

Spa Tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia

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Abstract— The health and medical tourism is defined as a sector in tourism where patients travel outside the country to meet various diagnostic or therapeutic procedures, that, for different reasons, might not be available in their homeland. Travelling abroad to realize certain diagnostic and therapeutic procedures has been done for long, however, it was during the last decade when the medical and health tourism was recognized as a separate branch of the economy with an opportunity to generate meaningful gains. The National Strategy for Tourism Development mentions medical and health tourism as a type of tourism which can generate revenues in the Macedonian economy, with an emphasis placed on the spa tourism. The number of mineral and thermal-mineral springs in the country, located in picturesque and forested areas, have always been a resort for many passersbys, but also those looking for remedy in the healing power of water. These resorts were the focal points around which healing centers, spa facilities, and sport terrains were being built aiming to attract as many visitors as possible. Spa tourism is represented with a small percentage in the overall tourist turnover in the country (www.stat.gov.mk). The largest portion of tourists is domestic. Foreigners are represented in a significantly smaller percentage, but no activities for organized spa visits in Macedonia are being taken by the tourist agencies abroad.

Keywords— Medical and health tourism, spa tourism, National Strategy for Tourism Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

The current condition of some spas is not promising, having in mind they operate with semi-ruined facilities and pools, decayed from the test of time. They are still considered natural healing centres, usually used for treatment of several diseases, as well as for therapeutic treatments in post-surgical phase. Operating as public institutions (under the state’s umbrella), up until recently, the spa facilities were considered an addition to the hospitals. However, upon their transformation, part of these spas was privatized, which helped develop sports and recreational activities – opening a window of unused opportunities for this treasure given by nature. Macedonia numbers at least 64 springs with different water temperature, ranging between 20-72 degrees Celsius. (Metodijeski, Taskov, Boskov, Filiposki, and Temelkov). These springs are rich with sulphur, phosphorus, arsenic, iodine, bromine and other elements with medical and physio-therapeutic properties. There are eight spas in the country. In their immediate vicinity, or, as part of the complex can easily be found hotels, motels and other accommodation facilities with accompanying physical and rehabilitation centres. The Health Insurance Fund has signed agreements for continuous medical treatment with a number of these spas.

In addition to using these services through the Health Insurance Fund, interested tourists may use private accommodation services, as well. Spa tourism is represented

only partially in the overall tourist turnover in the Republic of North Macedonia (chart 1).

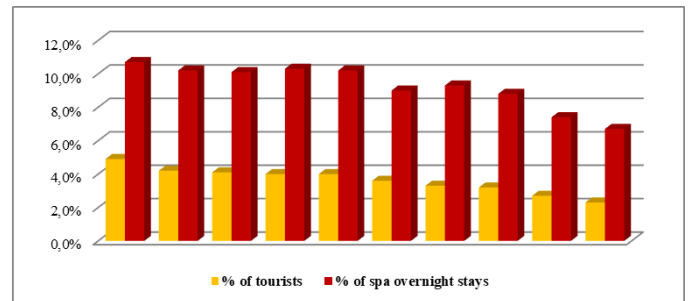


Chart 1: Spa tourism representation in the overall tourist turnover in the Republic of North Macedonia (2010 – 2019)
Source: own analysis

The spa tourist percentage in the country in regard to the overall tourist turnover in the time period from 2010 until 2019 is in continuous decline (4,9% in 2010; 2,3% in 2019). This is the same for the overnight stays. The percentage of realized overnight stays in regard to the overall realized overnight stays declines from 10,7% in 2010, to 6,7% in 2019. The decline is not a result of a lower number of tourists and realized overnight spa stays, but rather a result of the larger percentage of realized arrivals and overnight stays in other tourist locations (such as mountains, lakes, capital of the county – the city of Skopje, etc.). The participation of tourists in realized overnight spa stays in the Republic of North Macedonia is considerably low.

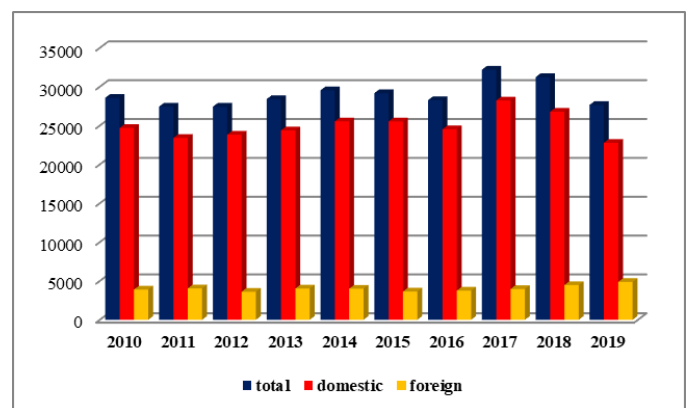


Chart 2: Total number of spa tourists (domestic and foreign) in the Republic of North Macedonia (2010-2019)
Source: own analysis

