travel, the emphasis is placed not only on the movement of patients but also on the overall economic, social, and healthcare advancements that such travel fosters, making it a more sustainable and impactful component of the global healthcare industry.<sup>2</sup>

### Medical Tourism Market Research, 2032

The global medical tourism market size was valued at \$97,311.04 million in 2022 and is projected to reach \$273,722.42 million by 2032, registering a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 10.1% from 2023 to 2032. In terms of volume, the global medical tourism market accounted for 21,110.54 thousand patients in 2022, and is projected to reach 71,174.94 thousand patients by 2032, registering a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 11.8% from 2023 to 2032. Rapid advancements in medical technology and telemedicine have facilitated the globalization of healthcare services. Patients now research and connect with medical facilities and professionals worldwide, making it easier to access information about treatment options, costs, and quality of care in various medical tourism destinations.<sup>3</sup> The top countries for MVT patients are Thailand, Mexico, the United States, Singapore, India, Brazil, Turkey, and Taiwan. According to the size of the wellness tourism market, the United States, Germany, China, France, Japan, Austria, and India are the top countries for wellness travel. India is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> by the Medical Tourism Association on the Medical Tourism Index for 2020–2021 out of 46 destinations of the world, 12<sup>th</sup> in top 20 wellness tourism markets globally, and 5<sup>th</sup> in wellness tourism markets in Asia Pacific Accreditation cooperation APAC.<sup>4</sup>

### India probably a global hub for medical tourism

Several key factors have contributed to the country's competitiveness in this sector. A significant factor is the presence of a large diaspora, which helps facilitate medical travel by creating a sense of trust and familiarity. Additionally, India boasts a vast pool of highly skilled and experienced medical professionals, offering world-class healthcare services at a fraction of the cost compared to many Western nations. The rapid growth and expansion of the private healthcare sector, which provides super-specialty care and state-of-the-art medical treatments, further enhance India's appeal to international patients.

The adoption of cutting-edge medical technology, coupled with international accreditation of healthcare facilities, has strengthened India's position as a reliable and advanced medical hub. Government initiatives have also played a crucial role in boosting medical tourism by offering various incentives, such as reduced import duties on medical equipment, allocation of prime land at subsidized rates, and tax concessions to healthcare providers.

Moreover, India enjoys several additional advantages that contribute to its success in medical tourism. The widespread use of the English language simplifies communication for international patients, giving India an edge over neighboring countries where language barriers may pose a challenge. Furthermore, Indian healthcare professionals are highly regarded on global platforms for their expertise and proficiency, reinforcing the country's strong reputation in the international medical community. These combined factors have significantly enhanced India's standing as a preferred destination for medical travelers worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

### Medical Tourism and Ayurveda as Solutions to the Rising Economic Burden of Diseases

The prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular conditions, continues to rise with the increasing complexities of modern living. As a result, the proportion of global deaths attributed to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) has grown significantly, from approximately 61% in 2000 to nearly 74% in 2019. NCDs already impose a heavy economic burden, and projections indicate that this challenge will escalate dramatically over the next two decades. Macroeconomic models estimate that chronic illnesses—including cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disorders, cancer, diabetes, and mental health conditions—will lead to a cumulative economic loss of around US\$ 47 trillion within the next 20 years. To put this into perspective, this projected loss accounts for 75% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010, which stood at US\$ 63 trillion. If left unaddressed, the growing burden of NCDs will place immense strain on healthcare systems, economies, and global productivity.<sup>6</sup>

The global community has collectively committed to achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC), making it the duty of each nation and its government to work toward this goal. However, every country has distinct healthcare requirements, and the gap between available healthcare services, advanced medical technologies, and public access to them continues to expand.<sup>7</sup>

