

COORDINATES OF DEVELOPING THE BALNEARY TOURISM

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Abstract:

Health is not only the absence of the disease or infirmity, but a state of wellbeing as physical, mental and social. In this context, the acquisition and maintaining of physical and mental health is regarded as "a component of the quality of life".

Modern people, overwhelmed by professional and personal problems' solving, often neglect their own health, but for all of that there is a viable alternative, namely health tourism or balneary tourism.

Balneary segment belongs to the health tourism market, together with medical tourism, thalassotherapy, hydrotherapy, wellbeing/ spa and fitness. Balneary tourism is one of the forms with constant tourist traffic having a relatively stable clientele, and that contributes to increasing of the utilization coefficients of accommodation's capacity and to achieve greater average revenues per day / tourist.

Given the need to adapt the balneary resorts to the requirements of the tourists, this paper aims to highlight some aspects regarding the content and quiddity of the balneary tourism, but also about adopting the repositioning policies of balneary resorts and prospects for development of balneary tourism in Romania/ Valcea County.

Keywords: *balneary tourism, health tourism, positioning, Romania*

JEL Classification: *L83,M31*

1. Introduction

Accelerated rithm of daily life as a result of urbanization and industrialization, pollution, stress, sedentary lifestyle, all these have induced various diseases to people: inflammatory and rheumatic, cardiovascular, metabolic, respiratory, decreased immunity, depression etc.

Modern man overwhelmed by personal and professional solving-problems often neglects his own health; but for all the health tourism is a viable alternative.

Romania has a multitude of natural therapeutic factors whose qualities are highly valued in the professional treatment centers across the country. Health holidays start becoming a more frequent choice for those who wish to preserve or improve health, relax actively and prevent illness.

Spa tourism stands out against the others types of tourism due to their many social and economic benefits as a result of the positive effects on physical and mental health of people, inclusive wellness.

2. Conceptual Framework

Even if the health tourism became a trendy subject, decidedly a less abundant literary production about it there is. Compared to other forms, in which the tourism is easier to be highlined, in the health system becomes more complicated to identify its touristic functions. In the literature the health tourism is defined by using natural healing factors through multiple terms depending on the type of resource or specific connotations of each country. Thus, health tourism is a comprehensive concept with many categories of activities (activities involving the "sunny" and fun, activities involving indirectly or even central health and care, wellness as sauna, massage and other activities referring on medical treatment), all with inflection points to other forms of tourism: leisure, adventure, sports, medical or care, wellness etc. (Hall 2013,

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p. 7). As a collective perception mainly aimed at physical healing through therapeutic waters and the spas, and fits into the concept of medical wellness (Smith & Puczko 2009, p. 24).

Water is the common denominator of health and tourism sectors and very often the sports sector as well. Water is used for different purposes in these sectors. Thus, it is distinguished (according to Masterplan tourism and spa, p.16):

- ✓ Water décor type: it must be pervasive in resorts: fountains, lakes, rivers. Baden Baden, Vichy or Karlovy Vary are perfect examples of "thermal cities";
- ✓ Water for comfort: heated pools, spas and thermal ludic centers;
- ✓ Curative water: water with specific properties which should be used according to a medical protocol;
- ✓ Playful water: water leisure par excellence, for amusement or aqua-parks. As americans say "No water no leisure".

Because health tourism has several connotations (depending on the resources of each country), its analysis is more complex compared to other forms that have a structure focused only on tourism. There are numerous published studies, but the definition of balneary tourism is currently not clear in literature reason for why several points of view are introduced in table no. 1.

