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Health, Wellness and Spa Tourism in the Balkans

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An 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

Treatment and prophylaxis using mineral water have a long history dating back to the Roman Empire in the cross-border regions (CBR). The objective of the study is to evaluate the potential of CBR Bulgaria-Serbia for the development of medical spa and wellness tourism using hydrogeological, medico-biological and medico-social assessments of tourism resources. More than 30 mineral springs and 21 touristic objects have been studied. There are good hydrogeological conditions for the development of intensive medical spa, wellness and spa tourism in the area of investigation. The combination of free-flowing springs and specific climate conditions is a great advantage for the development of highly specialized tourism such as medical spas.

The main wellness principles for creating holistic effects of treatment are described, and on the basis of an assessment of the medical spa and spa network and the market for these services in the CBR, a new management concept is presented. The core of the model is finding a good balance between the unique environment, highly qualified personnel, quality of services and innovative products such as Geomedical tourism, which will contribute to wellness and spa tourism and become a successful business. The necessity for certifying medical spa and spa services and introducing a quality management system (QMS) and a health risk assessment system (HSE) is outlined with the view to promoting a specialized tourism product on the international market.

Introduction

The analysis of the international tourism market proves convincingly that for the last three years medical and recreation tourism have exhibited high rates of development and 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 by the possibilities afforded by the EU member-states to their citizens – free choice of medical and health services in all countries which are members of the European Union. The dynamics of this process is reflected both in the quality of the offered tourism services in the individual states and in the creativity of managers in tourism. The quality of the proposed health and balneo therapeutic services in the different countries is also positively affected.

Design of the investigation

The aim of research and tasks

The objective of the study was to evaluate the potential of the cross border region (CBR) Bulgaria-Serbia for the development of medical spa and spa and wellness tourism.

The main tasks of investigation were:

- Evaluation of hydrogeological conditions in the research area
- Evaluation of medico-biological and medico-social prerequisites for developing medical spa and spa tourism in the CBR Bulgaria – Serbia
- To describe a model for the sustainable development of wellness tourism in the CBR.

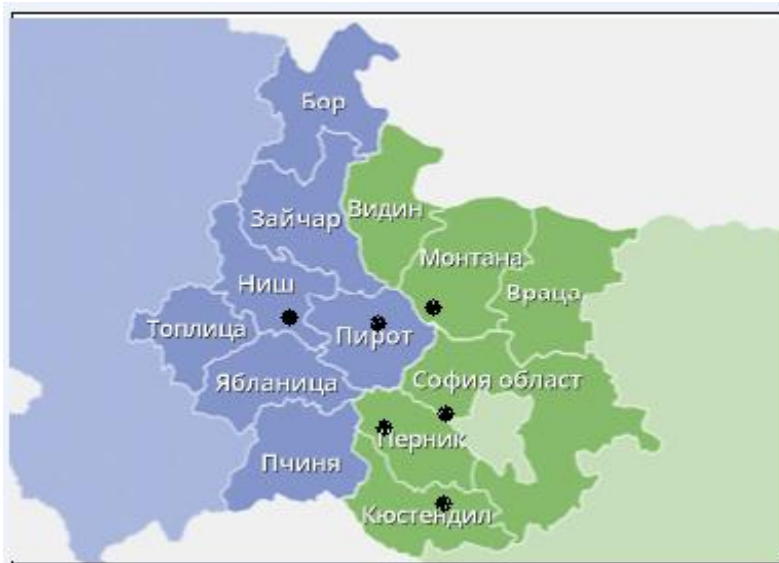
Methods of investigation

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

- Collection of archive hydrogeological information about the region to assist the expert hydrogeological assessment of the area from the moment of exploration
- Analysis of the actual situation
- Qualitative and quantitative assessment of the thermal mineral water resources in CBR based on the chemical analyses of mineral water from 30 sources
- Evaluation of the hydrogeological potential for the development of medical spa and spa tourism
- 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 medical-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
- 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.

The investigation area

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



Map of 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.

Obtained results of investigation

The main research findings are presented in Table 1.

Obtained results	Cross-border region objects
Hydrogeological data and estimate of springs potential (free flow rate)	More than 30 mineral springs
Estimate of hydrotechnical conditions of wells	More than 30 mineral springs
Hygienic conditions of wells	More than 30 mineral springs
Chemical composition of mineral water	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 centres
Environmental assessment	6 plots
Assessment of spa centres	21 spa and medical spa centres
Assessment of Certification status of spa centres	21 spa and medical spa centres
Model for sustainable development of tourism in CBR	Applicable for all areas

Table 1. Research Findings

According to our investigation plan, we chose some of the findings and discuss them here. The main preconditions for sustainable development of wellness and medical spa tourism are the presence of mineral waters, good technical equipment of the wells, free flow rate of springs and experience in medical rehabilitation.

Hydrogeological characterization and evaluation of the hydrogeological potential for development of medical spa and spas in the region

More than 30 mineral springs were studied in the cross-border region, which are in several hydrogeological basins, belonging to the following administrative districts (Table 2). All of them have their own chemical and physical properties, but the common origin of some of them provided the possibility to combine the springs in some hydrogeological groups/basins.

