

Bumrungrad Hospital, Bangkok

โรงพยาบาล บำรุงราษฎร์ – กรุงเทพฯ

<http://www.bumrungrad.com>

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World Perspective — SOUTHEAST ASIA

Thai Hospitals Put on the Ritz in 5-Star Style

• **Bangkok medical centers offer a lot of bang for little bucks in battle for foreigners. Luxury amenities complement top-quality health care.**

By: DAVID LAMB
TIMES STAFF WRITER

BANGKOK, Thailand — When an American tourist fell ill on a cruise ship last month and was rushed to Bangkok's Bumrungrad Hospital, his family in Chicago fired off a batch of panicked e-mails, seeking reassurance that health care in Thailand wasn't some Third World nightmare.

Reassurance soon came. The patient's private, \$60-a-day room was wired for the Internet, and after nurses delivered a computer, he messaged that care was great. He was on the concierge floor, he had cable TV—and, besides, Starbucks and McDonald's, located in the lobby, had just brought room-service coffee and a Big Mac. He'd try the hospital's Japanese restaurant for dinner, he said.

Although no one checks into Bumrungrad for a Big Mac, its nonmedical perks are a reminder that the Thai capital has taken dead aim on Singapore as the medical center of choice for foreigners in Southeast Asia.

In the battle for the lucrative niche, Bangkok's hospitals have turned to aggressive marketing and amenities befitting five-star hotels to complement the top-quality health care that Thailand has offered for years.

Bangkok has one great advantage over Singapore: price. As Curtis Schroeder, Bumrungrad's chief executive and the former administrator of USC-University Hospital in Los Angeles, puts it: "Thailand is the best health-care value in the world today, and I don't think anyone would challenge me on that."

Medical authorities say prices at Bangkok's top hospitals are as little as one-fifth those in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan, a third of Singapore's and a tenth as much as in the United States. Example: A complete cardiac checkup, including consultations and a full range of tests, is about \$100.

In many ways, the pitch for foreign patients is a direct result of the region's economic crisis, because the private health-care industry mushroomed during the boom years and ended up at overcapacity. By the summer of 1997, Bangkok had 125 private hospitals with 14,000 beds.

Then the Thai currency, the baht, was devalued, sending the region's economy into a tailspin. Some new hospitals that hadn't yet built patient loads or attracted top doctors failed. Those that survived had to scramble to fill beds.

The foreign community was a likely target: Japan alone has 60,000 citizens in Thailand; 15,000 Americans live in Singapore. Tens of thousands more expatriates live in countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, where substandard medical services require a trip out of the country to see specialists.

"Traditionally, foreigners chose Singapore because its doctors were seen as more competent and spoke better English, but that perception is no longer true: Thai doctors and medical facilities today meet the highest international standards," said Dr. Sachapan Israsena, medical director of the modern, 101-year-old Bangkok Nursing Home and Hospital, which rests on leafy, manicured grounds amid the city's teeming sprawl.

The private hospital has one nurse for every five patients, a staff of English-speaking physicians trained mostly in the United States, Britain and Australia, and rooms with balconies overlooking landscaped gardens. Half its patients are foreigners.

Bumrungrad, which last year moved into a \$110-million, 12-story facility, has taken the lead in the pitch for foreigners. Its high-ceilinged lobby is graced by teak pillars, upholstered sofas and a bubbling water fountain. Multilingual hostesses show patients to their carpeted rooms. In addition to McDonald's and Starbucks, the hospital has full-service Thai and Japanese restaurants, a helipad and serviced apartments for patients' families. A deluxe hospital suite, complete with dining area and bar, goes for \$150 a night.

Believing that health care can be marketed as a service industry, like tourism or airlines, Bumrungrad's Schroeder has set up representative offices in Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Bangladesh to help patients with visas and other arrangements.

He is talking with Thai Airways International about running health-care package trips to Thailand, and the interactive Web site he set up at <http://www.bumrungrad.com> gets up to 800 hits a day. Two staff members are assigned full time to answering e-mails.

So far, the strategy seems to be paying off. Although Bumrungrad also is popular with well-heeled Thais—only 3% of Thais have private health insurance—the number of foreign patients is expected to reach 160,000 this year, a 22% increase over 1998.

The hospital clinic, the largest in Southeast Asia, also sees half a million patients a year and prides itself on clockwork efficiency: On average, an outpatient spends only 42 minutes in Bumrungrad.

The Thai government agrees that medical care is a hard-currency market worth tapping into. Its Department of Export Promotions showcased eight Thai hospitals on a four-city Asian tour in March, and its Tourism Authority recently released a health-care directory for the travel industry.

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The Perfect Thai Vacation: Sun, Sea and Surgery

By SETH MYDANS

BANGKOK, Sept. 3 — Thailand, the land of temples, floating markets and elephant rides, has begun promoting a new attraction for tourists — root canals.

Having put just about everything else it has on the market for foreign visitors, Thailand has turned to what it calls medical tourism, offering services that range from dental care to cancer treatments.