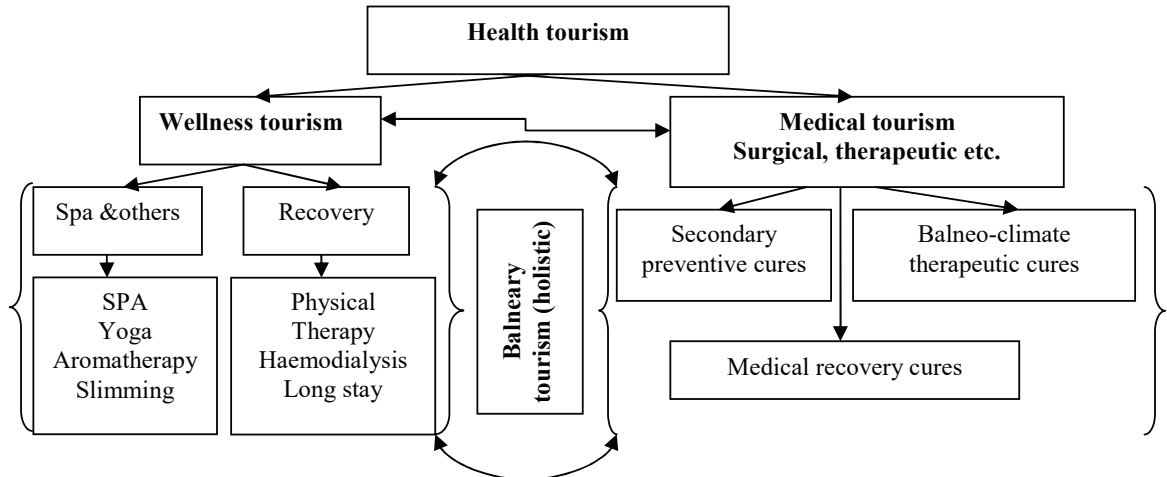
Table 1. The terms used to define treatments performed using water**

Concept/ source	Definition
Balneoclimatoterapie , Berlescu E., 1982	Using a complex of natural factors: balneo and climate factors of a balneary area for prophylactic, curative or medical recovery purposes
Balneo-terapy , French experts	Usage of current water supply (other than mineral, thermal or sea ones) for therapeutic purposes
Crenotherapy , DEX, 1995	Which has hot springs of mineral water
Cură balneo-medicală/ Curative medical spa , Stăncioiu A. F. , 1999	Practiced by people who go to spa resorts for health care or prevention of disease
Physiotherapy spa , <i>Whitehurst, M., 2012</i>	Recovery programs offered by the spas
Hydrotherapy , Marland, H., Adams, J., 2009	Water use for therapeutic purposes
Spa , Eddy, M. D., 2010	Massage and hydrothermal procedures performed for different physiological needs and overall sense of well-being
Thalassotherapy (spa-coastal), France, Italy, Spain	Multitasking elements in a privileged marine area, under medical supervision, for preventive or curative.
Termalism , France, Italy, Spain	Therapeutic use of thermal mineral water straight from the source
Termalismul (crenotherapy), Stănciulescu G. <i>et al</i> , 2000	Overall activities related to valorisation and usage of the curative mineral warm waters in a thermal resort.
Turism balnear/ Spa tourism , Glăvan V., 2000	Pathway for ensuring the necessary thermal and mineral water for internal and external use.
Health tourism , Hall, 2013	Tourist activities in which water plays a special role in health restoring
Health tourism , UOTO, 1983	Health assurance based on mineral waters and climate.

** elaborated by authors based on literature

As you can see, there is not a certain definition of health tourism based on natural treatment factors, but most experts accept that this term refers to travel being motivated by performing a medical procedure or activities based on using water in order to promote physical and psychical welfare.

Currently, the scope of health tourism gradually extends to medical and wellness tourism, balneary tourism being holistic represented at their interference (see graph no. 1).



Graph. no. 1. Interconnection between health tourism and spa tourism

In our country, the health concept requires a collective perception mainly of physical healing or medical one, through therapeutic waters and the spas that fits into the concept of medical wellness.

This belief is totally justified if is taken into account the full potential of the Romanian spa resorts, represented by the high quality of mineral and thermal waters. The whole system involves medical recovery cures, as secondary preventive and climate therapeutic cures, balneary cures, spa cures and beauty treatments, sports and fitness, primary preventive cures, yoga and meditation. For each of these potential tourism products, which can outline clearly an equivalent form of tourism is required a compatibility within the defining components of destination / tourism resorts, such as its natural and human resources, socio-cultural ones, infrastructure, tourist reception etc., all contributing to facilitation of specific activities.

