

Global Trends: Wellness and Mental Health Tourism - The Ultimate Retreats in Hospitality

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Abstract

In Europe, health tourism—which includes wellness and spa tourism—has a long history. Asian, European, and North American cultures all have rather distinct ideas on health tourism. The article will give a framework for distinguishing various health tourism concepts in particular European countries and compare the methods used, particularly in Slovakia, Portugal, and the Nordic nations (Finland), to the North American concept (Canada) and the Asian perception (Taiwan, Malaysia, etc.). Selected cases could serve as an excellent illustration of the various European approaches to health tourism. The secondary research framework made use of techniques from the exploratory and empirically based study. Some primary research results could be also mentioned in this study. Primary research experiences are based on the personal visits to spas in Slovakia and the discussions with the tourism experts (not structured) during the 4 years of post-graduate studies in Canada at Waterloo University as well as the discussions with the academics in Taiwan dealing with the studied topic in the past.

The findings of secondary research show that while traditional spas and countries with outdated spa models exist in Europe (such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Hungary, etc., which were once part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire), new ideas are also prevalent in countries like France, Spain, and the Nordic countries, which are primarily western or Scandinavian nations. Although spas in North America are entirely focused on the market and funded by their own funds, they provide comparable goods to those in Europe. Based on the discussion with the tourism experts in North America, the typical traditional spas approach is not familiar in Canada and the U.S.A. In Asia, the primary and secondary results revealed that the worsening living environment and pollution as well as job stress are driving forces for the growing demand for wellness and spa treatment facilities development. Similarly, as in North America and some European countries spas are more business oriented and wellness centres provide the improvement of health, culture, heritage, and a healthy balance of life as a way of life, not just a product.

Key words: health tourism, spa tourism, wellness, well-being, health care treatment, culture and spas

Introduction

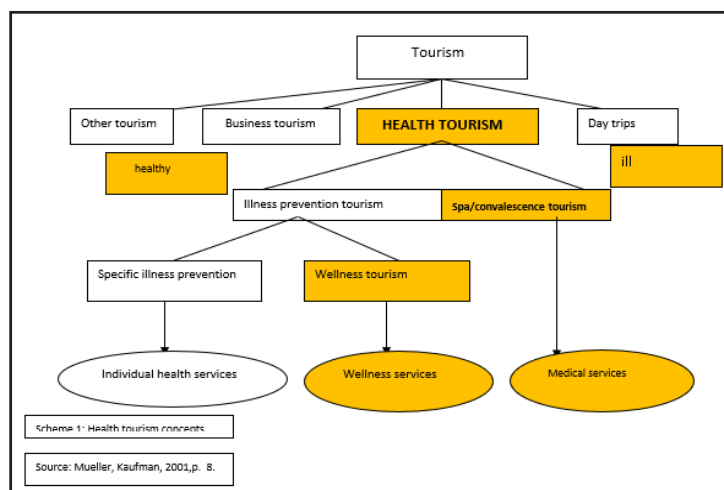
The majority of spas in Europe provide medical care; recreation is merely a supporting feature. However, several adjustments to this notion have been affected by globalization, new trends, and changes. In Europe has to be used similar definition as in North America, where spas were defined as places for relax and wellness, entertainment. The meaning of “health tourism” and “spa tourism” is dependent on cultural meaning to each country or nation. France and Spain are two European nations that have adopted this trend. However, several eastern European nations including Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, as well as Germany and Austria, continue to provide conventional spa services. The above mentioned countries view spas not only as places for health improvement, but based on history and former experiences the existing attitude is rooted in history. Our objectives will be to thoroughly explain the ideas, investigate the differences between other nations, particularly those in Europe, and describe emerging trends. The current conceptual foundation will be reinforced with a few solid examples and cases. The definition of Kaspar on health tourism was discussed by Benson and Stuart (1992).

