

Alliance targets medical and health tourism

Thebe Tourism Group and Serokolo Health Tourism recently entered into a joint venture to enable them to capitalise better on the relatively untapped medical and health tourism market.

"I am very, very excited about our joint venture. Many tourism operators shy away from this type of tourism due to the associated health risks, possible post-operative complications, insurance costs and unexpected delays, but Thebe is very comfortable and confident to be working with a medical organisation of the calibre of Serokolo Health," said Heather Gutierrez, head of inbound tourism at Thebe Tourism Group (TTG).

500 000 visitors

Dr Tshepo Maaka, founder and MD of Serokolo Health Tourism, said about 500 000 of this year's visitors to South Africa came to the country for medical reasons, which illustrates the huge potential for growth in medical tourism.

The concept of wellness tourism is not new to South Africa. For almost a decade various companies have offered a variety "surgical safaris" to overseas tourists. However, TTG and Serokolo will be focusing their joint efforts on creating a more specific, tailor-made offering that caters primarily for the health and medical needs of individual clients.

Three-day package

Their health tourism initiative is designed, for example, to present the mundane but necessary annual physical in a more attractive three-day package. Day one would focus on the mandatory battery of blood tests, X-rays, dietary guidance, cholesterol, sugar and blood-pressure checks, while days two and three would be devoted to de-stressing spa treatments while the client awaits test results.

"This would make it more of a wellness experience," said Gutierrez.

World-renowned facilities

Serokolo brings to the alliance a well-established health tourism market in sub-Saharan Africa. For a number of years, expatriate executives and directors have made use of South Africa's world-renowned medical facilities for medical procedures and other health-related treatments.

With the local market taken care of, TTG plans to focus its efforts on leveraging health and medical tourism business via its international client base.

"Medical tourism has been seen to thrive in a regional context. At Serokolo we made our prime target sub-Saharan Africa, with long-haul destinations a secondary consideration. West Africa has become our biggest market, but we are now receiving enquiries from the UK, Asia and Canada, which indicates the need to expand to include the overseas market," said Maaka.

As each client's needs differ, packages need to be tailored to take into account specific time constraints and health treatments, a service Gutierrez calls "worry-free caring".

Not a core function

However, the tourism-and-health alliance is unlikely to become a core function of TTG; rather, it is as a "very valuable element of tourism that has, to a large extent, been overlooked", said Gutierrez.

Medical procedures such as heart operations and hip replacements require a longer time frame due to post-operative care

Specialised personal attention in the form of a nursing sister would be allocated to each client on a full-time basis to handle orientation at the medical facility, deal with airport transfers and provide pre- and post-operative care.

Tailor-made

Due to the unique requirements of each client, medical packages will be individually tailored to include spousal support, such as pampering at a spa, along with a recuperation period for the client at a suitable tourist destination.

Gutierrez has already hand-picked staff from the TTG ranks to deal with the unique demands of medical tourism. "I have specifically targeted a team of experienced senior staff who exhibit the compassion needed to work with clients that require medical procedures, combined with the competence to be able to deal with the stresses of last-minute changes of plan."

The alliance is not overlooking the immediate benefits presented by 2010. "Next year we are expecting thousands of tourists in South Africa for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. That may be their primary reason for coming here, but we have so much more to offer on the 'lighter side' of medicine, from basic medical check-ups to spa treatments, eye checks, dental reviews, teeth whitening and so much more," said Maaka.

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