

China, the emerging medical tourism hot spot

Hainan, Xinjiang and Beijing show TCM promotion could attract wellness consumers from around the world

HAIKOU — Svetlana Shipetko and her two sons did not just come to South China's tropical island of Hainan to escape the freezing Siberian weather. Shipetko had an equally important goal — to ease her lower back pain.

Instead of prescribing painkillers, Shipetko's Chinese doctor Tang Yi performed the traditional Chinese therapy of “*tui na*”, which literally means “push-and-pinch.”

Every morning, Shipetko received the therapy at the Sanya Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, then spent the rest of the day bathing in the sun.

“It is great,” she told Xinhua through an interpreter. “No pills, no injections, but I feel much better.”

Shipetko is one of tens of thousands of Russians who flock to Hainan every year. The island province has received 800,000 Russian tourists in the past seven years.

Almost 80 percent of them tried some form of traditional Chinese therapy during their stay — either to treat a particular ailment or simply for wellness, health authorities said.

Rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, traditional Chinese medicine, also called TCM, has in recent years gained popularity in a world dominated by modern Western medicine.

Clinics have proliferated outside of China, but many face challenges such as getting herbs across the border or luring experienced professionals to work overseas.

As a result, more foreigners are coming to China for TCM treatment or therapy.

The boom is particularly felt in Sanya, where Russian-language advertisements for acupuncture pop up across the city.

Global flow

International medical tourism became popular in the mid-20th century with wealthy European and North American patients traveling abroad for cosmetic surgery spree.

In the markets that first responded to the demand, such as Brazil, South Africa, and Costa Rica, a variety of modestly priced procedures were offered.

The sector flourished with the rise of quality health care, commercial aviation, and the

internet. It is now a multibillion-dollar industry.

US-based industry resource company Patients Beyond Borders estimates that between 9.8 million and 14.8 million patients visited overseas hospitals and clinics in 2016.

People are tempted by lower costs, quality care, improved patient experience, specialty treatments, and the lure of “the new and different,” according to the company.

It said that in 2013 alone, more than 900,000 US nationals headed overseas for “nearly every imaginable type” of medical treatment: weight loss surgery in Mexico, heart valve replacements in Thailand, hip resurfacing and traditional treatments such as Ayurveda in India, and fertility treatments in Israel.

In Asia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea are the rising stars, drawing a great majority of patients within the region.

“We see a rising market in China,” said Patients Beyond Borders CEO Josef Woodman in an email.

He said China can successfully compete with mature markets in the region, as it is strong in TCM treatment and its health care infrastructure is improving fast.

Cups, needles, more

Acupuncture, cupping, *tui na* massage, and herbal medicine are some of the best-known TCM treatments overseas, but TCM master Professor Hu Kaiwen believes the ancient healing system has even more to offer.

Hu, president of Dongfang Hospital in downtown Beijing, is a veteran oncologist who specializes in integrating TCM with conventional Western medicine to treat advanced tumor patients.

While Western medicine sees cancer as abnormal cells to be annihilated, TCM considers the ailment a sign of imbalance of body and mind and prioritizes restoring balance rather than annihilation.

Hu said one Chinese philosophical saying applies: “Going beyond the limit is as bad as falling short.”

His therapy combines minimally invasive surgery with post-surgery TCM care. It offers an alternative to patients who do not respond well to chemotherapy or radiation.

Hu said the herbs can work



Two boys from Russia enjoy the traditional Chinese medicine therapy including acupuncture and massage in Haikou, Hainan province. ZHAO YINGQUAN / XINHUA

80 percent

share of the Russian tourists to Hainan island that have tried the traditional Chinese therapy during their stay

just as well to lengthen the lifespan and improve quality of life, but cost only a fraction of costly targeted Western drugs.

Wang Tiansong, president of the Sanya Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, said foreign patients with cerebral palsy and strokes have also responded well to TCM treatment.

Last year, the Beijing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine set up a Chinese medicine center in St. Petersburg as an outpost.

“TCM is centered around being green and natural, making it compatible with Russians’ passion for nature,” said the center’s Chinese director Wang Chaoyang.

Infra, promotion

Hainan is not the only tourism hot spot where foreign medical travelers swarm.