"The sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a change of location and residence by people in order to promote, stabilize, and, as appropriate, restore

physical, mental, and social well-being while using health services and for whom the place where they are staying is neither their principal nor permanent place of residence or work," is what Kaspar defines as health tourism. Mueller and Kaufman (2001) describe wellness tourism, a subset of health tourism, as the “sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey of residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health.” In both definitions are health stabilization crucial, but it is important to mention that a different approach have ill people (treatment oriented) and people who want only to prevent illness. It influences also the strict approaches of medical staff to the stay in spas and the rigorous entrance check-ups. Moreover, in the countries with conservative approach (mentioned European countries) the patients could apply for financial support from government to cover their costs depending on the state (after surgery or just treatment of diseases recognized by the governmental medical representatives). Depending on these possibilities, some treatments and stay in spas could be fully covered by the health insurance companies or partially covered (medical treatment, not accommodation and catering services). This is a great difference between the North American systems for instance. The patients dealing with the traditional approach remain in a specialty hotel that offers the

proper professional expertise and personalized attention. They need a whole range of services, including mental stimulation and education, relaxation and meditation, healthy eating and beauty care, and physical fitness. Although the element of health improvement is included in both definitions, there is one significant difference that is based on motivation and the goals of both strategies, which will allow one to differentiate between a number of concepts.

Mueller and Kaufman (2001) developed the following scheme, which allows one to examine this idea from multiple perspectives. In this scheme could be visible the concept of health tourism from the perspective of ill and healthy people (despite of it seeking a prevention from diseases). Unhealthy people are strictly oriented on medical services and need a strict medical supervision, which is quite expensive, but in the countries with traditional approach to health tourism are covered by health care depending on the seriousness of illness.



The authors Puczkó and Smith delineated in Table 1 regional differences and trends in Europe and explained the motivation of the visitors and the use of products and services in the health and wellness facilities.

Table 1 Regional differences and trends in Europe in the approach to health and wellness tourism

Region/countries	Typical focus	Typical products/services
Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Northern France, Switzerland, United Kingdom)	Beauty, weight loss, lifestyle improvements (e.g. mental wellbeing, stress relief), leisure and recreation private clinics specializing in certain treatments	day/beauty spas spa and wellness hotels thermal leisure spas holistic activities (e.g. yoga, meditation, vinotherapy, occupational wellness, alpine wellness, selfness and mindness balneotherapy)
Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Baltic States)	Physical recreation Leisure and relaxation Lifestyle improvements (e.g. diet, exercise, fresh air)	Nordic wellbeing, saunas, outdoor recreation (e.g. Nordic walking), cold therapies (e.g. crypto therapy, ice swimming), hot geysers (Iceland), thermal, medical and seaside spas (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)
Central and Eastern Europe (Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia)	Curative rather than preventive health care therapy and rehabilitation for the body medical tourism Water-based leisure	Medical and thermal baths Spa hotels Caves Aquaparks Wellness hotels
Southern Europe (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Southern France, Spain, Turkey)	Physical recuperation and relaxation sea-water-based wellness lifestyle elements (e.g. climate, healthy cuisine, pace of life) MEDICAL TOURISM	Thalassotherapy Traditional thermal and medical spas Holistic retreats (often run by non-locals) Religious and spiritual tourism (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Santiago de Compostela)

Source: Puczkó, Smith 2009.

Goal, material and methods

While the explanation of approaches in Central and Eastern Europe will be given priority, some examples from Western and Southern Europe will also be used, and the perception and approaches of North America and Asia will be compared. The existing different opinion and approach to the health tourism is important to understand in order to be able to distinguish main features and attitudes to health, spa and wellness tourism in different countries. There are visible typical roots of history, culture and geography of particular countries. Students as well as academics and professionals in the wellness, spa, and health tourism sectors may find this study helpful. With the assistance of BKF University of Applied Sciences in Budapest, Hungary, materials have been gathered over the course of a few years, primarily in Slovakia and Canada, but also in Hungary, as part of the international project "Regional wellbeing in the Balkans." The secondary research framework made use of the techniques used in the exploratory and empirically based investigation. Only distinct cases from throughout the globe have been used.

In this study were applied qualitative research tools in the exploratory research. In this type of research could be used several techniques as has been stated by Yin (2003), Vissak (2010), for instance collecting of data from secondary sources, observations, interviews with the representatives, etc. In this research were used also some primary and secondary sources from journals, internet websites, but also combined with the interviews and observations from spas during visits. Some primary research results could be also mentioned in this study. Primary research experiences are based on the personal visits to spas in Slovakia and the discussions with the tourism experts (not structured) during the 4 years of post-graduate studies in Canada at Waterloo University as well as the discussions with the academics in Taiwan dealing with the studied topic in the past. There were not collected any statistical data because the goal of this study is not to analyze the economic impact of different spas, but it is focused on the conceptual and cultural differences of the perception of spa and health tourism in Europe (predominantly) in comparison to the rest of the world (North America and some Asian countries).

