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A review of thermal tourism in Europe and Greece

Abstract

Nowadays, all over the world tourists prefer alternative and sustainable forms of tourism, such as thermal tourism, as they seek to receive higher quality of service. Many competing countries have paid a great deal of attention to thermal tourism due to its significant economic benefits. The therapeutic properties and the potential of thermal springs can bring many economic and social benefits at local and national level, such as job growth, longer tourist seasons and increased income, even in areas that are untapped. This form of tourism is considered to be profitable and competitive, outpacing other forms of tourism globally. The aim of this research note is to present an overview of thermal tourism in Europe and in Greece and underline its importance to tourism economy.

Key words: thermal springs; tourism; spa; Europe; Greece

Introduction

Today, European baths attract people of all ages who look for natural forms of treatment and a healthier lifestyle, thus increasing the number of centers offering these services. Thermal tourism has gained international appeal in population groups with different demographic characteristics who want to combine their holidays with programs of rejuvenation and relaxation, preventive and healing treatment, mental balance, sociability and meditation, taking advantage of therapeutic and beneficial properties of thermal water. Modern lifestyle, stress, improvement of the educational level and the configuration of new social standards has led to a quest for a more quality lifestyle and new experiences of relaxation and rejuvenation. Greece has significant comparative natural advantages, such as its long coastline, natural beauty, the Mediterranean climate. Moreover, it has a significant number of thermal springs with rich physicochemical properties that can be used appropriately for the development of thermal tourism (Kouskoulis, 2016; Lytras, 1998).

Thermal tourism

Thermal tourism is an alternative form of tourism that includes visits of tourists to thermal baths, hydrotherapy and thalassotherapy centers, aiming to restore their physical and mental health by using healing water. Participation in thermal baths can be done in conjunction with other recreational and cultural activities (Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs, 2006; Sfakianakis, 2000; Sarakiotis, 2012). Thermal tourism is addressed to people of all ages and of any physical condition and economic status. The potential of thermal springs can bring many economic and social benefits at local and national level, such as job growth, longer tourist seasons, and increased income,

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even in areas that are untapped. Responding to modern tourist demand, most thermal spa centers incorporate wellness philosophy into their practices by offering specialized healing programs, which adds additional value to thermal springs (Spathi, 2000; Mintel, 2007).

Thermal tourism in Europe

According to a survey by the Global Wellness Institute (2017), in 2015, in 109 countries worldwide, there were almost 27,507 health resorts with thermal/mineral springs, with revenues of \$51 billion, compared to \$50 billion in 2013. In terms of employment, workers around the world employed in the thermal tourism industry are amounted to 1.4 million. By including the indirect impacts from the purchases of the goods and services by thermal/mineral springs businesses as well as the induced impacts (from spending by thermal/mineral springs establishment employees), it is estimated that the economic impact of thermal tourism was \$159 billion, occupying 3.9 million jobs. Similarly, in Europe, thermal tourism facilities are amounted to 5,612 and their revenues to 19.7 billion dollars in 2015 (Yeung & Johnston, 2017).

In Southern Europe, there are historical spa baths, such as those in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, where spa tourism centers are widespread offering a host of services. Turkey is at the top of a geothermal zone and is among the seven best countries in the world for the quality and quantity of thermal springs (over 1000) (Smith & Puczkó, 2009). In Italy, there are 200 destinations and 480 establishments with thermal/mineral springs for hydrotherapy that offer various services to guests, who can combine their stay with recreational, cultural and leisure activities. These thermal spa centers attract about 2,000,000 people every year. The average age of the visitor is 58 years old, daily spending 15-20% over the entire tourism (Kouskoukis, 2014). In Germany, there are about 1,265 high-quality thermal spa centers based on mineral waters, clay and thalassotherapy. Furthermore, Germany is placed first in Europe as the top Thermal/Mineral Springs market and third worldwide in 2015, earning \$6,823.7 US mil. revenues (Yeung & Johnston, 2017). In Switzerland, there are 22 health resorts offering specialized facilities for health prevention with integrated programs based on beauty, warmth, water, nutrition and relaxation (Connell, 2011; Smith & Puczkó, 2009). In the Czech Republic, medical and spa centers offer luxurious infrastructure at very low prices and in many centers the medical and nursing services in the room are free of charge. Spa industry is a significant part of the Czech health care system (Pavel, 2014). Hungary has 137 cities activated in health and medical tourism. In Budapest, there are more than 150 hot springs and is considered to be the largest thermal spa station in the world with most hot springs within the city limits. According to research carried out by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, health and medical tourism (including spa and wellness) is among the three main reasons for visiting Hungary (Hungarian Investment and Trade Agency, 2014). Austria has over 100 spa baths in operation and has been diversified from other countries with the development of Alpine Wellness which is offered in the mountains of Austria, providing a quality product based on Alpine character such as altitude, climate, Alpine materials in the architecture and interior furnishings, alpine cuisine. In these countries, specialized facilities and thermal springs are completing the supply of health services (Mintel, 2006; Johnston et al., 2011). In France, it is estimated that 1,200 thermal facilities are operated in 100 thermal springs. The number of visitors is approximately reaching 1,000,000 per year (Kouskoukis, 2014). Holistic tourism is growing rapidly especially in UK and the Netherlands, where yoga festivals and meditation are additionally offered. In many centers, there is medical staff under the supervision of the Ministry of Health and some of these centers cooperate with medical Universities and research centers (Smith & Puczkó, 2013).