In China’s northwestern Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the Russians are joined by Kazakhs and other Central Asians from across the border.

At the Sixth Affiliated Hos-



A group of Russian tourists visit the Nanshan Buddhism cultural resort in Sanya, Hainan province, in November 2012. CHEN WENWU / FOR CHINA DAILY

pital of Xinjiang Medical University in Urumqi, signs are written in three languages — Chinese, Uygur and Russian. About 80 foreigners sought treatment in the first three months after the hospital opened its international department.

Wu Yue, a top hospital official, said the demand from across the border is so strong that the hospital plans to start building an Asian Orthopedic Center.

These developments have been incorporated into the Belt and Road Initiative the Chinese leadership proposed in 2013. Xinjiang has positioned itself as a regional hub that offers services to the

Lecheng, nation’s Amazon, rides policy support toward healthcare projects

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The scenery around Lecheng, a small town 6 kilometers away from the site of the Boao Forum for Asia on tropical Hainan Island, is changing daily as it is turned into an international pilot zone for medical tourism, an industry which is expected to bring in \$678 billion in 2017 world-wide.

About 90 kilometers from Haikou, the capital city of Hainan province, Lecheng, with its 700-year history, was chosen in 2013 as the location for a future world-class medical tourism center.

“All the projects in the the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, the only one in the country, have been designed to sit in an area of about 20 square kilometers, on both banks of the Wanquan River. This area has been nicknamed China’s Amazon and encircles Lecheng island with lush tropical scenery,” said Lin Ping, deputy director of the zone’s administration office.

Equipped with state-of-the-



Foreigners enjoy the beach and sunshine in Sanya, which is seeing steady growth in overseas visitors. YANG GUANYU / XINHUA

art facilities and served by a cluster of high-end medical professionals, the zone will cater to patients from around the country and overseas, Lin said.

More than 483,000 Chinese went abroad for overseas healthcare and leisure, health checkups and other medical services in 2015.

To support development of the pilot zone, the central government has offered a number of preferential policies under which foreign companies will be able to set up medical orga-

nizations in the zone and foreign doctors will be allowed to practice there for up to three years.

“A total of 27 projects have been completed or are under construction, attracting an investment of 22.8 billion yuan (\$3.3 billion). The main businesses of these projects involve treatment of tumors, plastic surgery, anti-aging services, leading-edge medical technology research, such as stem cells, health management and rehabilitation,” said Lin.

He said another 36 projects have passed medical technology appraisals and in total the administration office has talked with developers of 92 high-end medical and healthcare projects, with a potential total investment of 60 billion yuan.

“When all the projects are completed in about five years, the pilot zone will be able to receive 5 million tourists a year. Output value of the services will amount to 80 to 100 billion yuan,” said Lin.

Geng Songtao, a professor of tourism with Haikou-based Hainan University, believes that the pilot zone has many advantages that will help with the development of its medical tourism industry. He suggested that the zone makes good use of the preferential policies and produces an exquisite top-down design for the zone’s development.

Hainan, once a key stop on the ancient Maritime Silk Road and now building itself into an international tourism destination, plans to be an all-in-one international demonstration zone for Chinese traditional medicine tourism by 2020.

region, including health care.

Meanwhile, Hainan, once a key stop on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, is already being marketed as an international tourist island.

Investors have now set their eyes on medical infrastructure.

A public-private partnership cancer hospital, which cost 2.9 billion yuan (\$426 million), opened last year in Hainan’s capital city of Haikou. Equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and 1,200 beds, the hospital mainly targets wealthy treatment seekers from outside the province.

China’s State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine and the National Development and Reform Commission late last year set a target to build 10 TCM health tourism model zones offering medical treatment, wellness, recuperation, and elder care by 2020.

Woodman said China is on the path to establishing quality health care infrastructure. In 2007, there were only three Chinese medical centers accredited by the Joint Commission International, while today there are more than 77.

The next step, he said, will be to work toward promoting China as a medical tourism destination by working with the travel and economic development sectors.

Some have sensed the business opportunity.

Russian national Yana recently quit her tour guide job to join the Sanya Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine as a marketing officer.

Yana, who has been a tour guide in Sanya for 12 years, said her new job is promising.

“A lot of my Russian clients know about TCM and are interested in coming over,” she said.

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