Operating in Eden: cosmetic surgery tourism and the politics of public and private medicine in Costa Rica

Abstract

This dissertation offers an ethnographic account of North Americans' journeys to Costa Rica to undergo cosmetic surgery. I situate Costa Rica's booming medical tourism industry in a confluence of historical, economic and cultural conditions, through which Costa Rica is made attractive to North Americans, a regime of private sector expansion and state contraction is promoted, and the national medical program on which most Costa Ricans rely is transformed. In focusing on the everyday practices of patients, clinicians and workers at recuperation facilities, I consider how the desires and practices of middle class North Americans are intertwined with uncertainties about health care access and national identity in Costa Rica. The ethnography is organized around three sets of spaces through which medical tourists and their caretakers pass. The first includes popular media and web forums, where specific imaginaries of Costa Rica are produced, medical travelers are mobilized, and cosmetic surgery is normalized as a technology of self-improvement. The second is the...
Politics, government, and taxation. Costa Rica differed from other Spanish colonies in that it never developed a system of large land holdings. Agricultural production was limited to the size of families, and the distribution of land and other resources was relatively equal. The amount that industry contributes to GDP in Costa Rica is average for Latin America but is low when compared to that of East Asia (44 percent of GDP), the Arab nations (40 percent of GDP), and Eastern Europe (35 percent). However, it has become an area of aggressive growth through government stimulus. Costa Rica is also an important producer of sugar. Yearly export volumes average 130,000 metric tons per year, with revenues of US$39 million. Medical facilities in Costa Rica are on par with some of the best in the world. If they were not so, the country would not attract medical tourists who are used to the best. The hospitals and clinics compare favorably with the facilities in Canada and the US. The peak tourist season is from December to April when temperatures are comfortable and the weather is dry.

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