

## MEDICAL TOURISM IN GUATEMALA

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***Abstract:** Medical tourism has represented an interest for a long time. The Latin American and Caribbean Region (LAC) is an area recognized for medical tourism. Guatemala is one of the countries that attracts more and more tourists for medical services. Cardiovascular, beauty, dental clinics and SPA centers represent real attractions for medical tourists. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of clinics that may attract potential medical tourists. The method used consists on consulting platforms such as TripAdvisor, Facebook pages and websites of clinics from Guatemala and select based on some inclusion criteria those who can attract medical tourists. Lack of regulations at the legislative level and lack of clinics` accreditation are the main impediments in the development of medical tourism. The findings provide a scientific basis for a better image of Guatemala`s potential for medical tourism but also for planning health resources.*

***Keywords:** medical tourism, clinics, health system, Guatemala*

### INTRODUCTION

Many definitions have been addressed to medical tourism. Bookman and Bookman (2007) defined medical tourism as “international ‘travel with the aim of improving one’s health’. Carrera & Bridges (2006) assumed that medical tourism is “the organized travel outside one’s local environment for the maintenance, enhancement or restoration of an individual’s wellbeing in mind and body”. Medical tourism has attracted considerable interest within the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region (Snyder et al., 2016). Guatemala is a low/middle income country, part of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, bordering the Caribbean Sea with a population of 16.6 million people. It is the most populous state in Central America (World Bank Group Total Population, 2020). The health system is coordinated by MSPAS (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social). Under its subordination are 1011 primary health centers, 346 primary care clinics and 44 hospitals distributed throughout the country (Ketelhöhn & Arévalo, 2016). Guatemala's health system is made up of a network of

public and private clinics. Private clinics are non-profit and for-profit. The private non-profit sector includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and traditional Mayan medicine (Ceron et al., 2014). Guatemala's private health care sector is unregulated and fragmented; 86% is financed by beneficiary patients, 14% by private insurance companies, often through individual contracts and sometimes by employers who cover the costs for their employees. More than 90% of those with private health insurance are among the 10% of the country's high-income residents (Becerril & López, 2011). Besides medical services, the private sector provides health insurance, the possibility of prepayment of medical services and trade in medicines and medical equipment. For example, private pharmacies and other drug sellers are the most important players in the drug market, the state has limited control over the sale of drugs (Gragnotati & Marini, 2003). The largest development was recorded by private sector health services. Between 1995 and 2004, 292 new private hospitals were registered, as well as 2,614 private clinics and 714 private laboratories (Bowser & Mahal, 2011), 58% of which were concentrated in the metropolitan area of capital for the sake of accessibility. Only 11% of the population has access to health services, taking into account the time it takes to get to nearest health facility (Kenning, 2006).

The concentration of human resources in metropolitan area and lack of doctors with basic specialties in hospitals affect outpatient decisions and clinics in rural areas. This distribution is "a reflection of a centralized model of health care" (Plan, P. S. (2007). In Guatemala is no interest in regulating medical. Frequent change of officials or governing parties has been an impediment to any regulation attempt. In "Government roles in regulating medical tourism: evidence from Guatemala", authors address the issue of medical tourism in Guatemala from the perspective of development opportunities. The study includes an analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews conducted between June and December 2013 with politicians, representatives of private clinics, travel agents, representatives of public and private health workers and representatives of civil society. Stakeholder responses to medical tourism regulations demonstrates a lack of concern for this sector: "These regulations are not and have not been a priority for the Government", "The legislation that laid the foundations of the country's health system [is] ... complicated because ... new laws are being added ... sometimes ... contrary to what already exists. This creates a conflict of interest because everyone is interested in him and says, "The law says that, the law says this." In terms of institutional support, the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (INGUAT) is the main actor, but has the status of a government agency, a inferior structure to a ministry. INGUAT was involved to