Current situation of thermal tourism in Greece

According to a survey of the National Center for Social Research of Greece, which took place from 2005 to 2016 (EKKE, 2017), the arrivals of tourists who visited thermal spa centers increased by 8% over 2015 and the best performance of the 5th year 2012-16 was achieved, but still lags far from 2011 (58.5%). In 2015, Central Greece presented a decrease of 13.9% in the arrivals compared to 2014. In 2016 there was a little increase of 2.4% compared to 2014. In 2016, Central Macedonia concentrated 52.96%, Central Greece 9.59% and Attica 14.10% of the arrivals at thermal spa installations. Generally, between the years 2009 and 2016 the fall was 88.5%. Central Macedonia in 2015 had the same number of bookings as in 2014, a small increase of 5.3% compared to 2013. In 2016, there was a raise of 9% due to springs of Pozar. Thermal springs which are operated by the Public Properties Company presented fall to the bookings by 79.73% between the years 2005 and 2016. Those which are operated by private enterprises (except Edipsos) presented decrease in the visits by 58.83%. Private enterprises of Edipsos had a reduction of 91.67% and the municipal administration companies showed a decrease by 25.55%. To conclude, in all bathing units, visitors are significantly reduced due to the economic crisis, capital controls leading to liquidity problems and savings cuts from pension funds (EKKE, 2017).

Although Greece has rich water healing resources, thermal tourism is an untapped tourist source of income since there is no adequate promotion with effective marketing and promotion programs. Bureaucracy, the problems of insurance funds, lack of expertise and the small range of offered products make thermal spas unattractive. At the same time, lack of investment to upgrade traditional facilities and lack of awareness of the benefits of thermal tourism do not contribute to a competitive development of this alternative form of tourism. While many sources are considered extremely valuable due to their geographic location, quantity and quality of their thermal waters, many thermal spring establishments have aging facilities or they do not have any at all (Sfakianakis, 2000; Kouskoukis, 2017).

Proposals for tourism planning and development of thermal tourism in Greece

A modern model of thermal tourism should be put forward in order to give a distinct identity and competitiveness. It is essential that thermal tourism operators turn to larger markets so as to attract higher income tourists throughout the year. In addition, there is a need for proper organization, qualified staff, qualified legal and tax status (Aggelidis, 2017). Tourism policy should provide incentives to upgrade the quality of health centers' facilities by broadening the scope of their activities, offering multiple services in order to become centers of treatment and recreation for all ages. It is also very important to expand cooperation with health systems and foreign insurance funds so that insured tourists from all over the world can visit the health resorts. Moreover, thermal tourism could be combined with winter programs and other forms of alternative tourism. Professional marketing is required for the advertising and promotion of health centers globally in cooperation with distribution networks, local and state agencies, tour operators etc. Finally, more thermal springs and health providers need to be recognized and certified by a reliable and internationally recognized system which ensures the quality of the services provided (Papageorgiou & Beriatos, 2011).

Conclusion

In recent years, thermal tourism in Europe has expanded considerably, being one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. Today, baths offer a wide range of products in the broader sense of health tourism, with modern facilities and equipment. Modern health centers, installed in quiet and clean environment, have

been transformed into modern multi-purpose spa centers with recognized healing natural resources, particularly cultural features and medical services for prevention and healing (Petreas, 2008; Mintel 2004; Weaver & Lawton, 2002). Although Greece welcomed about 24.8 million visitors in 2016, the biggest focus is on "sun-sea", whereas thermal tourism is lagging behind (Ikkos et al., 2017). Due to the financial situation in Greece resulting in many cuts to the health care system and poor infrastructure, the current role of spa baths is mainly for therapeutic purposes. Greece is a well-known tourist destination but it should continue extending this alternative form of tourism that gives a distinct identity and competitiveness (Venetsanopoulou, 2006; Lytras, 1998).

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