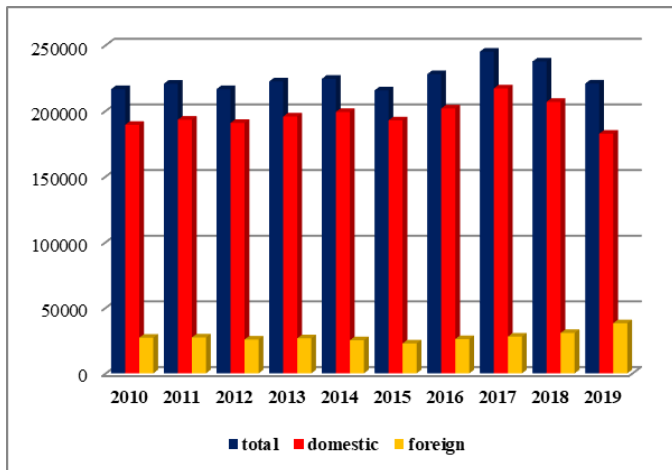


Chart 3: Total number of realized overnight stays (domestic and foreign) in the Republic of North Macedonia (2010-2019)
Source: own analysis

The flow of foreign tourists regarding visits and realized overnight stays in spas, is low. The reason for this is the large influx of domestic tourists who realize the rehabilitation services through the Health Insurance Fund.

There is a difference between baths, and spa and wellness centres. Both terms refer to health, but their meaning varies. Spa is an abbreviation for ‘sanus per aquam’, which translated means: ‘health coming from water’. In practice, this means that each center based on water (ideally, thermal or water with healing qualities – not always necessarily the case!), can be justified and called ‘spa center’.

The term ‘wellness’ is not directly related to water. It was coined from the American phrases ‘wellbeing’ and ‘fitness’, meaning ‘healthy concept for life’. If we associate this with the centers, we get ‘healthy center’ in which your activities are directed towards a healthy life (Jovanovic, V., 2013).

We can say that the spa center is more of a relaxation-and-pleasure type of place; while the wellness center is more easily associated with the concept of healthy living, calories burnout, and consuming healthy food. We cannot quite count on mass spas to be wellness and spa centres since one cannot really swim because of the crowd and noise.

The concepts of wellness and spa are quite new, as opposed to the baths which are considered traditional. What makes baths stand out are the healing waters which aid in treating various conditions, combined with the fresh, clean air – excellent for walking around and staying in nature. Baths put an emphasis on traditional medicinal services. In addition to rehabilitation, spas aim towards healthier lifestyles with improved quality of life, resulting in prevented medical issues. These are the reasons why most of the spas offers are typical for the modern wellness and spa centres.

II. SPAS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Bansko Spa (Banja Bansko)

On the road towards the border crossing of Novo Selo (near Strumica), on the borderline with Bulgaria, is located the Banja Bansko natural spa. There are 13 (thirteen) natural springs in the vicinity, with large reserves of underground waters which heat reaches 72 degrees Celsius. The spa

includes a Rehab Center with employed medical staff. Part of this spa is the ‘Tsar Samoil’ hotel located in the foot of the Belasica Mountain.

The rich woodlands and clean, fresh air surrounding the building make up for the relaxing atmosphere and healing conditions for treating all kinds of rheumatism, sciatica and polyarthritis; diseases of the digestive organs (ulcer, gastritis, etc.); bone fracture conditions; hepatitis/jaundice; nervous diseases; gynaecological diseases (sterility, ovaries’ inflammation) (Taskov, N., 2004).

Negorci Spa (Negorska Banja)

Negorci spa is located in the immediate surrounding of Gevgelija - settled in the foot of the Kozhuv Mountain at only 50m above sea level. There are three natural springs nearby, with large reserves of hot underground waters. The spa water features medical properties for seven types of illnesses. The spa is considered to be healing all types of rheumatoid conditions to the bones and muscles; sterility; gastrointestinal diseases; cardiovascular diseases; inflammations of the peripheral nervous system; different types of dermatological conditions, etc. Drinking sulfuric acid water cures inflammation of the kidneys, gastritis, and the onset of gastric ulcer.

The spa is equipped with modern electrotherapy equipment; Chinese and paraffin therapy, as well as underwater massage (Taskov, N., 2004). At depths of about 20-50 meters, thermo-mineral water splashes the surface, providing for the fact that in addition to the thermal water, the Negorci spa is also enriched with arterial-thermal-mineral water. In particular, this spa is known as the only spa in the country with thermal mud.