strengthen a group of entrepreneurs interested in medical tourism and promoting participation in international fairs and conferences (Ceron et al., 2014). In addition to INGUAT, CTSB (Tourism Commission) has received institutional support through various initiatives and programs within the Ministry of Economy, such as PRONACOM (National Competitiveness Program), Conapex (National Export Commission), Invest in Guatemala, Pacit (a program involving commercial attachés in other countries). There are no details in any of the articles on what this institutional support would entail. Lack of organization and regulations are the main impediments to development of medical in Guatemala. Compared to other destinations in Central America, Guatemala is in the forefront of international health care marketing. However, in the last two years, private hospitals, hotels, airlines and other private companies have teamed up to form a network, the Association of Guatemalan Exporters (AGEXPORT) to support a better organization of export services. But is still no "brand" for medical tourism.

Other impediments are lack of international certifications and accreditations, lack of a national network of information and promotion centers, motivation to attract tourists from abroad, insufficient funds allocated by political factors, public-private partnership and a coherent strategy at national level, insufficient collaboration between stakeholders, concentration of medical tourism offer in metropolitan area of capital. In addition, Guatemala has one of the highest crime rates in Latin America, 39.9 homicides per 100,000 people, in 2013. By comparison, Costa Rica had about 8, 5 homicides per 100,000 people, and Panama had 17.2 homicides per 100,000 people (Estrada & Ndoma, 2014). Most of the crimes start from the local "gangs" and are near the border with Mexico. This area is home to the Mexican Zeta cartel, which has moved to rural Guatemala after a crackdown on drug cartels. Cross-border crime is often committed by transnational gangs and transnational criminal organizations (Brads, 2011).

Tourists do not tend to experience violent crimes in Guatemala. The most common type of crime reported by tourists is theft and armed robbery. Robberies often occur in popular areas, large cities and crowded markets. In Guatemala, armed robberies are also taking place, with robbers attacking intra and long-distance buses. Robbers are more likely to stop buses / cars on rural roads than in the city and operate at night later than during the day (Alda, 2014).

Tourists are targeted on trails in remote areas, including those around Lake Atitlán and Agua Volcano. In other areas, such as Tikal and Cerro de La Cruz in Antigua, there is the Tourist Police (Politur), and this has helped increase the safety of these places (Little, 2014).

## METHODOLOGY

Platforms such as TripAdvisor, Facebook pages and the websites of various clinics in Guatemala have been used to identify clinics that can be points of attraction for potential medical tourists. The selection criteria taken into account were: number of reviews (> 50) on TripAdvisor (for SPAs), Facebook and own website for other clinics; rating obtained from the reviews (only the clinics graded between 4.5 and 5) were chosen; existence of English language option on the website; variety of medical services and experience of the doctors.

In total were selected 32 private and public clinics that are listed in Tabel no. 1.

**Tabel no. 1** Selected potential attraction clinics for medical tourists

Venga Atitlan Outdoor Adventures	SPA centers
Shen Masoterapia y Relajacion	
Healing Hands Therapy Spa	
Massage By Angela Stone	
Cardiovascular Surgery Unit of Guatemala UNICAR	cardiovascular clinics
Servicios Y Tecnología Cardiovascular De Guatemala S.A. / Cardiosolutions - Dr. Fernando Wyss	
Hospital Herrera Llerandi	
Instituto de Innovacion Cardiovascular GT, S.A.	
Central America Doctors	
Centro Dental De Especialistas, S.A.	dental clinics
Clinica Dental Donado	
Servicios Dentales Integrados / Sedi	
Ganddini Dental	
Smile Factory	
Guatemala Dental Team	
Plastic Surgery Center Dr. Salvador Recinos	cosmetic and reparatory clinics
Dr. Alfredo Longo - Cirugía Plástica en Guatemala	
Nova Esthetics	
Medical Aesthetics Guatemala	
Medical Aesthetics Guatemala	

