

THE IMPORTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF SPA TOURISM

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Abstract

Spa tourism represents one of the main forms of tourism practiced worldwide. The development of spa tourism has led to the establishment of a large number of resorts that vary in size, location, altitude, architecture, and level of facilities. The selection of territorial areas is made based on the existence of natural conditions suitable for the resort's specific profile.

Keywords: development, strategy, marketing, management, tourism.

JEL Classification: Z30.

Introduction

Spa tourism is one of the oldest forms of organized tourism, owing to the beneficial effects of mineral and thermal waters on human health. In Romania, this form of tourism has developed continuously, with the country ranking among the leading spa destinations at the European level.

At present, spa tourism has gained strategic importance in the context of increasing life expectancy, the rising incidence of chronic diseases, and the growing interest in prevention and rehabilitation. Beyond its medical benefits, spa tourism stimulates local and regional economic development and contributes to the diversification of the tourism offer.

1. Spa tourism – conceptual delimitations and particularities

Spa tourism is defined as the set of tourism activities carried out in resorts that benefit from natural therapeutic factors, which are used for preventive, curative, and rehabilitative purposes under medical¹ supervision. These factors include mineral and thermal waters, therapeutic mud, natural gases, and specific climatic conditions.

Unlike wellness tourism, which focuses primarily on relaxation and prevention, spa tourism requires the existence of specialized treatment facilities

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¹ Minciu, R. (2004). *Economia turismului*, București: Editura Uranus, p.87.

and qualified² medical staff. Consequently, spa tourism represents an intersection between medical practice and tourism activity, generating complex effects on public health as well as on the local economy.

2. The importance of spa tourism

Spa tourism stimulates the economic development of regions by creating jobs, attracting investments, and encouraging related activities such as transportation, food services, and commerce³. Spa resorts contribute to the revitalization of less industrialized areas and help reduce regional disparities. Investments in spa infrastructure, both public and private, enhance local attractiveness and facilitate the arrival of additional investors, while the steady flow of tourists generates a multiplier effect on the economy. Spa tourism has a significant economic impact on the regions where it is practiced, generating stable and diversified employment opportunities, both in the tourism sector and in related activities such as transportation, food services, commerce, and recreational services. Spa resorts attract public and private investments, contributing to the modernization of infrastructure and increasing local economic competitiveness. The continuous influx of tourists stimulates local businesses, generates additional revenue for the community, and produces multiplier effects on the regional economy. The development of spa tourism supports the revitalization of less industrialized areas and reduces economic disparities between regions. Modern infrastructure and diversified tourist services attract international visitors, thereby increasing tourism revenues and strengthening Romania's image as a health destination. Moreover, spa tourism can foster the development of local entrepreneurship through initiatives such as boutique spas, specialized treatment centers, or innovative recreational facilities. Consequently, this sector becomes an important economic driver, capable of supporting the sustainable growth of the regions where it is present.

Spa tourism also has significant effects on the health and well-being of the population. Spa treatments are intended for the prevention and treatment of rheumatic, neurological, respiratory, and cardiovascular conditions, thereby contributing to improved quality of life and reduced costs within the public healthcare system. Additionally, spa resorts provide opportunities for socialization and recreation, promoting social inclusion and relaxation in a natural setting. Socially, spa resorts facilitate interaction among people of different ages and physical abilities, offering opportunities for socializing, recreation, and inclusion. Recreational, cultural, artistic, and sports activities integrated into spa programs support the harmonious development of visitors and encourage a healthy lifestyle. Furthermore, spa tourism can indirectly reduce

² Ciangă, N. (2007). *Turismul balnear din România*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, p.56.

³ Neacșu, N. (2006). *Turismul și dezvoltarea durabilă* (p. 42). București: Editura Expert, p.42.

pressure on the public healthcare system through disease prevention and the rapid recovery of patients. Local communities also benefit from the positive effects of spa tourism on quality of life and social cohesion. Thus, this type of tourism is not merely a recreational activity but also an essential factor for public health and social well-being.

Spa tourism contributes to the diversification of the tourism offer and helps reduce seasonality, as it can be practiced throughout the year⁴. Integration with cultural and leisure tourism, through visits to historical sites, themed events, or recreational activities, increases the attractiveness of destinations and provides complex tourist experiences. Spa tourism plays an important role in the development of the tourism offer by diversifying available activities and attracting a wide range of visitors, which helps mitigate the seasonality characteristic of other forms of tourism. Spa resorts provide integrated experiences, combining medical treatments with relaxation, recreation, cultural activities, and nature excursions, making them appealing to families, young people, and seniors alike. This diversity increases the length of tourists' stays and enhances their satisfaction, fostering loyalty and promotion through recommendations. Spa tourism supports the development of local infrastructure and stimulates other economic sectors such as transportation, food services, and commerce, generating positive effects within host communities. Additionally, integrating spa tourism with cultural or leisure tourism can transform resorts into complex destinations competitive at an international level. Promoting spa resorts as destinations for health and relaxation contributes to Romania's image in the global tourism market. Thus, the importance of spa tourism extends beyond strictly medical considerations, having a significant impact on the tourism and economic development of the regions where it is practiced.

3. Strategies for the development of spa tourism

The development of spa tourism requires an integrated approach, which includes the modernization of infrastructure, diversification of services, professionalization of management, effective promotion and marketing, all while adhering to the principles of sustainable development.

Modernization of infrastructure

Modernizing infrastructure is an essential condition for increasing the attractiveness of spa⁵ resorts. This involves rehabilitating treatment facilities, renovating accommodation units, improving access infrastructure, and utilizing modern technologies for service management. European funds and private investments contribute to the competitiveness of the resorts.

⁴ Surugiu, C. (2009). *Impactul turismului asupra economiei regionale*. Revista Română de Geografie, 53(2), p. 145.