Results and discussion

The findings of secondary research supported also by primary research during the unstructured discussions with the tourism experts show that while traditional spas and countries with outdated spa models exist in Europe (such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Hungary, etc., which were once part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire), new ideas are also prevalent in countries like France, Spain, and the Nordic countries, which are primarily western European or Scandinavian countries (Table 1). Health-care tourism characteristic is visible in the countries with traditional spas feeling. "We define health-care tourism as an effort by a tourist

destination (like Baden, Switzerland) or tourist institution (like a hotel) to draw tourists by purposefully marketing its health-care services and facilities in addition to its standard tourist amenities. According to Goodrich et al. (1987, p. 217), these health care services could include medical tests conducted by trained physicians and nurses at the hotel or resort (spa), special diets, acupuncture, transvital injections, vitamin-complex intakes, and special medical treatments for a variety of ailments. Countries as Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other nations have facilities which are more health-care focused as has been also stated by Goodrich (1987). There exist the additional provision of wellness programs in hotels of spas offering spa treatments, but main focus is to provide full health treatment supported by professional medical staff and equipment. The location of spas is near thermal water resources which offer healing procedures based on bath or the use of streams, mud, etc. The provided spa treatment is important for healing of diseases by the application of thermal water, sulphur much, mechanic electrotherapy, mechanic therapy, oxygen therapy, reflection massages, and acupuncture.

The new concept of spa tourism versus the old concepts

According to the UNWTO, spa tourism is any travel that makes advantage of a nation's natural resources, particularly its natural mineral springs and climate, and necessitates the presence of medical facilities (IUOTO, 1973, p. 7). In European countries, this definition is used to explain some tourism concepts. In Europe, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are the most well-known destinations for spa tourists. There are two development streams for spa tourism in Europe (Knop, 1999, Gucik, 2006, p. 24). As previously mentioned in Scheme 1, spa tourism is a health care concept that promotes wellness. One subset of spa tourism in Europe has a strong medical foundation and focuses on providing traditional health care.

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Germany, and Austria are the most well-known members of this stream. In these nations, patients are usually under very stringent medical care, and spa patrons are treated according to their diagnosis. As has been already mentioned the doctors' examinations during the entrance to the spas and also during treatments are necessary. Along with Poland, the aforementioned nations were formerly part of Germany and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. All of these nations' healthcare systems are founded on the Bismarck model, which combines traditional medical practices. The second stream represents Mediterranean nations (Italy, France, and Spain) where spa tourism is a wellness idea. This idea, which takes place at upscale hotels and spa centers, is more focused on the market. The idea of health care plays a secondary role. Spas are seen as a technique to prevent civilization diseases in northern European nations like Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and

Finland (Gucik, 2006, p. 24). The idea of beauty and wellness, which is founded on marketing strategies and an effort to enhance welfare, was the dominant trend of the 20th century. Nowadays, spas need to think more economically in the idea of the combination of traditional and wellness approach is becoming more obvious in the spas with formerly traditional approach.

Many spas offer additional short-break wellness stays for people looking for relax and no doctors’ examinations are needed in this case. Wellness tourism’s traditional clientele consists of wealthy businesspeople looking to unwind and get away from daily stress, but more lately, it has also drawn in those looking for new ways to unwind and find balance in their life. In the third millennium, wellness emerged as a new trend (Gucik, 2006, p. 28). However, nowadays we should comment to this statement that it is not only a question of economic positions of visitors, spas for wellness are becoming more affordable also for middle class and ordinary people who want to escape stress and every day routine. It has become popular also among seniors where the number of this group of

people is growing. Seniors are becoming a strong group of visitors to the spas and this segment is focused not only on health treatment, but also on health preventive care, entertainment and leisure. The growing number of seniors in the world creates and enormous potential for spa managers to attract this group of potential customers. There is also another important fact to mention.

Spas are becoming the symbols of tourism spent in the quiet and not crowded environment which supports the idea of sustainability of tourism and could be depicted as so called niche tourism approach. For this reason, spas started to become even more popular for the people recovering after some negative effects of the disease COVID-19. Several spas offer post-COVID 19 treatments (physical and mental health improvement focused) and the patients are especially seeking health stabilization and quiet and tranquil (sustainable) environment, which is typical for this type of niche tourism.

The following Table 2 contains the range of services provided at wellness centers (Ibid, 2006).

