

Surf, sand ... and surgery? Inside the world of medical tourism

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Story highlights

More Americans are going abroad for care that's cheaper, better or more convenient than what they can find at home.



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2. Efficient services

The top destination hospitals are designed to be models of efficiency. At Bumrungrad, each floor of the hospital has its own pharmacy and own

(CNN)—Feel like you need to get away? Want to tour a foreign country or relax on an exotic beach?

Or maybe you need to take a few sick days for a routine medical procedure, say getting a pacemaker replaced or doing a bit of cosmetic surgery?

Why not do both at once?

It's a growing phenomenon called "[medical tourism](#)." In 2014, it is estimated that more than a million Americans left the country to seek care abroad. One of those million is documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock, who traveled to Bumrungrad International Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand, for the latest episode of his CNN series, "Morgan Spurlock Inside Man."

Why fly halfway around the world for care? Through his experience and in conversations with other travelers, Spurlock discovered that, for some patients and some procedures, there are real advantages to medical tourism. Here are five of the biggest:

1. World-class care

Not long ago, the reputation of overseas medical care was dodgy at best -- third world tummy tucks and doctors whose training may not have met Western standards. Today, the best destination hospitals in countries like Malaysia, India, Turkey and Thailand reportedly meet or exceed Western standards.

As Morgan Spurlock learned, Bumrungrad serves 520,000 international patients a year from 190 countries. Most of their doctors do post-graduate training overseas, with more than 300 of them American Board Certified.



Morgan Spurlock prepares for an MRI at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand, for CNN's "Inside Man."



Morgan Spurlock recuperates on the beach Thailand, for an episode of CNN's "Inside Man" on medical tourism.

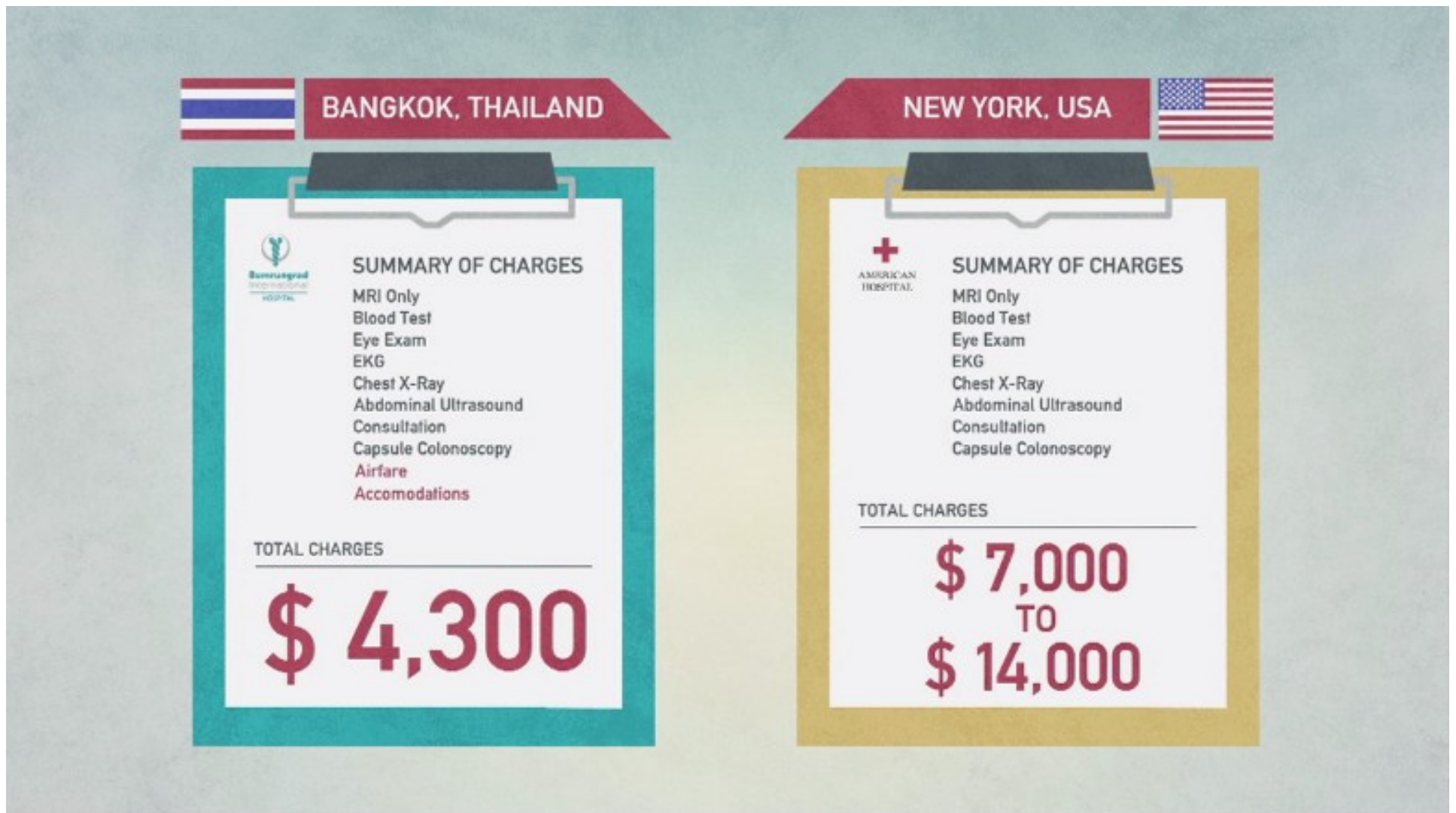
outpatient clinic, while a centralized blood lab processes samples in an hour. As William Brockwell, an American patient, told Spurlock: "The most I've ever sat waiting here has been 15 minutes. In the U.S., I've sat up to two hours, waiting to get waited on."

Those brief waits feel even shorter when the waiting room looks more like a five-star hotel than a hospital and your recovery room has a view of the beach.

3. Lower costs

How incredible? According to data compiled by AARP, a heart bypass in the United States typically runs \$88,000. In Costa Rica, that figure drops to \$31,500. Need a new hip? \$33,000 in the States and \$12,400 in Thailand. A typical nose job goes for \$6,200 here but only \$2,800 in Mexico.

If your insurance covers most of a procedure, you won't see the savings. But if you're underinsured or have a high deductible, the savings can add up, even once you add on airfare and lodging. A good rule of thumb: if the difference in cost to you is greater than \$6,000, seeking care abroad will likely save you money.



4. Skip the bureaucracy

Medical tourism means never having to say "co-pay." Or deductible, "reasonable and customary," in-network vs. out-of-network or any of the other confusing terms that make the American private insurance system so confounding.

As Spurlock discovers, overseas hospitals catering to international patients offer consistent prices that make it easy to comparison shop. Paying the bill is about as simple as checking out of a hotel.

5. The joys of travel



Morgan Spurlock visits the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand, for an episode of CNN's "Inside Man."

Let's face it, even a luxury hospital is still a hospital. No one wants to spend more time in one than necessary. Why not spend your free time before and between procedures visiting exotic locales and getting to know a foreign culture? While in Thailand for an MRI and endoscopy, Spurlock squeezed in a visit to [Bangkok's](#) temples, a stroll through a street market and some down time sipping a fresh young coconut on the beach.



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