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

*Dental clinics*

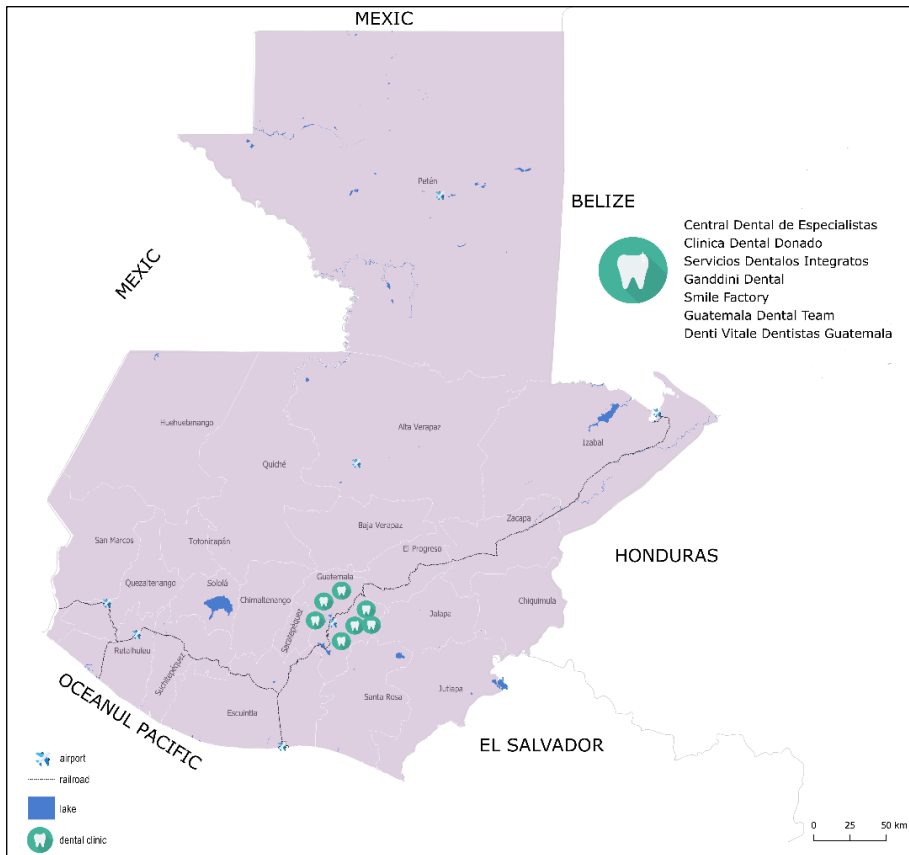
A dental clinic offers services in the field of dentistry, such as dental implantology, endodontics, orthodontics, prosthetics, aesthetics, caries treatment and prophylaxis. Among the advantages of the selected dental clinics are the medical staff who speak fluent English but also its rigorous training (internships abroad). Almost all comments made by those who used dental services in Guatemala are positive. Short waiting time and positive attitude of the medical staff are mentioned. Lower prices for any procedure compared to patients' home countries is another argument for traveling to Guatemala.

Dental clinics that can generate medical tourism are located in the capital area, Guatemala City, the most economically developed area in the country. The transport network is dense in this area, and here is also the biggest country airport in the country, La Aurora International Airport. Dental clinics offer services at less than half of the price compared to those in the U.S., which causes both Guatemalans settled in the U.S. and Americans to come here for treatment (Table no. 1).

**Table no. 2** Costs of dental procedures

Dentistry (USD)		
Procedure	S.U.A.	Guatemala
ceramic crown	1.300	450
dental implant	4.500	1.750
tooth extraction	600	150
canal treatment	1.300	420
maxillary plate	3.800	1.200
laser bleaching	1.250	285