Table 2. Variety of treatments and services in wellness resorts

Acupressure	Physiotherapy	Steam bath
Acupuncture	Hammam	Peeling
Aromatherapy	Homeotherapy	Skin massages
Bach Flower therapy	Music therapy	Reiki
Bio-lifting	Chirotherapy	Light therapy
Spinal exercise	Cleopatra bath	Shiatsu
Chinese medicine	Acidotherapy	Stretching
Depilation	Lymphoma drainage	Sport massage
Color therapy	Manicure, pedicure	Thalasso therapy
	Massage of ear lobes	Wraps from sea weeds

Source: Gucik, M., 2006, p. 28

According to studies conducted in the European Union, 67% of spa patrons seek therapy for illnesses and health issues, while nearly 50% seek solace from daily stress. The majority of guests demand that the spas be immaculate and free of pollution (Gucik, Sipkova, 2004, p. 86). European spa tourism adheres rigorously to ISO 9000 quality requirements in their spas which give the European spa tourism a high quality standard. Hospitals and other healthcare institutions also adhere to these quality requirements. In recent years are also health care facilities strongly supported by the medical innovations and the active participation of AI in several medical procedures which also influences spa business. Innovations are visible in the health care facilities as well as the leisure centres across the universe. Additionally, it is interesting to note that spas and patient stays in Europe are funded by a variety of sources, including personal funds and support from health insurance firms. This information has been already mentioned in the article. Only France and Spain

are an exception, since they take a more autonomous stance and require patients to cover the cost of their spa visits out of pocket. The necessity of each spa treatment is thoroughly determined by doctors. Slovakia is a typical example of one of the aforementioned nations with this idea. Slovakia is renowned for its 1300 mineral springs that provide high-quality therapeutic water. The 21 thermal spas are separated into climatic spas (Strbske Pleso, Novy Smokovec, Stos, Tatranske Matliare) and balneological spas (Piestany, Sliac, Trencianske Teplice, Bardejov, Dudince, Rajecke Teplice, Vysne Ruzbachy, etc.). The majority of these spas address medical illnesses (such as respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular, immunological, and reproductive disorders) as well as post-operative conditions in addition to being wellness centers. Slovakia has started to implement quite quickly commercialization in spa tourism and wellness, as well as more leisure facilities which are offering the entertainment, complex wellness services and are comparable to the other

countries focused on this type of facilities use. The use of strategic tool of marketing as a tool of competitive advantage is important to mention because it improves the total competitiveness of spas.

However, some pointed out that Nordic or Scandinavian nations lack the same abundance of mineral springs and customs as those in Central and Eastern Europe, and instead try to emphasize wellness and health prevention (new approach to health tourism). Finland, for example, has many wellness programs that use saunas. They apply for instance nordic walking, and cold water treatment (body soaks, massages, water therapies, and herbal treatments). Haikko Wellness in Porvoo, Finland, is a wonderful example. They provide traditional wellness therapies, cold treatments which are excellent against any kind of pain and swelling which could be symptoms of rheumatic diseases. It could be particularly beneficial for treating skin conditions like psoriasis, stress, and sleep disturbances. The temperature is -110 °C, and the treatment lasts for barely three minutes. Interesting is also a program "Wellbeing at work" which is an example of a care of the employers in order to have healthy employees, especially avoiding their stress. According to Tuohino et al. (2010), Nordic well-being is generally focused on nature, outdoor leisure, healthy eating, and the cleanliness of the air, landscape, and water, such as lakes. Excellent spas and wellness centres are popular among visitor of southern European countries because they are situated by the warm seas of these countries and offer plentiful spa products. One of them is for instance thalassotherapy which is popular in Greece, Spain, France, and Italy.

The Algarve in Portugal has a great wellness facility that is well-liked by western tourists from Great Britain, France, Germany, and North America. A complex of hotels there offers not only spa and wellness items, but also golf and delectable food. Similar concepts may be seen in other south European nations as well as Asia, such as a combination of beautiful beaches, pristine seaside scenery, sunny weather, unique wellness goods, and sports activities. Wellness is popular not only during a season, but also in the off-season time and the popularity is growing not only among the citizens of the cold part of Europe (Scandinavian countries), but also among the other citizens of Europe and the world. The growing number of seniors in the world creates an enormous potential for new clients in this field.

Another good example is also Turkey which started to be popular for seniors from Germany, Scandinavia, and Great Britain, etc. Turkish spa facilities are well designed and offer a good product for visitors. Nonetheless, a lot of European nations, particularly those in southern Europe, as well as the Nordic nations, are able to develop intriguing product offerings and draw in potential senior market groups. For example, similar health items are popular among Germans and Scandinavians during the winter months on Croatia's beautiful islands, such as Hvar, Brac, etc. For example, the temperature and amenities of the Canary Islands in Europe make them ideal for wellness

tourism. The growing population of seniors in Europe and around the world has made wellness an intriguing niche product with significant potential for future profit development.

