

Revitalization in Istanbul: Probing Cosmetic Surgery Tourism as a Form of Pilgrimage

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Drawing on anthropological research on the beauty and cosmetic surgery sector in Istanbul, my paper explores the conjunctures of pilgrimage and tourism, namely cosmetic surgery tourism to Istanbul. With an estimated total of over 1,000 plastic and aesthetic surgeons, Turkey recently ranked among the top ten of countries worldwide with the highest number of plastic surgeons per capita, and its cultural capital Istanbul has become a regional centre for cosmetic surgery tourists from the Middle East and its diaspora in Western Europe. As analyzed by Holliday et al. (2015), the cosmetic surgery tourist experience is intricately linked with notions of space, place and travel. In the case of Istanbul, promotional materials targeting international consumers/patients advertise with ‘revitalization’ and ‘healing’ in the context of a beautifying global city. Prospective consumers/patients are also attracted by an image of Istanbul shaped by Turkish media productions, namely “soaps,” transported into the wider Middle East. Within an age of body-centered consumerism, does the movement towards a center of healing and beautification constitute a pilgrimage? How to define this form of movement with its recreational, diversionary, experiential and existential aspects, to employ Cohen's famous typology, all clearly involved?