

## ROMANIAN HEALTH TOURISM – WHERE TO?

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### Abstract

*Health tourism has always been the main type of tourism in our country, due to the large number and variety of natural resources. Economic, political and social context in our country after 1990, decreased income, wear and tear reception capabilities and of the equipment used in spa cure, low foreign investment in Romanian tourism, led to a reduction efficiency of health tourism. This was reflected in the tourism statistics for the health tourism. In this paper the authors make a brief description of the Romanian health tourism and some proposals for reviving this type of tourism, once recognized throughout Europe.*

**Keywords:** health tourism, natural resources, tourism statistics, investments.

**JEL Classification:** L83

### 1.Introduction

Romania has a lot of natural resources that can be used for health tourism. Actually, the Romans visited us to use the mineral waters from the west part of the country (Băile Herculane or Sângeorz Băi), and Napoleon III used to send his people to bring to him mineral waters from Călimanești-Căciulata, because he thought that this waters were magical.

There are so many health resorts in our country, but unfortunately many of those were abandoned and there were no investors interested in their restoration. After 1990, the Romanian health tourism entered into a dark period and only a new vision can take it out. We need to adapt to all that is new in the field of health care, need to improve the services and need to reorient to another type of tourist.

In the present paper we describe the evolution of health tourism in the past 20 years and we tried to outline some proposals for reviving this type of tourism, once recognized all over the Europe.

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## **2. Natural resources for health tourism and the development of health tourism**

Mineral and thermal water, salted waters, therapeutic mud or the salt mine are spread all over the country in can be easily access. These resources have the physicochemical properties that meet the needs for prophylactic and health maintenance, building and restoring health, work capacity and individual physical and psychological comfort. Evolution of health tourism started in the 18th century. By the early 20th century were found most sources and tested their healing qualities and began planning major resorts with spa functions, but only after 1880 the development of the health resorts begun. After the World War II, when the Romanian tourism known it's best state of development, there were made 30000 new bed places, which were considered at the time of high comfort.

In this resorts at the beginning there were built single accommodation units and food, and later they were transformed in large complex made according to the concept of "everything under one roof", which allowed the spa cure any season.

There are 160 health resorts in Romania that are holding clean mineral resources, of which 24 are considered of national importance with the recognition in Europe. This 24 health resorts of national importance were ranked based on the classification system of Romania, according to their endowment. The most important health resorts are Baile Felix, Băile Herculane, Călimanești-Căciulata, Eforie Nord, Sovata, Sângeorz Băi, Vatra Dornei, Covasna, Băile Tușnad, Mangalia etc.

Also by 1989 there was a continuous upward trend that started in 1970 in terms of tourist traffic, both for tourism as a whole, but also for the health tourism, particularly. It was a reflection of the increased interest for tourism and for restoration of working capacity and health, which in this decade, 1980-1989, has become a important individual existence, approaching to that stage, a threshold saturation of demand (in the years 1988-1989 about 1/2 of the population used to spend an holiday in a resort, a situation comparable to that of many developed European countries).

Economic, political and social context in our country after '90 decreased income, wear and tear reception capabilities and of the equipment used in spa cure, low foreign investment in Romanian tourism, led to a reduction efficiency of health tourism. This was reflected in the tourism statistics for the health tourism.

Nowadays, because of the lack of investments in specific infrastructure, the offer of the health resorts is no longer a potential attraction for tourists, especially for the foreigners; there are so many valuable therapeutic resources both in terms of quantity and quality, which operated to international standards can generate significant flows of tourists and the development of the areas involved, in economic terms.

In terms of the number of care facilities in health resorts, we find an evolution different from all structures for the country. Because of dwindling revenues recorded by tourism, the funding in this sector has been increasingly lower. Due to a high interest rate on loans and a demand for this type of tourism in decline, the investment decision making for the development of spa offer became a difficult act, as long as their financial resources were insufficient to support current activities and conservation or degradation of existing structures.

