

From hospitals to hospitality

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Whether the patient is recovering from a serious heart surgery or simply enjoying a rejuvenating massage, health tourism (also known as medical tourism) accords the patient the pampering absent even from the world's most advanced hospitals.

In his interview with the *Asian Journal*, Tourism Secretary Ace Durano revealed, "We have all the natural ingredients to be a great tourist destination and to be a serious player in this industry" from the quality of medical services to the scenic tourist spots in the country.

Bright spot
Health tourism is considered a bright spot for the Philippine economy amid this year's predicted slowdown.



Philippine health and wellness tourism providers gather with Department of Tourism's Secretary Joseph Ace Durano (4th from left) and Undersecretary Cynthia Carrion (5th from left) at the first day of the World Health Tourism Congress. Shown together with them are some of the members of the Philippine delegation (1st row from L-R) Joyce Alumno (HIM Communications), Samie Lim (PCCI), Ruy Moreno (PPP Task Force), Dr. Sam Bernal (The Medical City), Asst. Elmer Punzalan (Dept. of Health), Dr. Dante Dator (NNTI), Alma Jimenez (St. Cabrini), Dr. Anthony Calibo (DOH). Second row: Dir. Cynthia Lazo (DOT), Ebong Yumul (Makati Medical), Carmina Desales (Capitol Medical), Andre Villanueva (Makati Medical), and Lara Santos (Health & Leisure).
Photo Courtesy of DOT

In 2008, for instance, 100,000 foreign patients with an estimated spending power of US\$350 million sought either medical or cosmetic treatment in the Philippines. Patients from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East often save 50 to 70 percent on their expenses.

And even as the costs of airfare and accommodation are added to the hospital bill, the expenses incurred are still very minimal. The

average cost of seeking treatment in destinations like the Philippines ranges from \$20,000 to \$70,000, a far cry from the price of medical treatment in the West.

Patients avail of the most innovative procedures in the country at a fraction of the price, and this, at the same time, boosts the Philippines' medical and tourism sectors.

Durano predicts that in five to 10 years, the industry will be "ten times bigger than what it is today."

"[Health tourism] just requires a little push and the moment it gains momentum, it will have a life of its own," he added.

Tourism Usec. Cynthia Carrion also shared her forecast, "If we continue what we started, by 2012, we'll have as much as \$3 billion."

The world's best
Health tourism places Philippine medical and cosmetic treatment on equal footing with the world's best. The 4th World Health Tourism Congress, which was recently hosted by the Philippines, steers the country in the right direction.

"It's just one of those sectors where we have that natural competitiveness," Durano said.

Filipinos, after all, comprise the

thousands of health care professionals working all over the world. The Philippines is proving it is indeed a force to reckon with. The country's top hospitals and wellness clinics converged with international medical tourism providers to address patients' hospital and travel needs.

Nurturing, healing

Other Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Thailand have made their mark as pioneers in the industry, since the advent of medical tourism in the late 90s.

It is, however, the nurturing character of the Pinoy that carves out the Philippines' niche in the global health tourism market. The Filipino culture of nurturance, according to Durano, "humanizes medicine."

Carrion also believes the Filipino idea of wellness is holistic and spiritual.

"When a Filipino massages you with the *hilot*, it's not only a relaxing massage, it's also therapeutic. It's healing you," she explained.

"They come here and after vacationing they come back and they look younger," Carrion added.

Beyond the usual postcard idea of relaxing in a tropical destination, health tourism sets foreign patients and *balikbayans* on the road to wellness faster, as the experience is immersed in the nurturance and prayerfulness of Filipinos.

And as the undersecretary pointed out, "We have to let the world know about it." ■

US home price drops set records in January

Widely watched index shows largest decline since it started in 2000

WASHINGTON — Home prices sank by the sharpest annual rate on record in January, and the pace continues to accelerate, but there were a handful of battered metro areas where price declines slowed, according to data released Tuesday, March 31.

The Standard & Poor's/Case-Shiller index of home prices in 20 major cities tumbled by a record 19 percent from January 2008. It was the largest decline since the index started in 2000. The 10-city index dropped 19.4 percent, also a new record.

All 20 cities in the report showed monthly and annual price declines, with 13 posting new annual records. Prices dropped by more than 10 percent in 14 cities. Faring better were Dallas, Denver and Cleveland, with annual price declines of around 5 percent.

"There are very few bright spots that one can see in the data," David Blitzer, chairman of S&P's index committee, said in a prepared statement. "Most of the nation appears to remain on a downward path."

In the Cleveland, Los Angeles,

Las Vegas and Washington DC metro areas—all ravaged by foreclosures—annual price declines eased somewhat. Meanwhile, six cities, including Minneapolis, Charlotte, Seattle and New York, showed smaller price declines in January compared with December.

Last week, the National Association of Realtors said sales of previously occupied homes unexpectedly jumped in February by the largest amount in nearly six years as first-time buyers took advantage of deep discounts on foreclosures and other distressed properties. Some economists say that could help moderate declines.

"We still think there is a good chance the rate of (price) decline will slow through the spring as existing home sales stabilize and perhaps pick up a bit, but foreclosures are weighing heavily on prices," wrote Ian Shepherdson, chief US economist at High Frequency Economics.

Prices in the 20-city index have plummeted 29 percent from their peak in summer 2006, while the 10-city index has fallen 30 percent. Prices have sunk back to levels not seen since late 2003, and analysts say the ultimate drop in prices could easily be 35 percent or greater in some metros.

To provide some relief, Congress in February passed a new \$8,000 tax credit for first-time homebuyers and President Barack Obama is directing \$75 billion to a new foreclosure prevention plan. But the success of those efforts could well depend on how far the US economy falls.

Some slivers of hope about the economy buoyed consumers in March and consumer confidence crept upward for the first time in four months, the Conference Board said Tuesday, March 31.

"We have seen some signs of improvement in the economy, but they are subtle," said Bernard Baumohl, chief global economist at the Economic Outlook Group. (AP)

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