

EVALUATION OF THE POTENTIAL OF THE CROSS-BORDER REGION BULGARIA-SERBIA FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELLNESS, MEDICAL SPA AND SPA TOURISM – POSSIBILITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the potential of the Bulgaria- Serbia cross-border region for the development of balanced Wellness and SPA tourism concerning the medico-biological and medico-social assessment of tourism resources and professional competencies of the employees.

More than 30 mineral springs and 21 tourist sites have been studied. There are good medico-biological conditions for the development of intensive medical SPA, Wellness and SPA Tourism. The combination of free spring flow and specific climate conditions is a big advantage for the development of highly specialized tourism as the medical SPA. On the other hand, the lack of a working model to control health risk, environmental and safe working conditions in SPAs is one of the obstacles for the development of this kind of tourism. The obtained results show the need to develop specific skills and professional competencies of the personnel.

A new model for management of Wellness and SPA Tourism, based on competency modeling is presented.

The core idea of this model is to find a good balance between indoor and outdoor environment, highly qualified personnel and quality services. The necessity of establishing a competency framework and certifying the medical SPA and SPA services, implementing the quality management system (QMS) and health risk assessment system (HSE) is outlined with the view of promoting the specialized tourism product on the international market.

KEYWORDS: Wellness, Medical SPA Tourism, competency model, cross-border region Bulgaria- Serbia, HSE standards

1 INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the international tourism market proves convincingly that for the last three years medical and recreational tourism exhibits high rates of development. The marketability of the offered specialized packages, including balneological destinations, shows that they are desired by more and more EU citizens. This may be explained with the possibilities afforded by the EU member-states to their citizens – free choice of medical and health services in all countries, members of the European family. The dynamics of this process reflects both on the quality of the offered tourism services in the individual states and on the creativity of managers in tourism. The quality of the proposed health and balneo- therapeutic services in the different countries is also positively affected.

The fast-growing expectations of the clients (Bulgaria has been declared “European SPA capital” in 2015) call for more concentrated and strategically oriented efforts to perfect constantly the staff qualification through modern methods and approaches. They include a permanent study of the market needs and adaptation of the offered knowledge, skills and competencies of the staff to the clients’ topical needs. Competence-based management and training of the personnel is widely used nowadays as one of the adequate approaches for staff qualification in the tourist industry. As an adequate answer to this challenge Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce has launched an Internet based information system for professional evaluation of the employees in 20 industries, among which the tourist one. This system can be used for elaboration of a model for professional competence, particular for the SPA tourism through modification of the already existing system.

2 DESIGN OF INVESTIGATION

Purpose and tasks of the research

The objective of the study is to evaluate the potential of the cross border region (CBR) Bulgaria-Serbia for development of Medical SPA, SPA and Wellness Tourism.

The main tasks of the investigation were:

- Evaluation of medico-biological and medico-social prerequisites for developing of medical SPA and SPA Tourism in the CBR Bulgaria –Serbia ;
- Evaluation of professional competencies of the employees, working in these industries and the current needs of the tourism market for knowledge, skills and competences of the staff ;
- Creation of a new model for management of Wellness and SPA Tourism in CBR, based on competency modeling.

2.1. METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

A specifically developed methodology has been applied for implementing the set tasks and achieving the project objective, which has the following sequence:

- Analysis and assessment of the medico-biological effect of the studied mineral water on the basis of chemical composition and physical properties;
- Evaluation of the medico-social aspects and existing conditions for development of the medical SPA, SPA and Wellness sector in CBR using assessment of the current status of the deposits and their impact on the socio-economic outlook of the region;
- "Face to face" surveys, including one pilot study of the qualification of the personnel occupied in SPA hotels and another one of the market needs for knowledge, abilities and competencies of the employees in this industry (100 respondents /hotel staff);
- Blitz questionnaire survey for medico-social evaluation of mineral bath in Knjajevo, Sofia (30 tourists with different profile);
- Assessment of the prospective areas for investment purposes;
- Evaluation of the potential of the areas for development of Wellness , Medical SPA and SPA Tourism in CBR ;

2.2. THE INVESTIGATION AREA

The investigation plan includes following districts from Bulgaria: Montana, Sofia districts and Nish , Pirot from Serbia.