**Table no.1 The evolution in number of accommodations and beds**

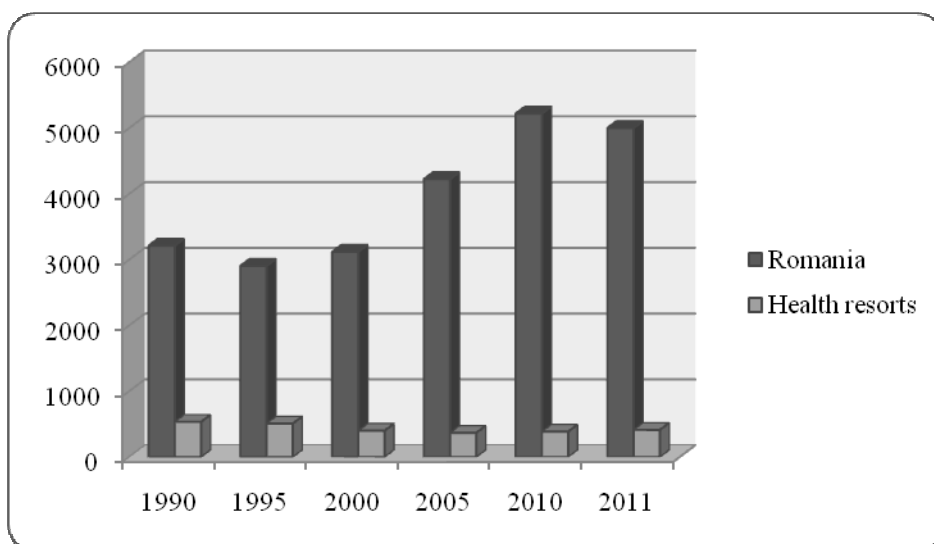
Year	Number of accommodation facilities		Accommodation capacity in operation	
	Romania	Health resorts	Romania	Health resorts
1990	3213	535	79535297	-
1995	2905	510	53539458	-
2000	3121	400	50197142	11326969
2005	4226	369	54978838	10714712
2010	5222	386	63808286	9150435
2011	5003	413	68417259	9621022

Source – INSSE, 1990-2011. [www.insse.ro](http://www.insse.ro)

After an increase in 1991 compared to 1990 the number of tourist facilities, both those across the country, as well as those of health resorts, overall the country has followed a decrease of about 18% in 1995 and a recovery until 2010 when he recorded the highest number of units. On the other hand, the number of units in health resorts declined from 1991 to 2005, and then it begun to slowly increase till 413 in 2011.

In terms of the number of beds, there was a continue decrease at national level, and strong fluctuations in those of health tourism. Although the number of hotel's structure increased, the number of beds continued to decline, reflecting a development of small structures, especially as guesthouses, by private initiative.

At the same time, large units (hotels, motels), came out of the tourist circuit. Receipts increasingly smaller and the increased costs associated with these structures of these large number of them generated closure or difficulty in maintaining standards, the adoption of solutions such as the use of one or two floors of six or ten, in case of the big hotels.



**Figure no.1 The evolution of the number of accommodation facilities**

In health resorts the situation was different. This is due to the closure of some small, old, outdated facilities and non-intervention of private initiative in developing new tourism facilities in the spa field. On the other hand, there were still in function hotels, the spa complex and large bases treatment, old and with a majority of the number of places, which could still provide this form of tourism services. In these circumstances, it was in the interest of those who run the establishments of health tourism to keep running big hotels, spa complex, which also features basic treatment and earn revenue throughout the year, at the expense of reduced capacity, which were removed from the circuit and have been degraded in the absence of investment shares or privatization.

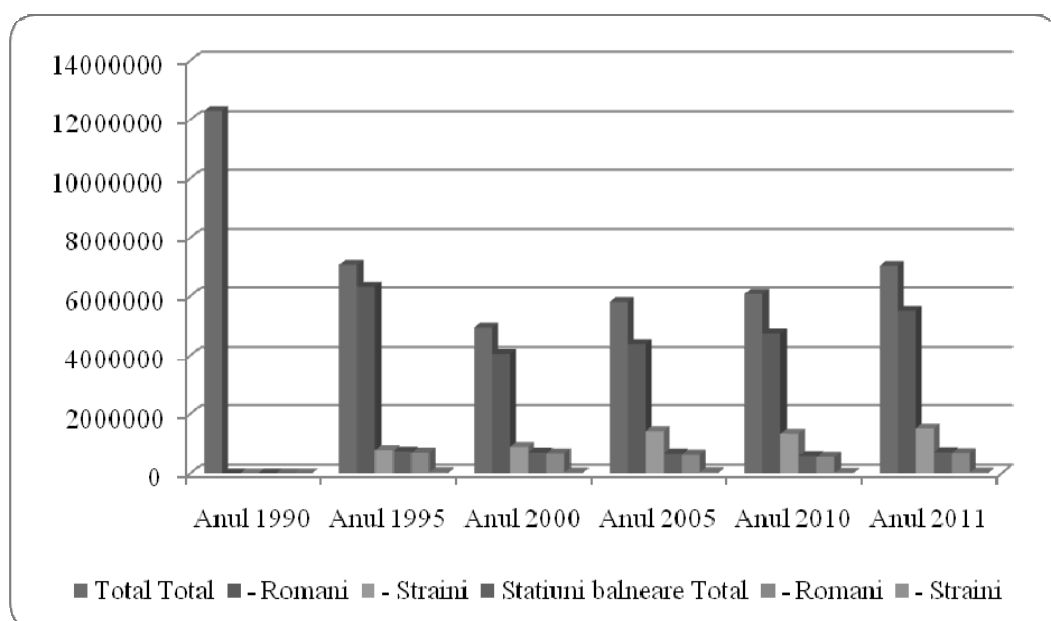
**Table no.2 Number of tourist arrivals in Romania and health resorts**