Wellness tourism consists of a medical tourism segment that promotes a healthy lifestyle, and healthcare tourism focuses on maintaining the health state whilst the medical tourism in fact requires illness treatment through more complex procedures, which may implies surgery, chemotherapy etc. (see table 2)

Balneary segment is one of the products from the health tourism market, along with medical tourism, thalassotherapy, hydrotherapy, spa and fitness.

Balneary tourism ranks on second place in top of increasing medicalization. This segment uses natural mineral water as underground water or that comes from natural sources and has recognized curative effects (as chemical, thermal and mechanical ones). It is generally practiced in an adequate natural environment. Spa treatments are more increasingly regarded as preventive treatments.

Table 2. Market segmentation of health tourism

	Medical tourism	Balneary tourism	Thalassotherapy	Hydrotherapy	Wellbeing/spa	Fitness
Preventive		X	X	X	X	
Curative	X	X				
Recreation				X	X	X

Source: by authors

3. Specific features of the balneary tourism

Balneary tourism is a specific form of tourism that has been developed significant especially in recent decades, with increasing stress and those illnesses caused by the pace of modern life in large conurbations. It is characterized by a number of peculiarities arising from the content and complexity of its business, such as:

- Basic motivation is health care (the treatment) done daily, according to a timetable, using a variety of factors and applying different procedures (the prophylactic, therapeutic or recovering cures).

- It valorises completely natural resources and factors for balneary cure purpose that a country / area has. Spa tourism is also based on a permanent potential of high complexity, which is practically inexhaustible, redeem being independently of weather conditions.

- No significant seasonal concentration, being the only form of tourism which is based on a potential permanent of high complexity.

- Length of stay is higher, according to the medical advice. Current trends manifested worldwide (new motivations and vacation cuts) led to the reduction of stay, thus attracting many other customer segments.

- Intensification of urban functions of spa resorts by the appearance of many and various activities of production, trade and services specific to human settlements. Currently the specialists estimated that about 60% of resorts have become towns in the true sense, reason for what a balance between urban and their tourism functions requires a careful process management planning.

- It can be practiced anywhere, due to the wide spread of natural factors in all areas. In the mountain areas where predominate a he certain bioclimate, mineral waters, and sometimes therapeutic gases; on the hills and plateaus where they meet especially mineral waters, a salty bioclimate and treatment with sludges; and on the seaside where marine bioclimate, the treatment with sludge, the vast sun, sand and ionization are the main factors of course, spa tourism is present.

- Generates an improving of natural environment by setting up parks and gardens on surfaces that can reach up to hundreds of hectares (Vichy France) or afforestation in order to create a suitable climate for relaxation and recreation necessary in a balneary resort.

- Requires specific material resources with medical technology, pavilions, clinics, spas, different facilities and the presence of specialized medical staff, physicians specializing in physical medicine and recovery, physical therapists, assistants, etc. That is a defining feature of the balneary tourism.

And in terms of health tourism some peculiarities for clientele can be identified, namely:

- Diversified segments of tourists due to the high rate of disorders with attrition character, the emphasis on prophylactic treatments, and diversification of the resorts by so called "cures release form" (fitness).

Tourism products like "release form" (fitness), thalassotherapy are for tourists with high incomes, while the traditional spa products are designed to segments of tourists with lower incomes, because in this case some of the medical expenses are supported through health insurance.

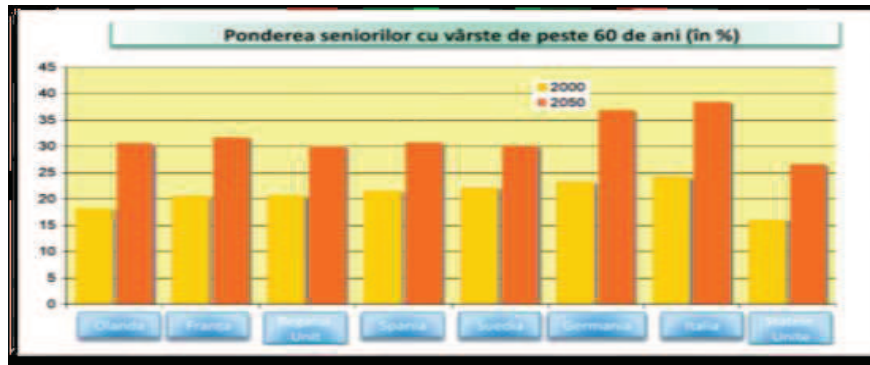
- Is subsidized more or less by the state, by country, through state health insurance or other social funds for ensuring the access for all population segments towards spa tourism.

