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## **REVITALIZING SPAS FOR WELLNESS: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR MACEDONIAN TOURISM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Spas have been gaining increased attention recently and represent an important segment of tourist offer. Compared to other tourism trends, wellness tourism grows rapidly since its primary motivation is wellbeing and self-care. Although N. Macedonia belongs to the group of destinations that have a significant number of spas with quality thermal and mineral waters, this tourist potential is still very little used. In 2023, spa resorts accounted for only 2,6 % of the total number of tourist visits. The content offer in these places is mostly based on health-treatment packages that are used by a small segment of visitors. Why is it so and what should be done to overcome this situation in order to make spas recognizable tourist resorts are the questions for which the research in this paper should give an answer. The main objective is to present the position and importance of spas for increased tourism development in N. Macedonia with enriched offer.

**KEY WORDS:** wellness tourism, Macedonian tourism, spa resorts, tourist offer, tourism development

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## INTRODUCTION

Spas have been interesting and attractive to people throughout many centuries because spa therapy is known as an important element for our health and prevention from illnesses. As a society were developing, knowledge and new concepts for health care changed over time but certainly not neglecting the health component as basis for their use. In this context, it should be emphasized that spa resorts that are developed on the use of hydro-thermal components promote their values for health preservation and prevention from various diseases. In addition to this, the importance for health care nowadays is strongly related to the contemporary understanding of the importance of spas which are also perceived as places of well-being and self-care. And spa therapy as part of their promotion is receiving increasing attention from many visitors.

Taking into account the modern way of life and the increasing need to overcome stress and physical inactivity caused by social, technical and technological changes, the tourism market is witnessing an increase in new modified contents in which the focus is the desire for an authentic individual experience. As standard of living is growing, spa tourism gains in significance, particularly in highly developed countries. In this context Milićević et al. (2020) argue that wellness offer is becoming a significant component of many spa centers as component of a wide range of different elements of their tourism products in order to be competitive on the tourism market. Their proactive approach to enriching services combined with those for treatment shows the orientation towards a wider customer segment. If it is taken into account that spas promote wellness by providing therapeutic and other professional services in order to renew the body, mind and spirit (Global Wellness Institute, 2024) then we should emphasize their role in the development of wellness tourism. According to the Wellness Tourism Market research report by Fact.MR (2024) the global wellness tourism market is expected to reach \$2.3 trillion by the end of 2033.

During their development spas expanded their offer with wellness, sports and recreation, and culture and entertainment offer, meaning there was a transfer from curative to health promotion. But as Becková and Kantorová argue (2021) wellness services are also offered by a large number of other entities that are not spa facilities as hotels or resorts by providing wellness offer with various scales and levels from mere complement to sophisticated wellness programs. Therefore it should be distincted that wellness effects from

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a stay in a spa differ from those in other facilities with wellness services because of the healing effects of hydro-thermal and other natural resources. In spa centers, the medical function is more prominent, due to medical treatments and programs prescribed, administered and monitored by medical teams, and is complemented by a preventive one that includes additional wellness services. Thus our research focuses only on spas.

International Spa Association (ISPA) defines spas as places dedicated to improving the quality of life through various professional services that support the renewal of mind, body and spirit.. The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science & Medicine (2007) explains that wellness is achieved by a combination of emotional, environmental, mental, physical, social, and spiritual health. And according to different authors (Smith and Kelly, 2006; Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001; Cohen and Bodeker, 2008) wellness in most cases means a healthy balance between mind and body which leads to a general feeling of well-being and as an approach to health care emphasizes prevention from diseases and prolonging life as opposed to treating existing diseases.

Wellness tourism is among the few tourism trends that are developing very quickly because it contributes to an improved psycho-physical condition through the use of various services that allow us to feel better. Therefore the research in this paper focuses on the spas in Macedonia trying to identify what the current situation is, whether their facilities offer both health and wellness services, and how much is wellness included in such offer, or is it just based on the traditional medical services offer. The paper aims to present the current situation in terms of the issues addressed and to find an answer to the question of whether a possible greater focus on wellness can contribute to revitalizing Macedonian spas with such additional content that will enrich their offer and attract more visitors.