		1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011
<b>Romania</b>	<b>Total</b>	12296552	7070385	4920129	5805096	6072757	7031606
-	<b>Romanian</b>	:	6304570	4053105	4375185	4726414	5514907
-	<b>Foreigners</b>	:	765815	867024	1429911	1346343	1516699
<b>Health resorts</b>	<b>Total</b>	:	718427	677495	650026	568257	689195
-	<b>Romanian</b>	:	680736	651983	613654	546068	662466
-	<b>Foreigners</b>	:	37691	25512	36372	22189	26729

Source – INSSE, 1990-2011. [www.insse.ro](http://www.insse.ro)

In terms of the number of tourist arrivals we can observe from the table above, a strong downward trend, both at the national level and in spas resorts. The decrease was obvious in the period 1990 – 2005, and from 2010 it was observed a gradual increase. Unfortunately this situation has made a point to drop foreign tourist interest for Romanian tourism. Most of the foreign tourists come from neighbouring countries, and the duration of their stay does not exceed 5-7 days. In theory there are so many foreigners who know about the Romanian health tourism, but in practice they do not come in the spa resorts because of the poor conditions they found there.

There are also, good examples of spa resorts where there were made important investments, and they are at the European level. We can mention here Sovata or Baile Felix, two examples of success, especially due to the foreign investments. The hotels were renovated, the treatment facilities were redesigned in order to suit current requirements of spa treatments, and there were developed recreational facilities, especially for young people.



**Figure no.2. The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals in Romania and health resorts**

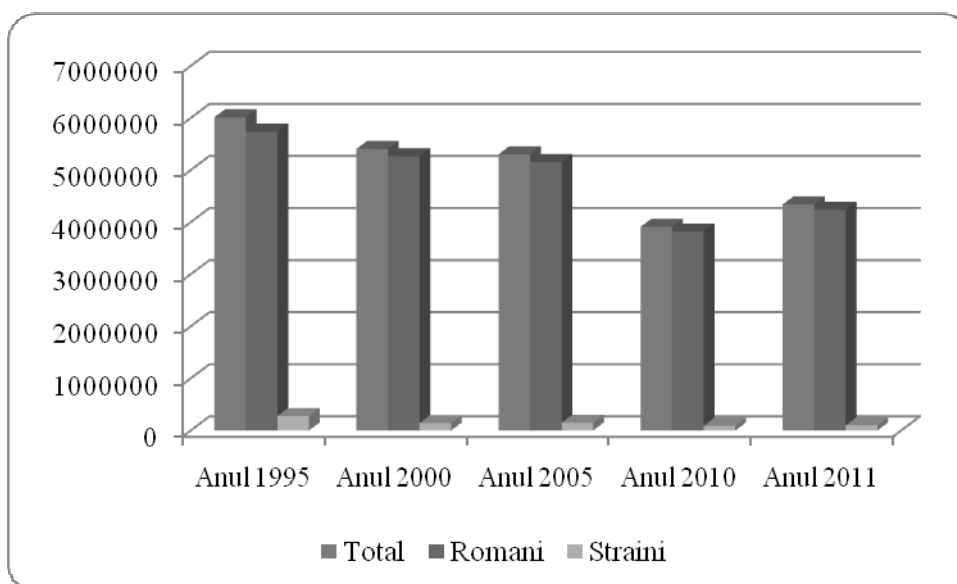
In case of overnight stays in accommodation, we see a clear decrease since 1990. Between 1990 -1995 the number of overnight stays at national level fell by about 45%, mainly due to uncertainty and low purchasing power. Also, the overnights in health resorts represent about 25 % of the total.