Source: <https://guatemalamedicaltravel.com/patients/#Prices>

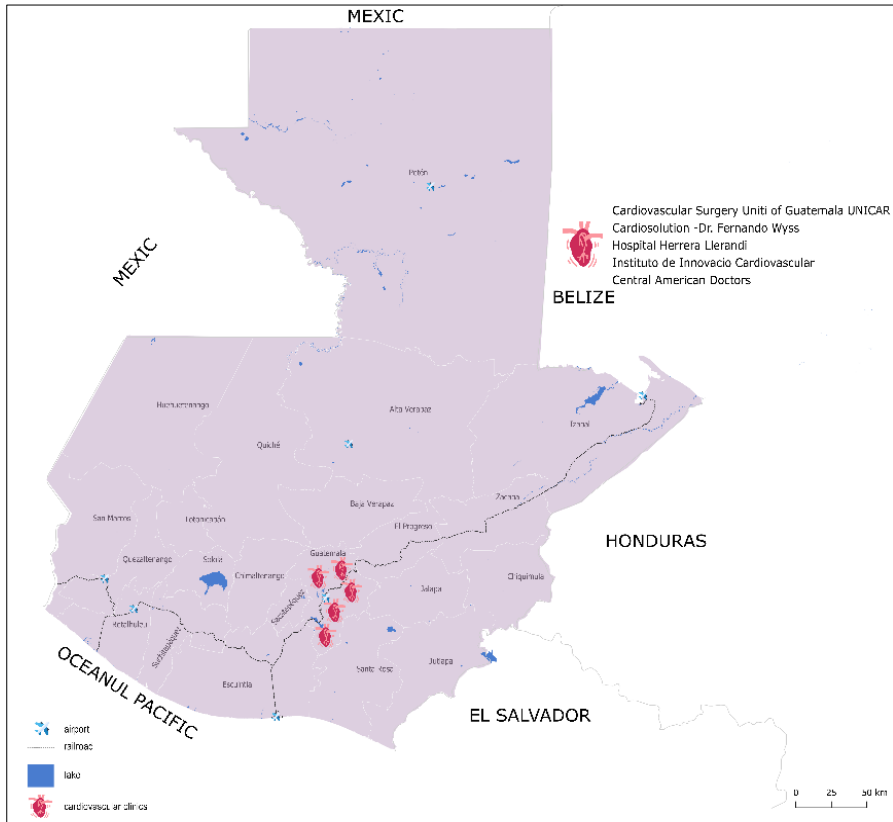


**Fig. 1** Potential dental clinics for medical tourism

### *Cardiovascular clinics*

The main activity of cardiovascular clinics is surgical treatment of cardiac, vascular and thoracic diseases, in adults and children. Also, emergency surgical is provided. The cardiac pathology approached in the surgery service includes: valve prostheses, valvuloplasty, coronary revascularization, surgery of acute or chronic aneurysms in thoracic aorta and others.

Cardiovascular clinics are located similar to dental clinics, in the capital area, where the transport network is well- developed. Here, it passes the railway that connects east with west and 3 of the 5 highways in the country, which favors domestic medical tourism. Also, here, there are numerous shopping and banking centers (15 banks have branches in the capital) and other facilities that can be used by tourists in general, but also by medical tourists in particular.



**Fig. 2** Potential cardiovascular clinics for medical tourism

The capital, Guatemala City, has almost one million inhabitants (994,938), and the neighboring cities of Villa Nueva, Mixco, Escuintla have about 500,000 inhabitants, and 103,165 in the case of Escuintla (Cabrera & Haase, 2018). All of them are heading to the capital for various interventions.

