

NIP AND TUCK TOURISM IN COLOMBIA

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BOGOTA, COLOMBIA -- It's normal to return from vacation with a deep tan, but what about coming home with bigger breasts, a newly sculpted nose, a nip and tuck and some wrinkle removal.

Vacations promising such corporeal transformations are being promoted by travel agents and plastic surgeons in Colombia, one of those countries along with Venezuela and Brazil where there's no shame in taking your body in for alterations.

"I was unhappy with my breast size and had gained a lot of weight," said Mauikai Gold, a 21-year-old from Miami who recently travelled to Colombia for cosmetic surgery.

She'd done her homework first, consulting friends and a half-dozen local doctors as well as beauticians at her favourite salon before choosing a plastic surgeon.

Next stop, Bogota.

Gold, who works in show business, writing songs and acting, lost 56 pounds to liposuction, added to her chest and got her nose fixed, she said in a telephone interview.

Total cost: about \$9,300.

The ethnic Cuban had inquired as to the cost of having similar work done in the United States before opting for Colombia and calculated that she would have paid from \$29,000 to \$35,000 to have it done at home.

Add the quality reputation of Colombian medicine to the savings and you've got a good product to promote, according to travel agents and doctors in this Andean capital.

It doesn't hurt that this South American nation is enjoying a tourist boom that brought more than a million visitors to the country last year for the first time in two decades, according to the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism.

"Of all those people coming to Colombia, at least 3 per cent come to get medical treatment, said Antonio Crespo, head of the Colombia Tours Solutions travel agency. In 2004, he said about 21,000 people came for surgery and in 2005, about 30,000.

Colombia Tours Solutions arranges travel logistics for tourists coming for plastic surgery.

"We help with the hotels, transport, if they need plane tickets we can help with that," said Crespo.

"Surgery packages" include medical procedures, nursing, post-operative treatment, travel insurance, transport, hotel, a tourist guide and air tickets.

It's not just Bogota, but also the Colombian cities of Cali, Armenia and Medellin that get many patients from abroad.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons cautions that there are risks to having surgery abroad. "Patients may take unnecessary risks, when choosing cosmetic surgery vacations, by unknowingly selecting unqualified physicians and having procedures performed in non-accredited surgical facilities," the organization states in a briefing paper on the issue.

The organization also says that vacation activity and post-surgery healing don't mix, unequivocally warning: "Patients should not sunbathe, drink alcohol, swim/snorkel, water ski/jet ski, parasail, take extensive tours (walking or bus), or exercise after surgery." The ASPS also recommends waiting five to 10 days, depending on the procedure, before taking a flight after surgery.

No official statistics exist on the number of tourists who visit Colombia on image improvement excursions. But plastic surgeon Andres Mejia says that for cities like Cali the volume is huge.

Colombia's reputation as a budding destination for plastic surgery got a nice kick from news last year that the Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona, who had become obese, slimmed down after stomach-stapling surgery in Cartagena, the country's Caribbean coastal gem.

"Maradona is an international hero and the whole world was very sad for him and now look at him, surgery changed his life. It's attracting lots more people," said Mejia.

Source: Globeandmail.com