⁵ Ciangă, N. (2007), p. 78.

Diversification and innovation of services

Diversifying tourist services allows spa tourism to adapt to market demands. Integrating wellness tourism, SPA, fitness, and recreational activities attracts tourists from various⁶ segments. Creating tourist packages that combine spa treatments with recreational, cultural, and educational activities increases the length of stay and fosters visitor loyalty.

Professionalization of management

Effective management requires continuous training of personnel, application of quality standards, and the use of modern tourism⁷ management tools. Public–private partnerships can support the efficient administration of resorts and maximize the returns on investments made.

Tourism promotion and marketing

Coherent promotion through tourism branding, digital marketing, and participation in international fairs enhances the visibility of spa⁸ resorts. Establishing a consolidated national brand can position Romania as a leading destination for spa tourism.

Sustainable development

The development of spa tourism must respect the principles of sustainability by protecting natural resources, monitoring the consumption of thermal water, reducing environmental impact, and educating tourists⁹. Urban planning and biodiversity protection contribute to the long-term conservation of natural and therapeutic values.

4. Case study

Băile Felix Resort is located in Bihor County, just 9 km from the city of Oradea, which provides it with a strategic geographical position and easy access for tourists. Its proximity to the Hungarian border facilitates the attraction of visitors from neighboring countries and Central Europe. Road access is well developed, with modernized roads and direct connections to the main transport arteries in the region. In addition, the resort is served by local and regional public transport, allowing visitors to move easily between accommodation units, treatment facilities, and tourist attractions. Oradea International Airport, approximately 15 minutes away, provides rapid connections to major European cities. The combination of a location with attractive natural landscapes and

⁶ Minciu, R. (2004), p. 92.

⁷ Stănciulescu, G. (2011). *Managementul destinațiilor turistice*, București: Editura ASE, p.102.

⁸ Cocean, P. (2010), p. 130.

⁹ Neacșu, N., & Baron, P. (2013). *Turism durabil și protecția mediului*. *Revista de Turism*, 15, p. 5–12.

efficient access infrastructure increases the resort's appeal to all categories of tourists. Thus, location and accessibility are key factors in the success and development of spa tourism at the resort.

Spa potential and therapeutic resources

The resort has oligomineral, bicarbonate thermal waters with temperatures ranging from 20°C to 49°C, used for rheumatic, neurological, and gynecological treatments. Therapeutic muds and natural gases in the area complement the effectiveness of treatments, offering solutions for physical rehabilitation and relief from chronic pain. The diversity of resources allows the organization of individualized spa treatments tailored to the needs of different categories of patients, from the elderly to young people or individuals with chronic conditions. The high quality and constant temperature of the thermal waters make their use possible throughout the year, supporting year-round tourism and mitigating seasonality. Additionally, combining natural factors with modern treatment and recreational facilities enhances the resort's attractiveness. This richness of spa resources positions Băile Felix as one of Romania's most important health tourism destinations. By responsibly leveraging these resources, the resort can provide both therapeutic benefits and complex, sustainable, high-quality tourist experiences.

Technical infrastructure and tourist demand

Băile Felix features modern hotels (Lotus, International, President, etc.), treatment centers, SPA facilities, and recreational amenities. Tourist demand includes visitors seeking treatment as well as those interested in relaxation and wellness. The accommodation and service network is complemented by restaurants, cafés, shops, and public recreational spaces, contributing to an integrated experience for tourists. Tourist demand is diverse, with visitors arriving for medical treatments and spa cures, as well as for relaxation, wellness, or recreational and cultural activities. The resort attracts a steady flow of tourists from Romania and abroad due to the combination of high-quality services, natural resources, and excellent accessibility. Moreover, the development of customized tourist packages and the integration of additional activities, such as fitness programs, relaxation therapies, and local excursions, increase visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Demand is also stimulated by the opportunity to benefit from long-term treatments tailored to individual needs, in a pleasant and relaxing natural setting. This infrastructure and well-defined demand give the resort significant potential for sustainable development and competitiveness in the spa tourism market.

Development strategies

Priority strategies for the development of the resort include modernizing infrastructure, diversifying services, effective promotion, and protecting natural resources. This involves renovating treatment facilities and accommodation units, improving accessibility, introducing modern technologies, and creating recreational spaces. Additionally, developing wellness services, organizing cultural and recreational events, creating customized tourist packages, and integrating leisure tourism contribute to visitor loyalty and reduce seasonality. Protecting thermal water resources and the natural environment, along with educating tourists and training staff, ensures long-term sustainability. Coherent promotion through branding and digital marketing complements these sustainable development strategies.

Conclusions

Spa tourism is a strategic sector of Romanian tourism, with economic, social, and medical impacts. Romania possesses valuable spa potential that can be leveraged through coherent strategies, including infrastructure modernization, service diversification, effective promotion, and adherence to the principles of sustainable development. The Băile Felix case study illustrates how these strategies can be implemented to enhance the long-term attractiveness and competitiveness of the resort. Moreover, spa tourism contributes to strengthening Romania's image as a destination for health and relaxation, attracting visitors from various countries and promoting cultural exchanges. Implementing sustainable development strategies allows for maintaining a balance between the use of natural resources and the economic demands of tourism.

Through infrastructure modernization and service diversification, spa resorts can more effectively meet the needs of contemporary tourists, offering integrated experiences of treatment, recreation, and culture. Education and engagement of the local community play a crucial role in the long-term success of these destinations. In this context, strategic planning and collaboration between authorities, investors, and tourism operators become decisive factors in enhancing competitiveness and improving the standard of living. Spa tourism not only supports public health but also generates significant social and economic benefits. Its development represents a model for promoting tourism at both the national and international levels.

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