### *Cosmetic and Reparatory Clinics*

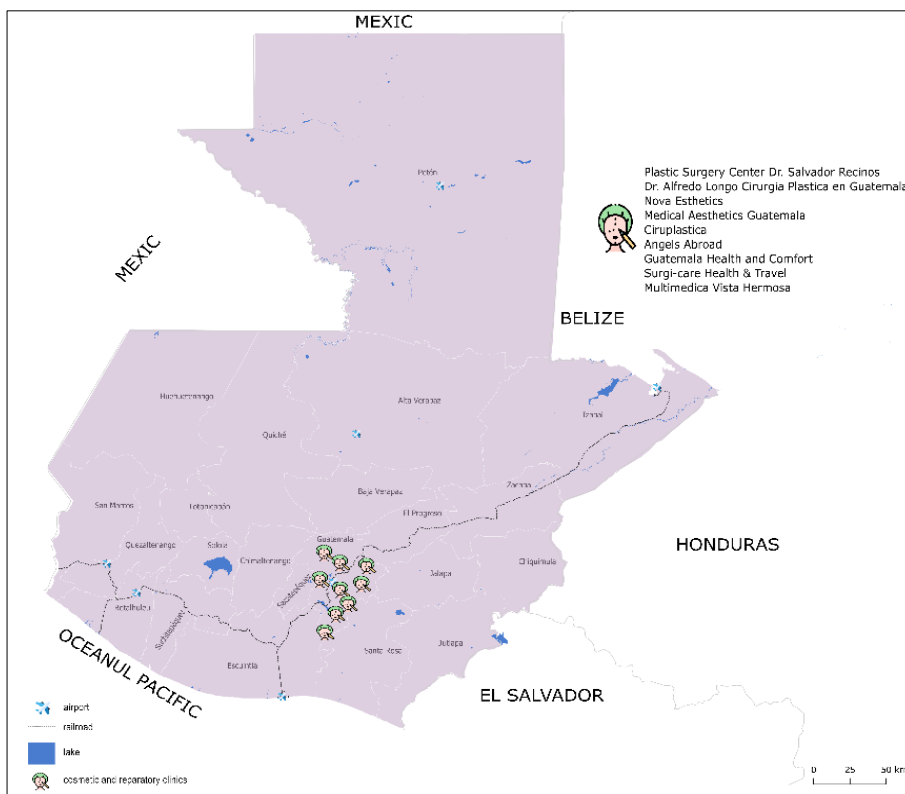
Cosmetic and reparatory clinic offers services for detection and treatment of skin cancers, treatment of skin, hair, nails diseases and conditions, evaluation, registration and monitoring of pigment lesions using dermatoscopy and digital computer technology, acne treatment, cosmetic problems, laser treatments, chemical peels, botulinum toxin injections, hyaluronic acid, bio revitalization with essential amino acids, mesotherapy, permanent hair removal, treatment of scars and stretch marks, skin rejuvenation and laser excisions.

Staff of these clinics includes doctors with various specialties, such as cosmetic and plastic surgery, dermatology, endocrinology, hematology, but also nurses and beauticians. Prices are considerably lower than in the USA (Table no. 2). Due to geographical accessibility, these clinics are located in the capital's hinterland. The transport system is varied, La Aurora International Airport operates direct flights to neighboring countries and the United States, and 15 airlines operate on this airport.

**Table no. 3** Costs of dental procedures

Cosmetic Surgery (USD)		
breast implant	15.000	4.800
raising eyelids	8.000	4.100
facelift	18.000	5.900
rhinoplasty	11.000	4.100