Debar Spas (Debarski Banji)

The Kosovrasti and Banjishte spas, better known as Debar Spas, are located in the immediate vicinity of the town of Debar. The waters (which temperature ranges between 38 to 48 degrees), contain sulfur-sulfide elements. Suitable for treatment of rheumatic diseases, high blood pressure, skin diseases and diabetes, the Debar Spa of Banjishte is located 4 km from Debar, and is known for its healing and radioactivity.

The healing effect of the thermo-mineral water is a result of its chemical composition, which contains sulfate, a number of rare elements, hyperthermia, dissolved gases and high radioactivity. The spa includes the Center for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (<https://ekobalans.mk>).

Katlanovo Spa (Katlanovska Banja)

The Katlanovo spa area has always been the ‘it’ place for strolls on the weekends, holiday celebrations and observances, picnics – while the spa itself has always been known for healing rheumatism and sterility both. Located 23km South-East from Skopje, on 230m above sea level. This healing spot feels so pleasurable for stay, because of the moderate continental climate and the fresh mountain breeze from the surrounding hills. As opposed to the natural healing spots, Katlanovo Spa is a Center for long-term treatments and rehabilitation. It belongs to the group of alkaline bicarbonate

waters, highly mineralized – which makes the water used in the swimming pools not drinkable.

There are a number of natural springs around the spa, featuring different degrees of thermality and minerality, used for treatment and rehabilitation. Part of these springs, enriched with sulfur, are used for drinking, and treating digestive organs. With its mineral and thermo-mineral waters, this Spa successfully treats digestive conditions, ailments of the digestive system, and cardiovascular diseases. (Taskov, N., Metodijevski, D., 2014).

Banje Spa (Banje Banja)

Located just 5km from the town of Kochani, and 66km from the nearest border crossing, this Spa has thermo-mineral waters with temperatures reaching 70 degrees, which may drop to 37 degrees. These waters have excellent properties for the treatment of digestive, skin, and rheumatic diseases, as well as diseases of the liver (<https://artoftravel.mk/>).

Kezhovica spa (Banja Kezhovica)

The South-East exit from Shtip to Strumica leads towards thermal water springs with 62 degrees Celsius; 82 Mach units of radioactivity; favorable chemical composition including sodium chloride, sodium sulfate or silicon oxide. These waters are efficient in treating rheumatism, joint diseases, nerve diseases, diabetes, gout, infertility; in treating different skin diseases, arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, etc. Physical therapy includes the latest physical methods of treatment. This Spa is of medical and recreational character, and its waters are used for drinking and bathing (<https://artoftravel.mk/>).

Proevo Spa (Banja Proevo)

This Spa is located just 3km from the town of Kumanovo. There is a single spring with water temperature of about 30 degrees Celsius. The Spa includes an Olympic-size swimming pool, and a mineral water pool. The mineral water pool in Proevo Spa reaches temperatures between 29-31 Celsius, containing calcium and sodium. The water is considered healing for nervous diseases, troubles with the digestive system, kidneys and with diabetes (Taskov, N., 2004).

III. CONCLUSION

The Group of Spas (as part of the Economic Chamber of Macedonia) initiates regulation of the status of spas as natural healing spots. All of these, now, private entities established prior 1991, in line with the amendments to the old Law of Health and Medical Protection in 2004, have been deleted as terms and provisions from the Law – that is, are no longer considered part of the entities functioning as a medical organization performing medical activities, offering medical services. Nevertheless, in line with the valid agreements concluded with the Ministry of Health back in 1995, these entities continued operating up until the new Law of Health and Medical Protection was passed in 2012. However, this new Law from 2012 didn't define the natural healing spots as medical organizations, which is not the practice in the countries in the region and further abroad. The natural healing spots, in addition to the activity they have been established in

the first place, play a meaningful role in the development of the spa tourism (Ministry of Health, 2012). The spa representatives point out that their operating is dominated by the revenues generated from the medical services, showcasing specific interest in overcoming this issue – above all, due to the insurers and patients using their services, because there is a danger of blocking the process of continuous medical treatment and specialist/consultative medical protection, which is considered necessary for some of the patients.

The integrated development of a top-notch medical service in addition to the tourist offering in this area is crucial for development for the medical tourism. Specialized tourist and service packages for international patients need to develop their offering with transportation, accommodation, translation, and other services. Having that said, it should be taken into consideration that the medical tourists may have specific needs, like ambulance vehicles or helicopter for transportation, or accompanied travelling. The accommodation part of this engagement would include accommodation for the patients and their accompanying parties, which requires hotel facilities (<https://ekobalans.mk/>).

The promotion of the spa tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia is a success-establishing element. Each of the medical institutions and tourist companies which already offer, or plan to offer packages for medical tourism abroad can and should individually promote themselves and the services they offer. However, an aligned, efficient, and targeted promotional campaign to the targeted markets on a country-level is needed.

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