

Will Travel for Baby Blues

An obscure cosmetic surgery has patients trekking halfway around the world to change their eye color

BY NICOLE PAJER

Joana Couto has always loved her grandmother's green eyes. "Since I was a child, every time I'd visit her I'd just be mesmerized by them," she says. "I wished I had her eyes." And on November 15, the 32-year-old made her dream a reality when she flew to India to have artificial green irises surgically implanted.

In the past, the naturally brown-eyed Londoner experimented with colored contacts, but had found the shades of green too Halloween-ish and the process of popping a lens over her cornea too uncomfortable. Desperate for a solution, she scoured the web for ways to permanently alter her eye color. Finally, she stumbled on a story about R&B singer Tameka "Tiny" Harris, who had her eyes surgically changed to "ice gray" by a company called BrightOcular. "I thought, 'Wow,'" says Couto. "It's actually possible." She immediately picked up the phone and made an appointment.

Since the first BrightOcular iris implant surgery in 2010, it has been performed over 3,000 times. The average cost of the procedure is \$6,500, and in addition to India, the surgeries are currently offered in 14 countries around the globe. The most popular colors chosen by patients include ice gray and Couto's choice of olive green.

While the BrightOcular implants are a U.S. design, the FDA has yet to approve the procedure domestically—with case-by-case exceptions for certain eye complications like iris abnormalities—and the technology is currently undergoing the approval process for a CE mark in Europe. Spencer Vessa, a rep for the company, says they hope to commence trials with U.S. ophthalmologists in the next two to three years. But until then, patients seeking the elective surgery are flocking overseas to places like India, South Africa, and Latin America.

On November 16, Couto landed in New Delhi and met with her surgeon, Dr. Udbhav Dorwal, MBBS, DNB, who performed a series of tests to confirm she was a viable candidate for the procedure. "We have to make sure there are no diseases in the eye and that there is enough space over the iris for us to put in the implant," explains Dorwal, who notes that "not every eye can accept the implants." Couto was sent back to her hotel with antibiotic

eye drops to prepare herself for the operation. Four days later, she arrived at IBS Hospital for her operation.

The procedure was done using topical anesthesia, with Couto lying down on the operating table. Dorwal made a 2.8mm incision into each cornea and, using an injector, implanted folded artificial irises made of medical-grade silicon. "The entire process took 30 minutes, about 15 minutes per eye," says Couto. An hour later, she was back at the Eros Hotel New Delhi ordering a Caesar salad from room service. The only restrictions were to avoid getting water in her eyes and to administer a series of drops until the incisions healed properly over the next three to four weeks.

Four days after the surgery, Couto is back in London, eager to show off her new emerald features. "You probably think I'm crazy for doing this," she says, as our Skype video chat loads. "But I'm really happy with it. It completely changed my face. I think it just looks so much better!" The Portuguese entrepreneur was experiencing post-surgery blurriness in her left eye, but Dorwal had reassured her that this was a normal part of the recovery and it has since resolved itself. Couto also admitted to being overly cautious about the healing process; she was wearing shades on a 24/7 basis. "I'm sleeping with sunglasses on—it's quite funny!" she exclaims, laughing giddily.

Her friends and family have joked that she looks like "a different person," but in truth, Couto says she feels more like herself than ever before. "I can't believe that what I had wanted for so long has happened," she says. "It's almost like I know myself in the mirror now. I can't stop looking in the mirror!" She blushes a little, allowing for how it sounds.

Toryn Green—the former front man of Fuel and New York-based rock band For the Taking—also underwent the procedure in 2015, and is equally happy with the results. "I'd needed vision

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correction for most of my life, so I'd grown accustomed to being photographed in blue contacts during concerts or TV appearances," he says. "After I had laser corrective surgery, I didn't need contacts anymore, and I was back to my natural hazel eyes. BrightOcular gave me the opportunity to have the color I'd grown used to, without ever having to wear contacts again."

But not all stories of artificial iris implants have happy endings: Research shows that these types of surgeries have not always had the best track record.

In 2013, Toronto-based ophthalmologist Dr. Allan Slomovic treated a 25-year-old patient who had undergone an iris implantation procedure in Panama that had left her severely visually impaired. "I saw her after she had bilateral advanced Glaucoma from the surgery and required several cornea transplants," he explains. "She was an artist who ultimately had to abandon her profession because of this cosmetic surgery. She's in misery!"

And a 2011 study by the *American Journal of Ophthalmology* advises that anterior chamber iris implants should not be used for cosmetic indications.

Dorwal, Couto's surgeon, agrees that there are eye enhancement procedures happening around the world he would advise against. For instance, some doctors use a laser to burn the melanin out of the eye as a means of lightening the iris. "That can lead to an increase in eye pressure and glaucoma," Dorwal explains. "And that type of procedure is not reversible." But after personally performing 137 BrightOcular procedures over the last two years, he maintains that these implants are a harmless and effective way to alter the color of one's eyes. "I have not encountered a patient who has had any kind of reaction to the implant," he says. "We are introducing something into the eye; we are not manipulating its physiology or the anatomy. So this is a very safe and reversible process."

For Couto, at least, the benefits far outweighed the risks. Two weeks after her surgery, she says she couldn't imagine her life without green eyes. The entrepreneur—who is in the process of seeking investors for her upcoming dating app (called Paceybe)—says her new look has given her a boost of self-confidence, especially in the singles world. Over Christmas, she visited her grandmother, surprising her with her upgraded eye color. "Everybody was incredibly happy for me," she says of her family's first impressions. "And my grandmother made a comment about how my eyes are so much more beautiful than hers!"

When we checked in a month and a half after the procedure, Couto was still beyond content with the outcome—so much so, in fact, that she's even consider doing it again. "I'm thinking of changing the color already," she admits. "My brother loved my eyes and is thinking of getting the surgery done. He wants to get smoky gray, and I will probably go back to match him." But she'll sit tight for "a few years," she says. For the moment, she is enjoying seeing green. ■