

# Iran's medical tourism combines quality healthcare with rich cultural, religious experiences



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**EXCLUSIVE**

*Medical tourism refers to the travel of individuals to other countries to receive medical, dental, or health services. This sector has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the global tourism industry, driven by increasing treatment costs in developed countries and advancements in medical technologies in developing nations. Beyond enhancing individual health, medical tourism also contributes significantly to the economy of the host country.*

*Iran, with its team of experienced doctors, advanced medical equipment, and cost-effective healthcare services, has secured a prominent position in the global health tourism landscape. The country has become a popular destination for patients seeking high-quality medical treatments at lower costs compared to Western countries.*

*With the development of specialized treatment centers offering a wide range of services across various medical fields, Iran is recognized as a leading health tourism hub regionally and worldwide. Iranian medical and healthcare facilities operate in areas such as cosmetic surgery, dentistry, ophthalmology, cardiology, organ transplants, and infertility treatments, providing a comprehensive spectrum of medical services.*

*This diversity attracts patients from around the world with different needs who wish to benefit from treatments tailored to their specific requirements. One of the most significant advantages of medical tourism in Iran is its affordability; many procedures that are prohibitively expensive elsewhere are offered here at much more accessible rates. This economic benefit has made Iran an appealing destination for those seeking high-quality healthcare at lower costs.*



Dr. Farzaneh Ghasemzadeh



Furthermore, Iranian healthcare providers and hospitals adhere to international standards, employing trained specialists and delivering reliable, high-quality services. This commitment to quality has earned the trust of both domestic and international patients, establishing Iran as a top destination in medical tourism. Another key point is Iran's utilization of modern medical technologies. Digital equipment and innovative treatment methods keep the country competitive on the international stage and attract patients seeking advanced treatments.

In addition to healthcare, Iran offers rich cultural, historical, and religious attractions, including renowned pilgrimage sites. Patients have the opportunity to enjoy a blend of medical care and cultural

and religious experiences during their stay, making Iran a unique and attractive destination for health tourism.

In an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, Dr. Farzaneh Ghasemzadeh, chairperson of an eye hospital in Mashhad, said that the health tourists visiting the hospital come from many countries around the world, including Europe and Arab countries. Europeans are divided into two groups: first, Iranians living in Europe, and second, native Europeans who are in Mashhad for various reasons. Additionally, some of these patients are dual nationals from Afghanistan, coming from Germany or other European countries.

She emphasized that most health tourists in Mashhad are from Persian Gulf countries, Arab nations, as well as Turkmenistan, Ta-

jikistan, and Afghanistan. Ghasemzadeh continued that the specialized ophthalmology hospital under his management is one of the most equipped hospitals in the eastern part of the country. However, the fees charged to patients are lower than many countries, including private hospitals in Iraq. She also mentioned that the quality of services and the human resources currently working in this field in Iran, especially in Mashhad, are unmatched anywhere else in the world.

The ophthalmologist spoke about how to attract foreign health tourists to Mashhad, saying that this is usually done through tour leaders and interpreters coordinating travel tours. The system in Iran has not yet been developed enough for travel agencies to actively and extensively attract tourists in this sector. Approximately 80 to 90 percent of patients come through tour leaders and interpreters, while the remaining 10 to 20 percent are those who speak English themselves.

"In fact, most of the patients coming to Mashhad are Shia Muslims traveling for both pilgrimage and treatment."

Dr. Ghasemzadeh discussed the issues and challenges that need to be addressed to increase the number of tourists seeking treatment in Iran. She said, "Medical tourism is itself a science and an independent field. When implementing medical tourism, all stages must be managed from start to finish. It's not just about

the medical aspect; other factors are also important." "For example, Turkey currently leads the world in medical tourism because for example after heart surgeries, patients can stay on beautiful islands there, find hotels, and these places are recognized as rehabilitation and relaxation hubs. The main issue is having a comprehensive medical tourism package that includes flights, accommodation, pre- and post-treatment proce-

Even flight bookings and appointment scheduling are managed by them.

"After providing medical services to the tourists, when they leave, if they are able to return, we follow up with them. If they can come back after some time, that's excellent — the return time depends on the type of illness and the services they received. If they cannot return, we provide all their documents and also send an explanation to their doctor, saying they should definitely consult a physician in their home country with these documents."

"We have a long way to go," she emphasized, noting that the ministries of foreign affairs and health must cooperate and coordinate with the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Ministry in this field. Because, if managed properly, medical tourism can bring immense wealth to the country if it is given the proper attention," she concluded.

Deputy Head of Khorasan Razavi Province's Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization for Tourism Affairs, Yousef Bidkhori, said earlier that



dures, post-surgery care, and even conditions for being in a healthy and suitable environment so patients do not get infected and maintain their health."

She said that in Iran, most of these activities are carried out in a traditional and unorganized manner. For example, there are no specific or comprehensive packages. Instead, tour leaders handle these tasks. Some leaders, with limited training, arrange packages such as hotel reservations, hiring drivers, and selecting doctors.

59 hospitals and medical centers in Mashhad have received IPD permits (licenses granted to establish an International Patient Department) from the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, to accept medical tourists.

He added that the Tourism Department of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has issued medical tourism permits to various travel agencies and service providers. These agencies, many of which are based abroad — par-



ticularly in Afghanistan — help facilitate the process for medical tourists. Patients can register with these companies, book appointments, follow their treatment plans, and receive care at authorized hospitals. Post-treatment services are also available if needed.

Bidkhori noted, "A plan to develop and implement a software system for managing medical tourism — initially piloted in Khorasan Razavi Province — will be expanded at the national level in the near future."

He emphasized that "delegating hospital coordination to private sector providers while maintaining regulatory oversight would ensure patients

leave satisfied and can easily pursue follow-up care in their home countries, thereby significantly improving healthcare quality."

Mashhad, hosting the holy shrine of Imam Reza (PBUH), is not only a religious tourism hub but also a prominent center for medical tourism. The city boasts highly capable specialized hospitals offering a wide range of services — from heart surgery and complex medical treatments to cosmetic procedures and infertility treatments. Several private hospitals excel in ophthalmology with advanced facilities, making Mashhad a key destination for diverse medical needs.