#### CURRENT STATE OF THE SPAS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Research about current state of spas applies analysis of works on their values, characteristics and potentials, as well as content analysis of their offer. The condition of some of the spas does not promise much, because they have ruined buildings and pools, corroded by the ravages of time. They are still only natural healing centers for curing certain diseases, as well as for therapeutic treatments in the post-operative stages. Functioning as public institutions, under the umbrella of the state because of the regulation as public health

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institutions according to the Law for health protection (2012), until recently they were treated as extended arms of hospitals. Some of them are privatized and developed as sports and recreational centers, which opens a new window to the unused possibilities of this wealth, gifted by nature.

As natural resources Macedonian spas are primarily associated with their healing values, although they have additional high potential to be an important part of tourist offer due to their natural and cultural surrounding. On its territory that covers 25,713 km<sup>2</sup> North Macedonia is abundant with numerous hydrographic resources among which thermal springs are counted for over 65 and eight spas have been established in these areas: Spa Banjishte, Spa Kosovrasti, Katlanovska Spa, Kumanovska Spa, Kochanska Spa, Spa Kezhovica, Spa Bansko, and Negorska Spa. Their dispersion throughout the country and water quality is great potential for spa tourism (Marinoski, 2012). The higher concentration of spa resorts in N. Macedonia in Southwest Region, Eastern Region and Skopje Region gives opportunities for creation of complex tourist offer with selective forms of tourism that can enrich the existing offer (Petrevska, & Nestoroska, 2015). The interest in studying them as natural values in the function of tourism has been present for a long time, as evidenced in the published publications by several authors, among which the researches of Stojmilov (1969; 1971, 1975, 1978, 1983) should be highlighted. Most of the spas have been used since earlier historical past, and as continuity they nowadays are established accommodation and spa facilities with possibilities for increased development of spa tourism. They have a favorable position towards the settlements, because of their vicinity to urban areas. Accompanied with very good climate conditions and abundance of vegetation that makes them very different to urban areas, enable spas to provide recreational and other activities related to wellbeing. Current research (Petrevska and Nestoroska, 2015; Nestoroska, 2006; 2007; 2012, Marinoski and Nestoroska, 2016; Metodijeski et.all. 2019; Taskov et all., 2015) indicates that Macedonian spas are not sufficiently used as facilities that offer enriched content with wellness programs that will increase the interest in visiting them from a larger tourist market segment. As Marinoski and Nestoroska (2016) also note Macedonian spas possess attractive anthropogenic values that determine the cultural dimension of these tourism potentials.

As stated before, although there is a significant number of spas with quality thermal and mineral waters this tourist potential is still very little used that is due to conditions of the amenities, infrastructure and spa offer which are identified as main milestones for their appropriate inclusion in tourist offer creation. According to the State statistical office (2024) in 2023 spa resorts

accounted for only 2,6% of the total number of tourist visits which is very little in number of visitors and not competitive to other tourist places (table1). For this purpose an analysis was made for the attendance of these places during last ten years. The average participation for the analyzed ten-year period amounts to 3,1%. Results show that there is continuous low visit to spas and in the structure of visitors prevail domestics. Implementation of the program by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in 2010 to subsidizing pensioners for spa climatic recreation was realized in the following spa centers: Health facility - natural healing center "Negorski banji" JSC Negorci Gevgelija, Society for physical medicine and specialized medical rehabilitation "Katlanovska banja" DOO Katlanovo, JSC Debarski banji Capa and JZO Banja banjsko "Csar Samuil" Strumica.

Table 1: Domestic and foreign visitors to spas for the period 2014-2023

Year	Total	Spas	Domestic visitors	Foreign visitors	% participation of spas
2014	735 650	29 532	25 534	3 998	4,0
2015	816 067	29 169	25 533	3 636	3,6
2016	856 843	28 276	24 525	3 751	3,3
2017	999 841	32 189	28 227	3 962	3,2
2018	1 126 935	31 244	26 778	4 466	2,8
2019	1 184 963	27 647	22 776	4 871	2,3
2020	467 514	12 876	11 376	1 500	2,8
2021	702 463	20 104	17 188	2 916	2,9
2022	969 277	32 792	26 063	6 729	3,4
2023	1 168 730	30 319	24 203	6 116	2,6

Source: State statistical office of N. Macedonia

Research further involves analysis of their offer by investigating the promotion for which we applied the method of content analysis of spas' websites listed in the references. They mainly promote medical services and are lack with wellness offer that is mostly related to the lack of appropriate equipment of accommodation capacities, infrastructure and human resources in favor of new orientation of tourist offer for health care, wellness and selfness tourism. Exceptions that can be taken as example for orientation to wellness offer are Banjishte and Kosovrasti Spa, Katlanovo Spa and Bansko Spa.

