

ESSENCE

Inside the Beauty Tourism Boom

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INSIDE THE
BEAUTY

TOURISM

BOOM

A growing number of women and men are traveling to other countries to get the look they want for less

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There was once a time when the idea of flying to another country for a cosmetic procedure would raise eyebrows. Most assumed that going abroad for any health care option could lead to botched results at discounted prices. But in reality, journeying overseas for a sought-after cosmetic procedure is emerging as the ultimate beauty hack for a growing number of people.

With steadily rising costs in the U.S.A., especially when it comes to health care, some Americans are choosing to hop on a plane to secure affordable cosmetic treatments. Beauty tourism, or going abroad for a cosmetic service, is becoming a popular choice among women and men who seek to upgrade their looks. In 2017 alone, more than 1.4 million Americans traveled for elective surgeries, ranging from rhinoplasties to dental procedures to tummy tucks.

"The primary allure of beauty tourism is the potential for substantial cost savings," says Steven Williams, M.D., a Dublin, California-based, board-certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon. "Procedures in countries like Turkey, Mexico and Thailand can be 40 percent to 80 percent less expensive than in the United States." The founder of Tri Valley Plastic Surgery, Williams recently completed his term as the first African American president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS). As an example, he points out that a hair transplant in Turkey costs between \$1,800 and \$4,500, compared with an average cost of \$7,500 in the U.S.

Not only do some other countries offer lower prices, but they have become authorities in providing certain treatments. "Turkey has emerged as a leading destination for hair transplants, attracting patients globally, including African Americans," says Williams. "Clinics in Turkey have developed expertise in performing hair transplants tailored to the unique hair textures of African-American patients. Of course, these techniques are available in the U.S.—but, again, typically at higher prices."

Cheaper prices don't necessarily equate to inferior service. While there will be horror stories about any industry, some countries are setting the standard with top-notch facilities and experienced doctors with stellar bedside manners, while offering affordable rates. The International Healthcare Research Center, a nonprofit organization that analyzes international patient care, released a 2021 report highlighting countries leading the pack in medical tourism. The report, titled Medical Tourism Index (MTI), based its results on the level of services provided, the country's infrastructure around communication and accommodations, despite language and cultural barriers, and the socioeconomic standards of the country, among other factors.

Places like Japan and the United Arab Emirates top the list for high levels of care and five-star services. Before travelers even set foot in destinations such as Japan, which specializes in antiaging injectables and nonsurgical facelifts, or the UAE's Dubai, praised for general cosmetic surgery, they have typically already been in contact with concierges attached to the clinics. Not only will these customer service agents help walk patients through what they can expect from their process—including when they should arrive or how long they should stay for aftercare—but some will offer travel packages including lodging, transportation and meals.



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adds that distance from home and differing medical practices can hinder effective postoperative care. Even so, many continue to book trips for plastic surgery.

Brazilian Butt Lift

In 2023, a then 25-year-old Dorrett Grham flew over 3,000 miles—to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, from Woodland Hills, California—for liposuction and a breast reduction. It was

Nations across the globe are eyeing the success of their neighbors in medical tourism and want in. To compete, they are investing accordingly. A company in Tokyo recently announced its plans to create a translation app, to streamline conversations between its clinic and medical aesthetics staff. Russia is working with international travel agencies to assist visitors arriving for treatments and, depending on the procedure, has created a special medical tourism visa. Turkey, one of the largest medical-tourism hubs, has been growing in the field for over a decade. It continues to invest in state-of-the-art facilities and health care technology. Over the next few years, the territory expects to cash in with \$20 billion in revenue from medical tourism alone.

Williams credits social media, in part, for the beauty-tourism boom, but reminds us that folks don't always reveal the downsides of trekking to another country to tweak their look. He says the risk of complications and infections is higher for those who travel abroad, and there's a lack of legal recourse should something go wrong. He

Grham's second time going under the knife with Jairo Ulerio, M.D. During her first procedure, in 2021, Grham, a mother of one who says she'd desired plastic surgery since middle school, underwent a Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) and tummy tuck. (It's important to note that BBLs are among the most life-threatening cosmetic procedures; clinics in South Florida that perform BBLs actually lead in fatalities in the U.S.)

Grham says she researched for years before selecting Ulerio. She made sure that he was board-certified and didn't have any documented deaths in his years of work. She paid roughly \$10,000 total for a BBL, a tummy tuck, her flight and her accommodations. For context, a tummy tuck alone in the U.S. is about \$8,000. She loved her results. “I didn't do treatments or anything on my tummy-tuck scar, and it is basically nonexistent,” she says.

She also loved Ulerio's bedside manner. He required her to stay in the Dominican Republic for 10 days after the procedures so he could monitor her progress daily. She remained in a recovery home he recommended, staffed with nurses who monitored her vitals. »



When Graham had her initial consultation with Ulerio, she wanted all four procedures done at one time; but he advised her it would be too much trauma on the body—and if that was what she wanted, he wasn't the doctor for her. "I respected him for that," says Graham. "I don't want the type of doctor who will just listen to me and do what I want, even if it's dangerous."

Hair Transplant

Frank Pierce, 39, of Jacksonville, Florida, always wanted a beard, but the hair on his face failed to grow out entirely. So when he learned on social media that he could grow a full beard with some help, he started researching the procedure. "I wasn't lacking confidence; I just felt something was missing," says Pierce. He simply wanted to change his look; and decided that he could always shave the beard off if he didn't like the results. After discovering that Turkey is known for its hair transplants, he contacted a clinic for a consultation. He chatted with his doctor for the first time via WhatsApp,

and learned he could grow an entire beard after about a year by removing hair follicles from a "donor area" (in his case, the hair would come from the back of his head).