Figure 1. Map of the investigation area



Limiting factors in conducting the survey:

All experts' and prediction assessments are based solely on the chemical analyses submitted during the investigation work. The available archive materials are used to evaluate the sustainability of the hydro chemical characteristics of mineral waters, using for treatment.

3 OBTAINED RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The main research data, characterizing the objects of the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Obtained results

Obtained results	Cross-border region sites
An evaluation of the hydrogeological potential	More than 30 mineral springs
Medico-biological assessment of mineral waters	More than 30 mineral springs
Medico-social assessment of tourism development in CBR	More than 30 mineral springs
Touristic infrastructure audit	21 SPA and medical SPA centers
Environmental assessment (indoor and outdoor audit)	6 plots
Assessment of SPA centers	21 SPA and medical SPA centers
Assessment of Certification status of SPA centers	21 SPA and medical SPA centers
Assessment of professional competency of employees	10 SPA and medical SPA centers
Assessment of HSE competency	10 SPA and medical SPA centers
Model for sustainability development of tourism in CBR	Applicable for all area

According to our investigation plan, we choose some of the achieved results and discuss them. The main preconditions for sustainability development of Wellness and Medical SPA tourism are the presence of mineral waters, good technical equipment of the wells, free flow rate of springs, staff experience in medical rehabilitation.

3.1. HYDROGEOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION AND EVALUATION OF THE HYDROGEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICAL SPA AND SPA IN THE REGION

More than 30 mineral springs have been studied in the cross-border region, which are in several hydrogeological basins, belonging in geographical respect to the following administrative districts (Fig.1). All of them have their own chemical and physical characteristics, but the common origin of some of them gave us the possibility to combine the springs in some hydrogeological groups/basins.

List of examined mineral springs

- **Republic of Bulgaria (17 thermal springs)**
 - **Montana district: Varshets basin:** Varshets, Spanchevtsi, Barzia, Slatina, Opletnya, Gabrovnitsa-Elov Dol
 - **Sofia district :** (10 thermal springs with 18 wells)-Pancharevo, Ovcha Kupel, Bankya, Gorna Banya, Knyazhevo, Sofia Bani, Batalova Vodenitsa, Svoboda quarter, Nadezhda quarter, Lozenets .
- **Republic of Serbia (6 thermal springs, 25 wells)**

- **Vranska Banya** - 11 working wells with high geothermal potential
- **Topilo**- 18 wells
- **Nishka Banya**- Glavni izvor, Suva banja and Školska česma;
- **Zushanitsa-1**;
- **Gvozdena**- 1;
- **Soko Banya** – Soko area and Joshinska area.

All the investigated sites are well-known tourist centers, where there are good hydrogeological conditions for the development of intensive Medical SPA, Wellness and SPA Tourism in the three areas of investigation. The existing abundance of mineral waters affiliated to different genetic classes provides the possibility of using them for domestic purposes (drinking, hygiene needs), irrigation, bottling, heating and cure [1].

More of the wells are in a good hydrotechnical condition. The main standard hygienic requirements are satisfied. Especially valuable are the mineral water wells with a free flow rate. The last one is a big advantage for the development of highly specialized tourism as Medical SPA [2].

3.2. MEDICO-BIOLOGICAL AND MEDICO-SOCIAL ASSESSMENT OF MINERAL RESOURCE

In order to estimate the medico-biological importance of mineral water, it is necessary to understand the conditions for water formation, the way of water recharge, which are directly related to the flow rate of water sources and the longevity of their use, the hydrotechnical state of the water sources with the aim of ensuring the necessary sanitary-hygiene and the environmental standards for their exploitation. In this context, the collected information about the locations of the hydrothermal deposits in CBR with data characterizing the resources, temperature and content of biologically important macro components in the water, as well as the description of the individual water sources was the base for medico-biological assessment of mineral resource for tourism.

The ecological state of the deposits and the utilization of the hydrothermal resources are evaluated at present on the basis of data from the respective basin directorates. Some recommendations are given for their more rational management, control and protection.

