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A wider perspective

Dr A. Michael Briner MBBS, FRANZCO, FRACS

Dr A. Michael Briner discusses his experience of study tours in four very different countries and why he finds these trips so rewarding.

Having attended study tours in India, China, Japan and South Africa over the last four years, I have learnt that, while each destination offers a very different experience, there are common threads, too. First and foremost, the concept – having cultural and professional visits and talks in a destination spanning both urban and rural conurbations. The contrasts in one country can be astonishing – within days you can visit a clinic lit by a single naked light bulb with peeling paint on the walls, and then a medical school that rivals the best in the world. This format gives you a much more balanced view, highlighting contrasts between the private and public sector as well as available resources due to geography.

Going on different tours also allows one to compare and contrast hospital services, registrar training, equipment, treatment of outpatients, etc. in different countries. For example, Japan has a very high ratio of ancillary staff to doctors – higher than Australia. They also often keep patients in for two days after cataract surgery as standard practice, compared to the usual day surgery in Australia. In other countries, patients are not seen the day after surgery at all but are simply contacted by ancillary medical staff. In China, a particular problem is horrific eye injuries from exploding fireworks. In India, there are extraordinary grass roots organisations that provide surgery for all castes, free of charge if necessary, which is quite literally life saving – if you can't see, you can't work and, because of India's social structure, if you can't work, you die.

Although each country is so different, we always received a warm welcome. We also came away with a much deeper understanding of the societal and cultural issues in each country. South Africa stood out because of its medical expertise, its



Tori Shrine near Hiroshima, Japan



Taj Mahal at dawn, Uttar Pradesh, India

social history, spectacular scenery and wildlife. Socially, however, it has a very different feel to, say, Japan with its impeccable manners, high levels of organisation, cleanliness and relative socio-economic homogeneity.

Another great advantage is the ability to mix with peers – both within the group and in different countries. The tours attract a range of professions, including ophthalmologists, optometrists and anaesthetists, and it's always fascinating to compare notes.

Finally, the superb guides and the tour leaders must be mentioned. Highly respected experts in their own field, they bring not only their professional knowledge to the tours, but their



Tawny lion, South Africa

humanity and (in the case of Harminder Dua) lovely poetry!

Overall, I have to say that my experience of study tours has widened my perspective immeasurably, helping me to better understand not just the eye healthcare of these countries, but also the people and cultures.

Dr Briner travelled with Jon Baines Tours. For more information about upcoming tours visit
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