Source: <https://guatemalamedicaltravel.com/patients/#Prices>

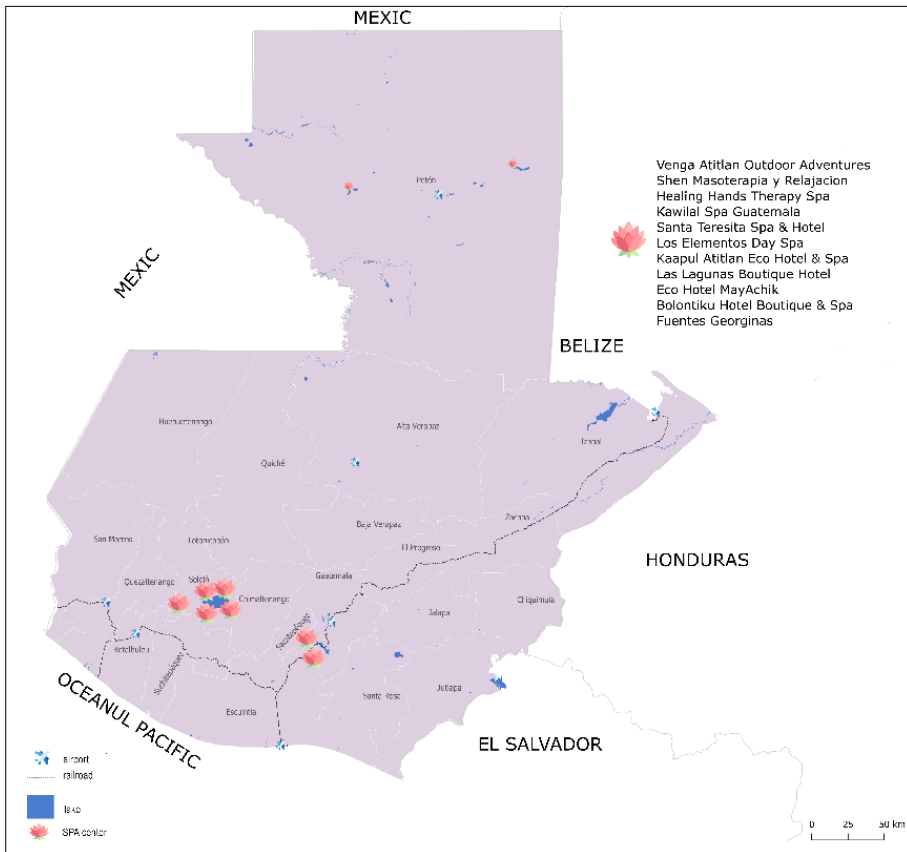


**Fig. 3** Potential cosmetic and reparatory clinics for medical tourism



*SPA centers*

Nowadays, SPA centers are locations where are carried out various activities to relax the body and mind. These activities include wet/dry sauna and jacuzzi. The price for a day at SPA centers in Guatemala varies between \$ 20-75 depending on the chosen unit, but also on the services offered. Among the strengths are the interest of hoteliers to offer SPA facilities in the accommodation unit and consumers` enthusiasm, even if the local industry is still in an early stage (Argueta, 2014). On the other hand, a big downside of the industry is the lack of a trades nomenclature. Currently, in the International Standard Classification of Occupations are no specifications for the positions of spa manager, spa therapist, spa receptionist and the list goes on. Therefore, there are no spa schools, because currently no diplomas can be issued.



**Fig. 4** Potential SPA centers for medical tourism

*Typology of medical tourists in Guatemala*

Historical migration trends have also influenced the healthcare sector in Guatemala. The 1970s and 1980s marked the beginning of cross-border travel for healthcare services between Guatemala and neighboring countries (Jonas, 2013). On the one hand, the growing number of Guatemalans living in the U.S. created the category of patients from Guatemala who visit the country for medical procedures. Immigrants from Guatemala represent the sixth largest Hispanic population living in the United States, 2% of the Hispanic population in 2010 (Brick, 2011). Between 2000 and 2017, the Guatemalan population increased by 255%. from 406,000 to 1.4 million (United Nations Population Division, 2020.).

On the other hand, the medical industry in Guatemala, which is more extensive in terms of medical services provided compared to the one in southern Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras, has created the category of patients who prefer to travel to Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango for medical services (Cerón et al., 2013). The demand for health care services has been extended by referrals to other people. Also, the growing number of Guatemalan doctors training abroad in a variety of medical specialties is another reason for foreign to access medical services in Guatemala. (Green, 2009).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Guatemala's medical tourism industry is in "embryonic stage." Although some clinics and hospitals provide services to cross-border patients, medical tourism is far from representing the majority of profit. Dental, cardiovascular, cosmetic and reparatory clinics and SPA centers represents point of attraction for potential medical tourists. The advantages for development of medical tourism are supported by low prices and qualification of medical staff. Lack of regulations at the legislative level, high crime rate and lack of clinics` accreditation are the main impediments in the development of medical tourism. Currently, according to the available information, Government involvement is minimal and plans for future investments are not in sight. The findings provide a scientific basis for a better image of Guatemala`s potential for medical tourism but also for planning health resources.

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