

*Enticed by cut-price plastic surgery, Australian women are flying to Thailand for “mummy makeovers”. But are these sun-and-surgery holidays really a passport to bodily perfection? By Meredith Nash.*



# FOREIGN BODIES



Phuket – it’s 2pm and Patong Beach is choked with tourists baking in the midday heat of Thailand’s southern islands. Cocoa-battered women sip mai tais while “lady boys” parade around Bangla Road. A massage? About \$5. You pay extra for a “happy ending”.

Far removed from Patong’s sweat, sun and sex, I’m standing in the cramped quarters of the nurses’ change room in the basement of Phuket International Hospital. Swimming in oversized blue scrubs, my ensemble is complemented by a surgical mask, cap and a pair of plastic sandals, borrowed from a communal pile near the door.

Ushered through the swinging steel doors of the operating theatre, my eyes adjust to the surgical lights and stifling heat as a small man, standing on a footstool, repeatedly jabs at a pair of disembodied breasts with an instrument shaped like a shoehorn, designed to make space for the silicone that will soon sit underneath the woman’s chest muscles.

I’m not sure if my jaw is open so wide because of the bowl of bloody instruments, or because the scrub nurse is reading text messages while the anaesthetist watches TV in the corner. Only then does it occur to me that the patient, a 38-year-old mother-of-two from Perth who had been topless in the consultation room an hour earlier, lamenting that she couldn’t fill out a bra, will emerge from her surgery with breasts that will no longer be “real”, but will be big. Really big.

It’s not every day you meet a mum who chooses to combine sun and sand with breast implants and Botox. Coined by a Los Angeles plastic surgeon in 2004, the “mummy makeover” – a trifecta of breast surgery, tummy tuck and liposuction – has become the quickest way for Australian women mourning the loss of their pre-pregnancy figures to erase evidence of childbearing from their bodies.

The doctors *Sunday Life* interviewed estimate nearly 4000 Aussie women jetted off to Asian destinations last year, only to return and say, “What baby body?”

Destiny MediTravel offers a range of customised overseas surgical holiday packages for less than the price of breast implants in Australia. From about \$11,000, post-baby mums can have breast augmentation and a tummy tuck, including return airfares and 14 nights’ accommodation in a resort in Phuket. Gorgeous Getaways, another medical travel agency, even provides the option of 24-hour babysitting for patients with young children.

Phuket International Hospital has an entire wing devoted to plastic surgery for medical tourists. Opened in November 2007, with the sleek furniture and lush floral arrangements of a boutique hotel, the hospital offers a range of rooms and VIP suites with flat-screen TVs and views of manicured gardens. The tiled floor is so clean I can see my reflection.

Photographs cover the clinic walls – Caucasian women with immovable faces, blindingly white teeth and contoured bellies – and for a few minutes I almost forget I’m outside Australia. It’s only when I take a

wrong turn that I find myself in the public ward, 40 degrees hot and packed with “real” people.

Following the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the Thai Government saw dollar signs in medical tourism and the influx of foreign money has helped prop up a flagging economy. Unfortunately, Thailand’s once-strong public health system has since suffered from acute doctor shortages – skilled Thai surgeons can earn three times as much in the private sector sucking fat from foreigners as they can treating the local sick. According to Kasikorn Research, the Thai medical tourism industry is worth a staggering \$2 billion.

Despite a system seemingly on the brink of collapse, the Public Health Ministry appears to have done little to deal with this situation. President of the Consumer Foundation in Bangkok, Saree Ongsomwand, has criticised what she calls this “go-for-foreigners” trend. Claiming that the “number of doctors is already insufficient” compared to the population, she says medical tourism “can’t fail to have an effect on the quality of our medical services”.

Undeniably, the faces around me in the clinic all look pretty much like mine. In a sea of women, two blokes in blue singlets and beat-up thongs shift in their chairs, thumbing restlessly through plastic-surgery magazines as they wait for their wives.

The waiting room is its own cultural microcosm. Newly arrived patients get the low-down from three stay-at-home Sydney mums booked in for a slew of procedures: tummy tucks, lipo, boob jobs, eye lifts, collagen injections. “Speak slowly with those Thai nurses. If they don’t understand, demand to see a doctor.” “You’re rough as guts the first three days. If you don’t move too much, you’ll be right.” “Pay for your surgery in baht. They’ll screw you on the exchange.” Fascinated with their hints for navigating the medical system, I wonder why these women are having surgery in the first place.

“When I lay down, my breasts flopped to the side. In fact, everything was floppy,” says Tanya Barnes, 36, a Sydney mother of two. She says she and her husband spent months researching her surgery before booking her trip. “I’m not trying to be the hottest mum on the block. I just feel like this is a lifestyle choice.”