*Ayurveda* promotes physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being through its preventive, promotive, and holistic therapeutic approaches. It emphasizes preventive strategies such as lifestyle modifications, including *Dinacharya* (daily regimen), *Ritucharya* (seasonal regimen), *Nishacharya* (night regimen), Yoga, *Pranayama* (breath control), *Panchakarma* (five bio-cleansing therapies), and *Pathya-Apathya* (guidelines on wholesome and unwholesome diet and habits). These practices not only aid in disease prevention but also enhance overall health and strengthen the body's immunity against illnesses. *Ayurveda* adopts a holistic approach to health, taking into account an individual's *Prakruti* (natural constitution) for both treatment and preventive measures. Rooted in the philosophy of maintaining harmony with the environment, *Ayurveda* utilizes natural resources to restore health, achieve balance, and ensure the well-being of the mind-body complex. This unique approach makes *Ayurveda* a highly suitable and promising option for health tourism, particularly in the domain of wellness tourism. India has emerged as a leading global destination for individuals seeking high-quality clinical care, rejuvenation, and holistic healing. With its strong emphasis on traditional therapies and treatments under the Ayush system, India has also become a preferred hub for yoga and wellness tourism, attracting visitors from around the world who seek authentic and comprehensive healthcare experiences.

### Strategies adopted by government of India

The six-pillar plan of “National Strategy and Roadmap for Medical and Wellness Tourism” has been developed by the Ministry of Tourism emphasizing creating a brand for India as a destination for wellness, bolstering the environment for health and wellness travel and setting up an online MVT portal for enhancement in the accessibility for MVT, promoting wellness tourism, etc., Under the banner of “Incredible India,” various digital promotional activities are being taken regularly. The special provision of medical visas has been made for tourists traveling to India for health-care purposes to about 156 countries globally.<sup>8</sup>

Growth of *Ayurveda* in medical tourism in India. India’s AYUSH industry is experiencing significant growth, driven by rising consumer interest, strong government support, and a thriving export market. The sector's manufacturing value surged from US\$ 18 billion in 2020 to US\$ 24 billion in 2024, while the AYUSH service sector reached US\$ 26 billion, bringing the total industry worth to over US\$ 50 billion.

With the Indian AYUSH market projected to expand from US\$ 43.3 billion to US\$ 200 billion by 2030, it has witnessed an eightfold growth over the past decade, highlighting its increasing role in healthcare and wellness.<sup>9</sup> The Ministry is providing interest subsidy for establishing world-class, cutting-edge super-specialty hospitals/daycare centers of the systems recognized under the Indian Medicine Central Council Act, 1970, or Homeopathic Central Council Act, 1973, having a good connectivity under the categories, namely, 50-bedded hospitals; 10-bedded hospitals, and day-care centers.<sup>10</sup>

### Better outcome for medical tourism: *Ayurveda* healing

India offers a wide range of facilities for retreat, rejuvenation, and healing. From yoga ashrams and *Ayurvedic* resorts to wellness centers and integrative therapy hubs, the country provides diverse healing experiences. The increasing demand for *Ayurvedic* treatments has prompted luxury hotels and resorts to incorporate specialized wellness segments, staffed with expert therapists. To maintain service quality, capacity-building initiatives are being undertaken to train therapists, service providers, and paramedical personnel. However, ensuring quality assurance through regulation, standardization, and accreditation is essential to enhance credibility and trust in *Ayurveda*-based healthcare.

The cost-effectiveness of *Ayurveda* makes it a highly attractive alternative for Medical Value Travel (MVT), particularly for individuals seeking long-term management of chronic and complex diseases. *Ayurvedic* therapies provide integrative solutions for conditions such as musculoskeletal disorders, metabolic syndromes, neurological diseases, and autoimmune conditions, often reducing dependency on expensive pharmaceutical treatments. Given its growing appeal in Western countries, several leading healthcare providers are establishing wellness centers focused on *Ayurveda* and restorative treatments.

To capitalize on this opportunity, strategic efforts should be made to develop *Ayurveda*-centered medical tourism hubs, including healing townships, wellness villages, and specialized integrative medicine zones with world-class amenities. State governments should be encouraged to create dedicated wellness tourism areas, while policy measures should support private investments in *Ayurveda*-based infrastructure. Initiatives such as low-interest loans, reduced import/excise duties on medical equipment, and treatment cost parity assurance will further strengthen India’s position as a global leader in *Ayurveda*-driven medical tourism.

Collaboration with MVT facilitators, airlines, hotels, and hospitality sectors can help streamline the travel and treatment experience, making India a holistic and cost-effective destination for integrative healthcare. Additionally, increasing the number of *Ayurveda* institutions and medical professionals will improve service quality and expand access to traditional treatments worldwide. With stronger healthcare infrastructure, skilled professionals, and integrative management of diseases, *Ayurveda* has the potential to revolutionize medical tourism by offering affordable, sustainable, and effective healing solutions for global patient.

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