- Higher fidelity than to other tourism forms, because the treatment requires a longer period and many times it should be repeated over several years or the treatment itself is conducted only to improve the medical condition and therefore it should be repeated twice yearly.

4. Actually status of balneary tourism

Balneary tourism is one of the constant forms of tourist movement with a relatively stable customer basis, which helps boost the capacity utilization coefficients for accommodation as well as increase the average revenue per day / tourist.

In Europe but also in Romania there is an accelerated process of demographic aging, the elderly being the most important target group for health tourism. Additionally the purchasing power of a person over 50 years old is nowadays higher with 30% than that corresponding to other age groups. The seniors hold 50% of the net income of households in Western Europe.



A qualitative balneary tourism can be developed in Romania, with approximately 8,500 mineral and thermal springs that hold it. Employers in Tourism Spa argue that Romania is the richest country in Europe in terms of resource spas, accounting for about a third of mineral and thermal springs in Europe, but only 10% of the springs are exploited because of the gaps in approach to scientific research.

There are 117 localities in Romania with natural therapeutic factors of which 29 are designated as balneary resorts of national importance and 32 as resorts with local importance; 80% of their assets belong to private owners and 20% is owned by the Ministry of Health and Public Service Retirements.

Value of the Romanian balneary fund is accentuated by the complexity of natural factors, namely existence of the main environment factors in the same resort along with a wide group of minerals with beneficial effects that can be used in a large range of spa treatments.

In Romania the spas' culture is still developed and it can be exploited through a suitable development of services within their diversification. However, balneary vacations remain a consequence of the Romanian social policies and the beneficiaries of these vacations, retirees and unions' members become a captive clientele, meaning that this market segment may disappear with reducing or eliminating social subsidies. Cohabitation of this market segment (social clientele) with ones that use unsubsidised cures has been become difficult. Many tourists younger and with higher incomes request more qualitative and various services, reason for what they focused nowadays on anything else, such as active vacations abroad.

Balneary tourism is the only form of tourism which is based on a permanent potential, highly complex, inexhaustible and relatively independent of weather conditions. Although health tourism can be practiced continuously, no matters the season, most resorts have limited their main activities for a specified period of April to December (when social programs are available).

As we mentioned, tourists targeted by Romanian health tourism are generally elderly people who regularly come to treatment cures. Length of stay in this tourism is high, between 12 and 16 days.

Domestic spa tourism is dependent on prices, and the experts assess that an increasing in prices with 20% can lead to a decrement of 40% in demand. Partly it is explained due to bigger period of staying in spas that makes consumers to spend more money (as total expenditure) in the health tourism than in other forms of tourism. Existence of the treatment vouchers (compensated tickets) for certain social categories of consumers on this market and the packages offered by tour-operators counterbalance this disadvantage; however, health tourism is practiced mainly by lower to middle-income social categories. In fact, in all European countries, demand is strongly influenced by the coverage of expenses related to balneary cures directly from social and health insurance budgets.

Over 95% of spa clients in our country are Romanians with a main tourists' category over 50 years old. There is also a small number of foreign tourists coming especially from Israel, Germany, Holland, France, Belgium, Italy, Hungary and Spain. Foreign tourists prefer

equally a general relaxation and curative items of various natural resources (mineral, thermal, mud etc.), opting for touristic structures of higher classification category, but the offer for this kind of spa tourism structures is extremely limited.

Spa tourism market can be seen as a continuum that reflects the needs and interests of its component segments.

Thus, the main segment consists of consumers with predominant purpose on recovery health services, satisfied with average quality standards of accommodation and treatment units, customers with subsidized tickets. Another segment consists of tourists looking for: high-quality facilities, healthy food, opportunities to ride in pristine natural settings, availability of gyms. But a niche segment consists of tourists seeking for spa facilities, fitness, anti-aging or cosmetics treatments, body purification.