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## CHALLENGES TO REVITALIZE SPAS WITH WELLNESS OFFER

Development of spa centers and spa tourism require development of new ideas and innovations. It applies also to Macedonian spas because they are facing with problems that threaten their very existence and which in part persist to this day. In recent years, they have faced significant problems as insufficient funding, lack of qualified staff and fewer visitors. Because spas primarily have traditionally a healing function, they have to focus on providing various wellness programs since wellness in general have become increasingly popular and demanded. If we consider the European Spa Association (2024) definition that a spa is a mineral source or a place where such a source was found and it promotes spa medicine as a curative and preventive approach using natural remedies, rehabilitation techniques and education as part of a healthy lifestyle, it should be taken into account that such attributes should also be present in the offer of Macedonian spas. They have an immense amount to offer, particularly for maintaining wellness and preventing disease as well as providing healing and benefit with various wellness modalities to health seekers. Current situation in spa resorts nowadays is facing a major milestone, with taking activities for improved development of their facilities and adjustment to tourist demand for wellness tourism. The practiced concept in previous development showed that spas should not be used only for medical treatments but more even for recreation, self-care and wellness.

Development and enrichment of wellness offer as a new spa concept for health-care tourism should be foreseen as main goal. The main challenge is to adjust a part of facilities in wellness centers to attract tourists by meaningfully promoting such services and facilities. Some of the spas are mentioned as good examples, but they too need to enrich their content of wellness services in order to be competitive. This is especially important if one takes into account the diverse wellness offer in neighboring Bulgaria and Serbia, or the countries in the wider region (Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria). The concept of medical only spa centers needs to be overcome, and health and recreational contents and services based on shorter stays with wellness offer in order to improve the overall health condition should be offered. Marinovski and Nestoroska (2016) identified that the range of services which might be included in the spas' offer is wide and should be adapted to the customers with diverse offer of health treatments (medical examinations, vitamin treatments, special diets, and acupuncture or hydrotherapy treatments), treatments for relaxation, health-care and self-care (exercise programs, treatments for exfoliation, various baths, saunas, cellulite treatments, etc.). Such components if included in treatments that will provide visitors with health benefits through

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various forms of prevention, selfness and wellness will enable improved tourism spa offer.

As Angelevska-Najdeska (2017) argues the task of the promotion in tourism is to bring the consumers to the tourist destination where the tourist product is offered and to acquaint them with the destination and the product. For that purpose the promotion should contribute to increased number of visitors to spas as tourist destinations. Wellness products can be one of the marketing tools that can significantly help to revitalize spas. Voinova (2020) indicates the need to use new approaches in promotion with the involvement of a sufficient digital platform and Beckova and Kantorova (2021) discuss that this will bring an analytical and business perspective to marketing communication and target specific customers very effectively and in an addressed manner. Since the recreational attributes of spas are possibilities of using health amenities through prevention and health care, intensive marketing and appropriate management are needed for Macedonian spas too, to fit into a tourist product which will be recognizable with a typical wellness image. Therefore it is of significant importance how spas upgrade the wellness offer with their basic medical services and how they will be promoted.

## CONCLUSION

Spas should have better role in the overall Macedonian tourist offer because each of them has specific tourist values. In this turbulent tourism market they should constantly keep pace with changes and accordingly innovate tourism products and services. Their thermal springs with diverse hydrological specifics are excellent basis for being used as places for health, recreation, recuperation, wellness and selfness. The recreational and health component related to the specifics of the mineral springs are particularly significant, contributing in transforming the spas into tourist centers for the development of wellness tourism. But they attract visitors primarily for health treatments and recuperation which imposed the need to research the current state of their contents and services.

For further spa development as competitive wellness tourism resorts attention should be paid to their modernization in terms of facilities, infrastructure, staff and offer of both medical and wellness services. Their offer and promotion should be expanded for relaxation and recreation for enabling conditions for their revitalization as wellness centers. This is especially important considering the competitiveness of the environment with such an offer and



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their orientation towards constant development and upgrading of the wellness offer.

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