Cutting down on the lattes is a lifestyle choice, but when did plastic surgery become one? It’s a long way from the 1970s, when women talked about their birthing bodies with curiosity and pride. Or when jelly bellies, droopy breasts and stretch marks were viewed as badges of honour and not of loss. Now, the pressure to be a yummy mummy has extended far beyond worrying about the gym and dieting.

Cheap surgical packages in Thailand, along with direct flights from Australia to Phuket, have made post-birth surgery a reality for women who have given up on exercise. Barnes is adamant that she tried to “feel the burn”, even hiring a personal trainer, but says, “the spare tyre wouldn’t budge”. Is it any

surprise a plastic-surgery holiday – offering what is popularly referred to as “Western care at Third World prices” – is driving this industry?

Medical tourism is not just limited to cosmetic surgery. As countries like the US and Australia find themselves with overburdened medical systems and long waiting times for surgery, travelling overseas makes sense: heart bypasses, hip replacements, spinal surgeries and even fertility treatments can be done quickly and for one-third of the cost of the same procedure at home. According to a report

## “Australian women all want breast implants post-baby... They order surgeries like they are ordering food.”

by the Deloitte Centre for Health Solutions, the medical-tourism market is set to explode in the next three to five years, with about 10 million US patients alone expected to seek treatment abroad by 2012.

You don’t even have to book the surgery yourself. Through her popular website, Destiny MediTravel director Melanie Bawden arranges accommodation, air travel, tours and anything else her clients – mostly Australian women – may desire while overseas. “We receive between 15 and 20 requests for mummy makeovers each month,” she says.

“Australian women always want the big ones,” says Dr Rushapol Sandawat, 39, as we discuss the business of post-birth breast augmentation. “Surgery here is less than half the price than in Australia, even with the airfare and hotel,” he says. “No one can compete. Australian women all want breast implants post-baby. It is the most common surgery. Body contouring and tummy tucks come next.”

Sandawat says breastfeeding is the primary reason. But before I can mention an American study that claims to debunk the perception that breastfeeding causes sagging breasts, the Perth mum enters the room for her first consultation. “I’d like a decent, balanced set of boobs. I’m sick of padded bras. After breastfeeding, everything is saggy around the edges. I don’t have a negative body image; I see room for improvement.”

Sandawat marks her breasts with black texta and pulls her nipples in every direction. “I can tell you are very adaptive. I will only choose the best implants in the world. Everything will be guaranteed.”

So convincing and charming is Sandawat, the mum doesn’t ask one question about the risks. However, she does point out “if something goes wrong back home, our doctors get to fix their own problems without anyone noticing. If a patient comes to them from overseas surgery, they can say, ‘I told you so.’”

In a 2007 survey, the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons noted that two-thirds of their members

had repaired botched overseas operations, ranging from infected implants and lopsided tummy tucks to deformed nipples. Australian blogs and cosmetic surgery forums are filled with horror stories of leaking implants and thousands of dollars spent on skin grafts and corrective surgeries. One 47-year-old Sydney woman who booked her procedures through a medical travel agency spent \$10,000 and was off work for a year following a botched breast augmentation done in Malaysia.

It seems one of the biggest issues with post-baby

surgery holidays is that women generally only spend between 12 and 14 days overseas before returning home. Although appropriate recovery time depends on the nature of the procedure, overseas-surgery patients risk developing infection, scarring, blood clots from air travel and even partial paralysis if they’re not provided with appropriate post-operative care.

Behind closed doors, Sandawat agrees. “To speak frankly, this is not enough time at all. Many times we [surgeons] do not want to do the surgery, but the patient wants it. Sometimes it seems they order surgeries like they are ordering food.”

For the Perth mum, tall and slender her entire life, surgery is a way to feel good about her breasts, which no amount of exercise, pills or dieting could fix. “I never felt pressure to look like Angelina Jolie – I am naturally slim. I just have a need for fuller breasts.”

And fuller they are. I find her three days later in the hospital waiting room in a yellow boob tube, her body unlike the one I saw pre-surgery. With 10 days left on her holiday, she’s going to sit by the pool and bask in the sun, enjoying her new breasts, her surgery the perfect accessory to a golden tan. ●

### THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

**Mummy makeover:** \$12,650 for breast augmentation and tummy tuck, plus airfares, transfers and accommodation in Phuket, Thailand.

#### BREASTS

**Thailand:** \$4000+

**Australia:** \$10,500+

#### LIPOSUCTION

**Thailand:** \$5400+

**Australia:** \$14,000+

#### BOTOX

**Thailand:** \$210+

**Australia:** \$600+



Sources: Cosmetic Surgery Institute of Australia; Department of Health and Ageing; Gorgeous Getaways; Surgical Services International; Destiny MediTravel.