With regards to our results, we can outline the high potential areas for Medical SPA and SPA Tourism development: Sofia Mineral Bath, Knjajevo Mineral Bath and Nishava region in Serbia. There are prerequisites for development of complex tourist services as Eco-tourism, Medical SPA, City SPA, Geo Wellness, Geo-medical and Forestry tourism particularly in Sofia and Nish districts [3].

Site Knjajevo Mineral Bath, Sofia

A special blitz questionnaire survey for medico-social evaluation was carried out in Sofia, district Knjajevo (July, 2015). 30 participants with different socio-demographic profile took part in the survey. All of them are tourists and visitors.

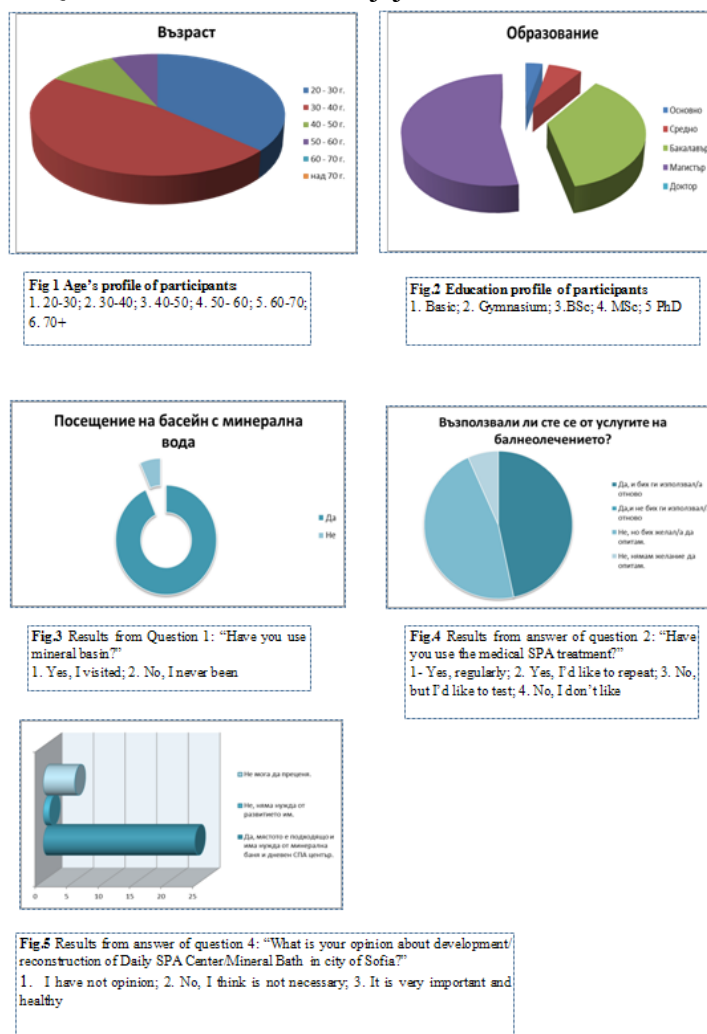
The age and education profiles are presented on fig.1-2.

Some results about the level of Wellness and SPA culture of the participants are shown on fig. 3-4.

The core of our pool is associated with the participants' opinion about the need for Daily SPA with Mineral Bath in the city (Fig.5).

The results turned our attention to a very specific part of the public health culture-health prevention. All participants realized the power of the mineral waters as a factor of Wellbeing . The benefits of SPA and Wellness can improve their health and quality of life [4].

Figure 1-5. Tourists ' Questionnaire Results Knjajevo Mineral Bath, Sofia



Some comments on the outcome

Study of staff qualification

The pilot survey aiming at characterizing the qualification of the staff in the observed SPA hotels is presented in Table 2. The main contents of the questions were to describe the staff's area of professional competency and their HSE and QMS certification culture [5] .