Certain Romanian areas of health tourism were selected in order to be encouraged and support touristic product development; this selection is based in part on an assessment of what already exists in Romania (as resources) and on current and further trends on tourist market tastes and preferences.

The satisfaction with existing complementary facilities (especially in terms of opportunities for fun) is generally reduced.

Distribution of the treatment tickets is actually the engine that keeps alive most spas in Romania. However, many resorts cannot be restored or kept in good conditions and can be switched off at any time. Tariffs' level of subsidized tickets in this system is far below the rate at which it can provide reasonable facilities and quality services, to bring an adequate profit operators.

Given the current budgetary restrictions, there are no guarantees about maintaining widely subsidized tickets to this system, too.

5. Strategic directions for the development of spa tourism

Although, according to statistics, tourism has not a high share in GDP, health tourism is likely to grow up in coming years because of its strong points: natural environment as cure factors, natural and anthropical potential, lack of seasonality and, not least, the services (especially medical ones) offered to tourists.

According with the Employers League in health tourism (OPTBR) - Recent research for developing of the national tourism brand indicates a high demand for health tourism, internally and externally, which ranked at 3-4 positions, ahead of other traditional segments proving that its potential as well as therapeutic efficacy of cures performed is known.

Since spa tourism product is extremely complex, and many tourists wish to engage themselves in many other activities (recreation, leisure etc.), it is necessary to consider the construction of diversified touristic products for different segments market, including many cultural and sports components. For instance, organising different kind of events can be a solution, which highlights the characteristics and potential of rural or urban area that belongs to respective health resort, with effect of strengthening the identity of the destination.

In fact, depending on type of resorts, there were created packages having cure factors positioned centrally; for instance: "One week of recovery" (a package of six nights- BB in hotels two and three stars plus medical advice and two treatment procedures daily, free of charge), "Let's bath spas!" (five nights FB, medical advice, two procedures daily, and five days of treatment), "10 days resort" (ten nights FB, minimum seven days of treatment, two procedures daily and a medical consultation, with accommodation, meals and treatment in hotels of two, three and four stars) and "wellness spa" (three nights, two days half board, a festive dinner, access to swimming pools, sauna, gym and two free procedures type wellness). However, the offer through such programs designed only based on length of stay and basic services, should define more clearly the profile of program and / or activities through

keywords / determinants in the decision making of consumers to purchase the "recovery", "wellness" etc., and to express their relation to such resources for those uses.

► **Concept development of thermal city**

Enrichment of tourist areas' offer with medical endorsement in terms of personalised medical services should be integrated as a distinct product into a global offer of the tourist destination. For instance, a public treatment center in the resort for tourists and customers from surrounding areas or hotels with their own healthcare equipments can be.

Ludic hydrotherapy equipment are also among the equipments fitted in a resort. This category may comprise thalassotherapy centers at the seaside. A thermal city should be at least equipped with hot springs, a qualitative heritage built, a spa park, with special care for the environment (promote clean means of transportation, avoid traveling by car ...), a constant animation (casino, cultural events, congresses ...) for an operating period of at least 6 months.

It can be supplemented by an offer of complementary products such as bottled mineral water and creating a range of cosmetics. There are national and international markets (especially Central Europe, Ukraine, Russia).

Priority mission of each area is to identify the health tourism products that can be included in the spas in different tourist regions of Romania with benefits for a touristic clientele national and / or international. For example, private investment for the creation of spas in existing hotels, for developing of private clinics (in urban areas), diversifying services in the regions which depend on a short season (coastal areas) - golf, boating pleasure cruises, thalassotherapy etc.

► **Specialization of the treatment stations/ units for aging preventing and anti-aging cures.**

These "cures" are addressed to seniors but persons wishing to pursue a "cure medicalized". In this regard Ana Aslan / Gerovital is certainly a good starting point ; it is a product of "medical tourism", therefore, necessarily with a « medicalized » purpose and expensive. It may be supplemented by a general medical examination, cosmetic surgery, diet, anti-smoking cures, cures against the alcohol abuse, cures against obesity etc.