The attractions for a visitor are top-quality medical care, extremely low cost and a side trip to the beach.

"We thought, listen, we have really excellent medical facilities here and we have excellent holidays," said Teerapol Chotichanapibal, director of Royal Orchid Holidays. "If you can come and get a clean bill of health and then go and enjoy your holiday, what could be better?"

So, in Royal Orchid's glossy "Discover Thailand" brochure, a traveler can choose from options that include a performance of classical dance, a visit to the River Kwai, a Thai cooking class or a seven-hour "Comprehensive Health Examination for Women or Men."

The key to this new promotion is the high level of medical care that has emerged here in the past decade or two. The top private hospitals in Bangkok boast foreign-trained and certified doctors and modern medical equipment. They offer an inexpensive alternative to visitors who may need procedures not covered by health insurance or who live in countries with long waiting lists for national health care.

"They'll come for hip replacement or knee replacement or cataracts and, yup, while they're here they'll take a vacation," said Ruben Toral, director of international programs at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok. "They get their cosmetic surgery or their dental work and, boom, they're off to the beach."

Katty Anderson, of Carmel, Calif., opted for a physical exam while on a visit to Thailand and says, "I tell the story of my experience to everyone, which I thought was fabulous, the efficiency and the speed. What happened to me was just the absolute opposite to anything that could happen in the United States. I came out saying, you see, it can be done."

When she tells people she had medical care in Thailand, she says, "They roll their eyes up in their heads and say, 'I can imagine.' And I say, 'No, you can't.' "

Thailand made its name as a medical destination in the 1970's with one of its specialties, sex-change operations, known more formally as gender reassignment surgery, or G.R.S.

On its Web site, Bumrungrad describes the procedures it offers, then adds: "Many Bangkok G.R.S. Center patients extend their visits to include the many sites of Thailand including Bangkok, the northern hilltribe areas of Chiang Mai/Chiang Rai and the beautiful southern islands of Phuket and Koh Samui."

Or it is possible to go directly to Phuket, one of Thailand's premier beach resorts, and check in to the Phuket International Hospital, which advertises, "Bright sun, blue sea, cosmetic surgery."

Price is also an attraction. It is still possible save money in Asia on ready-made suits or gemstones, but some of the best bargains now seem to be things like open-heart surgery, which goes for about \$7,000 at Bumrungrad, rather than the tens of thousands of dollars it might cost in the United States. An outpatient consultation is generally less than \$10. A complete cardiac examination, including a full range of tests, costs about \$100. The average hospital bed costs \$50 a night.

The hospitals' efficiency and personal attention also come as a culture shock to many Western visitors.

"Someone dressed in a beautiful Armani suit with little high-heeled shoes simply took me around from appointment to appointment and they immediately did all these tests, one after another," Mrs. Anderson said. "I went down and had lunch at the Starbucks in the lobby of the hospital, came back up and the doctor had on his desk the most beautiful file, all bound with tabs and everything, with all the results of the tests that they had done."

"Something like that, as you know, is impossible in America," she added. "I mean, it's inconceivable."

Curtis J. Schroeder, an American who is Bumrungrad's chief executive officer, said 225,000 foreigners visited the hospital last year, about half of whom live in Thailand. Americans made up 29,000 of the outpatients and more than 30,000 of the inpatients, he said.

With its 554 beds, air of luxury and aggressive marketing, Bumrungrad now dominates Thailand's medical tourism industry and has almost single-handedly shifted the regional hub for medical care from Singapore.

Though two-thirds of its patients are Thais, the hospital caters to foreigners with a concierge service that handles such things as airport transportation, bank transactions, visas and airline tickets.

Since Sept. 11, Mr. Schroeder said, there has been a flood of Middle Eastern patients who now avoid the United States for fear of discrimination. In response, the hospital has hired extra Arabic interpreters, stocked up on Muslim prayer rugs and opened a kitchen serving religiously acceptable halal food.

"It looks like Mecca downstairs," Mr. Schroeder said.

Bumrungrad has made a deliberate effort not to look or smell like a hospital, softening its decor and filtering its air. Its gigantic, carpeted lobby with deep sofas, potted trees and a blonde-wood reception desk has the look of an expensive hotel.

As much as anything, it is the Starbucks coffee shop that draws comment, along with the McDonald's, the Au Bon Pain, the Japanese restaurant and the mezzanine food court. A bed-ridden patient can order from any of these outlets through room service.

Elevators carry portraits of a guest chef each month who visits to prepare the hospital's menus.

All of this helps patients and their families to feel safe and comfortable, Mr. Schroeder said. But it is also great for the tourist brochures.

Mr. Schroeder, who was previously the administrator of USC University Hospital in Los Angeles, has been an enthusiastic booster of Thailand's medical tourism.

"We looked at finding a way to do frequent-flier miles, but we can't figure out a way to calculate them," Mr. Schroeder said, perhaps joking. "If you have a cholecystectomy, how many miles do you get?"

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