In 2023, he headed to Istanbul, Turkey, and paid around \$3,500, a price that included both his hotel and the procedure. He documented his entire experience on TikTok (@whoisfrankpierce). "I want to help further the conversation," says Pierce. "If you have a receding hairline or certain forms of alopecia, which I know many Black people live with, it may be possible to fix. I had no hair on my face except for a small mustache. Now I have a full beard."

Rhinoplasty

Zoe Martin, 29, of Brooklyn, wanted a rhinoplasty for a more contoured look. "I was inspired by filters, insecurity, media and a handful of other things, which ultimately led to a decision to undergo plastic surgery," Martin admits. She didn't want to compromise her Black features for a more European appearance, but she wanted a more

defined nose. She began to study Black women who'd had nose jobs on TikTok—and discovered many of them had gone to Boru Ok, M.D., of Dr. Boru Ok Clinic, in Istanbul. The surgeon has become one of the go-to doctors in Turkey for Black women wanting an ethnic rhinoplasty. "My focus is on creating results that refine and balance diverse facial structures," says Ok. "I saw an imbalance in the attention given to techniques for Caucasians versus African or Afro-Caribbean patients. This



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—ZOE MARTIN



gap inspired me to concentrate on refining techniques for ethnic rhinoplasty, ensuring each patient's unique features are respected and enhanced naturally."

Martin was sold. Before long, she was on a solo flight to Turkey in 2023. An ethnic rhinoplasty in the States can cost as much as \$30,000; the average price in Turkey starts at \$3,000. She says the procedure took a few hours, and the customer service was excellent. Martin admits she would have done one major thing differently, though: She would have done a bit more research. "It takes a year to recover and see full results. I wish I had known that beforehand," she says. "But I love my results now, and I would do it again."

Cosmetic Dentistry

Sharena East, 35, of Houston, was so impressed with the customer service she received in Tijuana, Mexico, at Amatista Estetica Dental, that she no longer has dental work done in the United States. "I was raised to believe Southern hospitality is the best hospitality, but I beg to differ," she says. "Now that I have been to Mexico about 15 times—the way their nurses and doctors care for people, it's something you haven't experienced unless you've been there."

East first traveled to the country in 2022 for another procedure: fat removal from under her chin. Blatant by her results, she kept Mexico top of mind when she decided she wanted porcelain veneers. In September 2023, she flew from Houston to San Diego, California. Then she took a 20-minute cab ride from the airport to her hotel in Tijuana, on the border with the U.S. After checking in, she took a taxi from the hotel to the dental office. When she arrived at the practice, she went through a second consultation with a team of doctors—the first had taken place two months earlier, via Zoom. A couple of hours later, she was in the dentist's chair, and five hours after that, she had the smile she had always wanted. "As a public speaker, [I notice] people always look at my mouth, so I wanted that perfect white smile," she says. "I love my teeth now." East returned to her hotel and relaxed before her flight home the next day. "I asked the cab driver to stop at a taco stand before taking me back to the hotel," she says, laughing, and insists she felt no pain. "I even tried to fit a little shopping in before my flight."

East paid about \$5,000 for her flight, transportation and the procedure. For comparison, a complete set of veneers in California ranges from \$20,000 to \$70,000. East travels back to Mexico several times a year for maintenance and cleanings. She could receive those services stateside but prefers to return south of the border. She encourages others to do their research—and to take the leap if they discover that going abroad is their best option. "Don't be afraid to travel," she says. "If you are concerned, take a family member or friend. But don't settle for what is convenient. Settle for the thing that will bring you the most joy and give you the most longevity in your investment. Cosmetic surgery is an investment."

With so many satisfied customers, the future of beauty tourism looks very bright. "As the world shrinks and global standards in plastic surgery rise, beauty tourism isn't going anywhere," Williams says. "But the future of beauty tourism will hinge on one critical factor: patient education. If you're considering surgery overseas, do your homework. The stakes are high, and the consequences of not understanding what you're signing up for can be even higher."

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

If you're planning to take the plunge and travel abroad for plastic surgery, Steven Williams, M.D., offers up tips on how to protect yourself.



Williams was the first Black president of ASPS.

Verify a surgeon's credentials. "Ensure the surgeon has experience with the procedure you're considering," Williams says. "The American Society of Plastic Surgeons offers an international membership program, allowing patients to verify if a surgeon abroad meets established standards."

Research facility accreditation. "Confirm that the medical facility is accredited by recognized international organizations," he says. The Joint Commission International and Global Healthcare Accreditation are among those to check.

Seek patient testimonials. "Review the experiences of previous patients, to gauge satisfaction and identify potential red flags," Williams notes. "Speaking with two or more patients can be a very effective way of learning more about what to expect." You can also check out resources like realself.com, an online health care marketplace, for customer reviews, as well as Facebook groups where people share their experiences with doctors.

Plan for comprehensive care. "Arrange for adequate time abroad to accommodate the procedure and initial recovery, and establish a plan for follow-up care upon returning home," Williams says. "There can be distinct differences in aftercare, including whether an international practice will prescribe pain medication." Williams emphasizes that it's incredibly important to arrange for a health care professional to monitor your progress closely, as proper aftercare is crucial.