In this particular case the product is offered through the clinical / treatment units together with the hotel equipment for thalassotherapy or thermal recognized cures.

The aging process has become a problem for all EU countries. Average age of life is over 70 years old. Romania could position itself as a pilot country as regards an "aging slow and beautiful" and fight against aging ; so, it could be created in Romania the first European CLUSTER ; product portofolio comprising a general medical examination till to treatment cure and production of cosmetics or other healthy goods.

It could be developed specialized resorts either at Snagov (close to Bucharest) or at the seaside (Mangalia), or in the countryside (Govora etc).

Western European population aging represents a tremendous growth potential for balneary resorts in Romania which would like to launch their touristic products on this market, especially those specialized in rheumatism cure.

In order to increase Romanian health tourism's attractiveness and thus to attract a new clientele, it is necessary to move from a position of resort, often focusing on rheumatism and asthma treatments (saline) towards the resort globally centered on fighting against aging through an opening to a younger clientele from 50 to 65 years old - which nowadays comes less in resorts - while continuing to support the fundamental component represented by the thermal water.

► **Traditional spa sector**

Traditional spa cures are those in which clientele's expenses are partly covered by health and retirement social systems, since this is an itself product, as social benefit. It

belongs to the social policy of our country and, in this regard, it can address rather to disadvantaged categories such as, for instance, retired seniors with small pensions/ incomes, families in economic difficulties and disability persons.

Market of the traditional spa sector, in its social form, corresponds to a real demand in Romania but many improvements should be done: comfort level increasing, cures to be restructured and benefits diversified.

Repositioning of the spa products goes through a period of profound adjustment because of the existing equipment, staff and services; as well as a new stage of engendering diagnostic equipment, care services and accommodation has started.

Restructuring the cure, taken into account the risks of further decline of spa sector traditionally in the next years - because of the economic crisis - and radicalization of policies of the retirement or health insurance systems, possible at any time; nowadays it is more important than ever to make decision correctly as regards with: developing cures without subsidized social benefits, developing health cures available at discounted price compared to spas, development of short-period cures.

Diversification of benefits, as differentiate factor in terms of product and image, by improving the current conditions of accommodation and treatment in order to keep traditional customers and in the same time, diversification of actual supply as regard creating cures specialized for specific customer segments (cures against smoking, for slimming, for young mothers) or offers to attract customers either proximity or a weekend clientele.

► **Getting in shape the customers in frame of spa units**, in particular for urban, female and young clientele, that means endowment hotels with jacuzzi equipment, gym and massages. These resorts should necessarily be located nearby urban markets as it works based on an hourly or daily schedule.

6. Conclusions

Romania has a valuable spa potential, but balneary products also means know-how, natural resources, treatment units, accommodation, a suitable environment enabling for spending from 10 to 16 days without bored. Although the resorts are very good in terms of the natural resource, tourist attractiveness is negatively influenced by other components of the tourism offer, such as: faulty exploitation of resources, low level of knowledge of natural resources, lower aesthetic value of the natural environment, higher attrition rate of accommodation and treatment units, lower diversity of HoReCa, high density of buildings in public areas; improper quantity, quality and diversity of leisure structures in most resorts, inadequate general and specific trade, inappropriate quality of infrastructure facilities.

Strategy of partnership is, perhaps, in the current context, the key element for the development of health tourism in Romania. It is necessary to change the optic of supporters / operators involved in the sector in terms of health tourism development in Romania; success is conditioned by involving all decision makers at the macro and micro-economic levels.

Given the closely dramatic situation of spa destinations, despite the various plans for re-launch, modernization and adaptation elaborated over time by different institutions and organizations, the resorts remain unadapted to meet actual requirements. So, while natural balneary potential represents the most valuable assets of Romanian tourism ", it continues to lose ground to international competition, requiring inclusion of corresponding form of tourism in a planned system, with common objectives (without establishing the same specialized language before) to all its supporters, deadlines and actions based on each resort, depending on its specific, all kinds of resources it holds, but also which market to be targeted on.

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