**Table no.3 The evolution of tourists overnights between 1990-2011**

		1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011
<b>Romania</b>	<b>Total</b>	44551804	24111170	17646675	18372988	16051135	17979439
-	<b>Romanian</b>	:	21730464	15497317	14908854	13284554	14912557
-	<b>Foreigners</b>	:	2380706	2149358	3464134	2766581	3066882
<b>Health resorts</b>	<b>Total</b>	:	6015468	5406773	5303980	3910309	4342157
-	<b>Romanian</b>	:	5737508	5265048	5155731	3820672	4238654
-	<b>Foreigners</b>	:	277960	141725	148249	89637	103503

Source – INSSE, 1990-2011. [www.insse.ro](http://www.insse.ro)

Nutrition, with accommodation, is an important part of the health tourism that contributes greatly to the overall quality and image of the supply. The type and the profile of catering, convenience and services offered, the quality of the preparations have a significant weight in the choice that makes tourists. In resorts and spa towns in our country, feeding takes all its specific forms, from restaurants and restaurants pension in bars, disco-bars, self-service, buffets, bakeries and patisseries. These units includes all categories of classification, but many units are of class II, III and IV, with facilities located well below current travel requirements, but with very good locations in these resorts, which increases the unfavorable image that creates the health supply.

**Figure no. 3 The evolution of tourists overnights between 1990-2011**

### 3. Actions done at the national level and proposals

Diversity and potential importance spa led authorities to pay attention to this sector, so in 2009 tourism was declared as a priority for the ministry, and in 2010 a National Strategy was developed for the health tourism. In 2011 the Master Plan was completed and there was created a "BALNEO " group, with interdepartmental participation of specialists from the main institutions involved in this activity, which to track and resolve issues in the sector.

Romanian spa tourism strengths are: a loyal clientele and a high confidence of the population in the therapeutic properties of the treatment factors. Among the weaknesses are: a negative image, very close to the hospital and disease image and the absence of research in the field, also the lack of investments in spa amenities and the introduction of modern procedures. More rapid risks are influenced by: the strong dependence of social budgets funded clients in counterpart with extraordinary opportunities created by expanding markets through liberalization in 2013 and people traffic services; the availability of EU funds created for this sector as well as increasing the number of customers in terms of growth potential due to age and the large number of elderly projected for the next 15-20 years; the evolution of international markets, new trends in health tourism in general: anti-aging products, medical tourism private clinics, treatments prescribed care, wellness services.

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The Master Plan for health tourism is developed in phases and short-term, medium and long. It was the result of a strong collaboration between authorities and some local structures, in order to create incentives for investors in spas, respectively, achieving investment grade, according to modern standards and requirements for developing an effective public-private partnership that would stimulate investment.

The Master Plan for health tourism has focused on three principal objectives:

- Objective 1. Choosing one or more marketing positioning.
- Objective 2. Defining the strategy to be applied for each combination market/product.
- Objective 3. Defining financial resources to be allocated and the most optimal method of work.

Privatization has helped many investors to own hotels, with or without the treatment facilities, restaurants, guesthouses, most of them built in the '70 or even older. As a result, there were a large number of employers in spas. It must be appreciated the courage of those who understand the value of an investment in a health resort, many have tried to raise the level of comfort. Even when the clientele

comes from ticket recipients' treatment, they were thinking about the future and have tried to provide a solid, competitive, both internally and externally.

Some of the OPTBR (Organizatia Patronala a Turismului Balnear din Romania) members are investors with a large financial power and small entrepreneurs in almost all resorts, being representative of the whole sector.

#### 4. Conclusion

Unfortunately, the future of health tourism is not so good. It is necessary to involve more partners and numerous types of investment for this type of tourism, so that it could be at its state of development once known. From our perspective, it is important to align the international trend of development of health tourism, with a focus on the young consumers and strong diversification of recreational structures.

Also, a solution could be the introduction of new technology for maintenance and beautification of the human body, so that the health tourism will not be just a synonymous with aging and illness of the human body. Romania has so many cosmetic products that are extremely popular on the international market, but with very little use in the structures spa treatment in the spas (Gerovital, Ana Aslan, Pell-Amar etc.). This can be transformed in a strength for the spas.

As European countries like Vichy (France), Baden-Baden (Germany), Spa (Belgium) or Karlovy Vary (Czech rep.) were able to maintain and even reinvent themselves, we believe that the Romanian health resorts could be strong competitors on the European health tourism market.

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