In Northern America are visible similar trends as in Europe which is the growing number of seniors, increasing work stress, new types of illnesses and health problems except the old ones and pollution of the environment. The concept of spas in North America is market oriented, but the visitors still seek these facilities not only for fun and entertainment, but also for health treatments. The spa products are becoming more popular even in this part of the world. One such instance may be Toffino, a spa in British Columbia, Canada. This is a common Canadian approach to wellness and spas, combining various therapeutic techniques with athletic pursuits. For example, in Tofino, you can experience a nearly unspoiled geothermal spring in the Maquinna Provincial Park and mix it with hiking, biking, fishing, and bear and bird viewing. Traditional spa products that are based on indigenous peoples' traditional washing methods are also very popular.

In Canada, combining wellness and culinary tourism is quite popular. This combination is typical for niche tourism and is especially appropriate for wealthy portions of the population, such as seniors, who are considered to be part of the baby-boomer generation. In North America, wellness combined with a healthy lifestyle and culture is currently a very popular trend. Because of this, spas in North America are more leisure-oriented than health-oriented, and their programs focus on improving people's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Similar to Northern America as has been also stated by the authors Smith and Jenner (2000) and Douglas (2001) in Australia is more visible a concept of wellness, appearance improvement, physical and mental body building. The authors Voigt, Pforr (2013) and Voigt, Brown, and Howat (2011) supported the idea of the impact of wellness on the improvement of physical and mental health too.

Similar to this, living circumstances are getting worse in Asia due to population growth and job stress, which is driving up demand for wellness and spa items. Taiwan could serve as one example. According to Lee and King's (2008) research (quoted in Chang et al. 2003), "maintaining good health is the most desired lifestyle for Taiwanese (59%)." Wellness tourism has been studied also by the authors Chen, Chang and Liu(2015) who were focused especially at the senior group of wellness tourists in Taiwan. Asian culture places a high value on health and well-being. It concerns also elderly people whose number is tremendously growing also in Asia. Wellness is very popular also among the young generation which has been studied and supported in the work of Lee, Lee and Cheng T. (2019). "The number of Asia destinations have tapped into this lucrative market," according to Lee and King (2008). Taiwan and Japan, both of which have an abundance of hot springs, could serve as examples. Both Malaysia and Thailand have seen a huge increase in spa travel. By combining cultural diversity, heritage, and wellness items, both nations were able to produce an

intriguing product. In Taiwan is popular the combination of 230 hot springs (explored by the German merchant Peitou in 1894), and the other superior products. In Asia, wellness therapies are also common. For example, Malay, Chinese, and Indian traditions provide ayurvedic, energy healing, traditional Chinese medicine, and ramuan spa treatments.

Conclusion

Finding variations in methods and understanding the boundaries between how health, spa, and wellness tourism are perceived based on geographic, cultural, or historical origins was the aim of this study. In order to compare different approaches, we compared the situation in three continents, Europe, North America and Asia and focused on the perception of health and wellness tourism in the depicted countries of these continents. We found out in this study that the notion of European spas especially in more traditionally spa based countries as for instance in Central and Eastern Europe (former Austrian and Hungarian Empire countries) are different as in the rest of European region or the world. They apply more strict health care approach and are focused on the treatment of health problems. However, new trends and particularly economic factors compel these nations to develop new wellness-related product offerings. As a result, it is common for European spas to combine wellness and traditional health tourism products. The North American idea, which is primarily focused on relaxation and leisure, is solely focused on the market. In contrast to certain European countries that have dual kinds of financing, spa services must be entirely funded by private sources. Asia offers a variety of typical East Asian medical approaches in addition to standard wellness treatments, making it a promising product for the ongoing growth of mineral springs in spa tourism. Asian wellness centers appear to have made health, culture, heritage, and a healthy balance of life a way of life, not just a product. These days, health tourism is gaining in popularity, particularly among seniors who desire to live longer and want to stay also more happy. Especially during the last period of time when the world experienced unexpected pandemic situation of COVID-19, health and wellbeing has becoming the main treasure for everybody, not only the seniors, but also for the young generation. For this reason, the subject of health tourism presents fresh opportunities for additional study and advancements in the field of management.

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