Table 2. Some characteristics of the personnel occupied in SPA hotels in Cross border region

Questions/ Answers	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
	Professional competency of staff	Education needed for SPA therapist	Education needed for SPA managers	Managers' opinion about HSE and QMS implementation	Respondent's qualification	Planning professional training in the area of Health Safety Environment System HSE and QMS
A.Public Health	100					
B.Medical Rehabilitation	0					
C..Economics	0					
D. Other	0					
A. SPA and aqua trainers (BSc)		0				
B. Sport Trainer		18				
C. Medical rehabilitation /or Kynesitherapy		23				
D. Others		49				
A. Management of tourism			21			
B. Management of social services			0			
C. Management of health			9			
D. Others			70			

A. Master in ABM				78	0	
B. Medical specialist				2	12	
C. Economics				11	8	
D. Others				9	80	
A. No, we are not						10
B. It is not required by the Regulations						85
C. Yes, we are planning						2
D. Other						3

The results of this pilot survey of 100 individuals show the great variety of the respondents understandings about the needed qualification of SPA therapists (49 % - “others”) and SPA managers (70% - “others”)as well as the big differences in the qualification of the employed managers (80% - “others”). These outcomes are strong arguments in favor of the need to create common criteria and standards for the knowledge, skills and competencies of all professions in the industry, which can be used for both designing training programs and formulating adequate selection criteria.

Along with this survey another one was carried out to study the necessary knowledge, skills and competency of the staff occupied in the tourist industry (in all types of alternative tourism, including Wellness, Medical Spa and SPA). The respondents are 43 employers from the tourist industry (31 – from alternative tourism and 12 - from mass tourism). They have been asked to rank the importance of knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to satisfy the contemporary needs of the clients and to meet the standards of these industries.

The questions have been formulated using the competence model [5] elaborated in Bulgaria for the evaluation of the tourist staff industry.

The survey shows the following results [6]:

- among the most important skills are : analyzing the market needs and the wishes of the client (1,31)¹, elaborating and offering new tourist products (1,31), acquiring new knowledge quickly (1,42), following criteria and standards (1,65) ;

¹ values of the overall scores

- among the most topical general competences are: effective time management (1,37), recognition of new opportunities (1,30), social engagement and ethical behavior (1,59) and control of the observation of the standards (1,67) ;
- the most important competencies needed to learn turned out to be : constant perfection of language culture (1,37), acquisition of new knowledge on the basis of new information and new technologies (1,37), upgrading the knowledge about the global processes, self-actualization of the competences according to the topical requirements (1,37);
- the fourth ranked two communicative and social competencies are communication with the clients (1,07) and team working (1,23).

The respondents have been asked to rank the most important deficits in their requirements listed above, shown by newly appointed graduates of Bulgarian universities. They pointed out team working (5,3) and customer care (5,3) as greatest deficits, respectively these should be the areas of most active training and education.

Existing competency models, elaborated for the tourist industry can be periodically modified in compliance with the results of the topical market needs. The organizations that have adopted competence-based management (CBM) apply it more often in the area of training and development, because of the following reasons, showing that it:

- Enables a common understanding and standard criteria to be applied across a wide range of employee functions
 - Assists both managers and employees in identifying training and development needs
 - Enables the organization to promote its values, goals and objectives
 - Assists in the management of change
 - Enables employees to know what exactly is expected of them
 - Helps to clarify the career development milestones

The use of competence-based training for the tourist staff will enable the employers to manage the qualification of the personnel in compliance with the topical market requirements and thus to increase constantly the competitiveness of their hotels.

4 CONCLUSION

1. The cross-border region is characterized by different types of mineral waters, applicable to medical treatment and cure. The combination of mineral water and specific climate conditions is a favorable prerequisite for the development of Medical SPA therapy and Tourism.

2. There is no distinct boundary between Medical SPA and SPA Tourism in CBR. This creates preconditions for incomplete utilization of the available natural resources, as well as for unprofessionally developed advertising products.

3. Finding a good balance between interior, unique environment, highly qualified personnel, quality of services and innovation products as Wellment and Geo-medical tourism will contribute to developing Wellness and SPA Tourism making it a successful business today.

4. The key role for the progress in the branch belongs to the reconsideration of the possibilities offered by the existing natural environment and the material facilities, the awareness that changes in the overall organization of the sector are necessary by introducing innovative tourism products and using good practices for development of the cross-border region implementation of QMS and HSE systems.

5. The hotels and SPA centers need an efficient competence-based management (CBM).

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