Republic of Bulgaria	Republic of Serbia
Vidin district	Bor district
Montana district	Zaychar district
Sofia district	Nish district
Pernik district	Pirot district
Kyustendil district	Yablanitsa district
Sofia City district	Pchinya district

Table 2: Examined area in CBR

List of examined mineral springs:

Republic of Bulgaria:

- Montana district: Varshets basin: Varshets, Spanchevtsi, Barzia, Slatina, Opletnya, Gabrovnitsa-Elov Dol
- Sofia district: Pancharevo, Ovcha Kupel, Bankya, Gorna Banya, Knyazhevo, Sofia Bani, Batalova Vodenitsa, Svoboda quarter, Nadezhda quarter, Lozenets (1).
- Dolna Banya basin: Pchelin, Momin Prohod, Dolna Banya, Kostenets
- Belchin basin: Belchin Bani, Shtarkelovo Gnezdo, Zheleznitsa
- Pernik district: Rudartsi, Dolni Rahovets, Breznik
- Kyustendil district: Kyustendil, Nevestino – Barishteto, Nevestino – Topilata, Sapareva Banya

Republic of Serbia:

- Vranska Banya- 11 working wells with high geothermal potential (19,92 MW);
- Topilo- 18 wells
- Nishka Banya- Glavni izvor, Suva banja and Školska česma
- Zushanitsa-1
- Gvozdena- 1
- Soko Banya – Soko area and Joshinska area

There are good hydrogeological conditions for the development of intensive medical spa, wellness and spa tourism in the area of investigation. The existing abundance of mineral waters, affiliated to different genetic classes, provides the possibility of using them for domestic and drinking purposes (including hygiene needs), irrigation, bottling, heating and cure. Most of the wells are in good hydrotechnical condition. The main hygiene requirements are satisfied. Especially valuable are the mineral water wells with a free flow rate. The latter is a big advantage for the development of highly specialized tourism such as in medical spas (Станева, 2014).

Medico-biological and medico-social assessment of mineral resource

To estimate the medico-biological importance of mineral water it is necessary to understand the conditions for water formation, the way water recharges, which is directly related to the flow rate of water sources and the longevity of their use, and the hydrotechnical state of the water sources with the aim of ensuring the necessary sanitary-hygiene and environmental standards for their exploitation. In this context, the collected information about the locations of the hydrothermal deposits in CBR with data about the resources, temperature and content of biologically important macro components in the water, as well as a description of the individual water sources was the basis of the medico-biological assessment of mineral resources for tourism (Iling, 2008).

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

The description and evaluation of mineral springs were done according to hydrogeological classification of mineral water deposits in Bulgaria, using hydrogeological terms such as “basin” and “field”.

Montana district

Varshetz basin- there are 7 different mineral springs with similar chemical composition and physical characteristics because of their hydrogeological genesis. All of them were examined. The high content of Fluor 1.8 mg/dm³ is a specific characteristic of the mineral water. The main medico-biological treatment is connecting to treatment of different disorders of the nervous system.

The city of Varshetz has had a high profile since the Roman period and it is well-known in Bulgaria as a balneological and spa centre since 1850 (<http://wellspring->

bgrs.info/bg/). The spa centre is situated in an attractive landscape with a panoramic view at the foothill of the West Stara Planina Mountain. Some touristic destinations are available here. There are good environmental characteristics and landscape possibilities (moderate relief) also for geomedical and forest tourism. Tourism infrastructure is suitable for several kinds of services.

The BAGG evaluation scale: High potential in the area of complex touristic services such as medical spa, spa, wellness and ecotourism, GeoWellness, Geomedical and forestry tourism (Станева, Маринов and Тодоров, 2013).

Sofia Municipality: 10 mineral springs with 18 thermal wells

All of the mineral springs relate to ancient settlements from the Roman Empire and have a good reputation as healing places. The mineral waters from the Sofia district can be described as hydro-carbonate, nitrogen and sodium type with low mineralization. High radioactive waters in Pancharevo and Ovcha Kupel springs. They are suitable for balneological treatment of cardiovascular diseases, disorders of the nervous system, disturbances in the metabolism, musculoskeletal disease etc.

The famous medical spa centres are Bankja, Ovcha Kupel, Knjajevo, Gorna Banja and Pancharevo. They are balneological resorts of national and local significance (<http://wellspring-bgrs.info/bg/>). All thermal springs are located in the foothills of Vitosha mountain and National Nature Park Vitosha. Several eco destinations are available and very popular with tourists.

The BAGG evaluation scale: Sofia Mineral Bath and Knjajevo Mineral Bath have a high potential for medical spa and spa tourism development. The potential of complex touristic services as eco-tourism, medical SPA, City SPA, geowellness, geomedical and forestry tourism is great in the Sofia district.

Dolna Banja Basin

The basin includes several thermal springs: Pchelin, Momin prohod, Dolna Banja, Kostenez.

The common origin of mineral springs impacted on their chemical characteristics. The waters are radioactive, sulphate, sodium, fluorine, with low mineralization. There is a high content of Fluor and increased concentration of micro components such as W, Li, Ge and In.

Medical Spa treatment

The mineral waters are used for treatment of diseases of the musculoskeletal system, injuries to muscles and tendons, rheumatism of the bones, neuralgia, diabetes and allergies. According to experts, the water of the apiary is similar in quality to that of Brambilla in Germany, Masutomiya in Japan and Buxton in England. Kostenez and Momin Prohod have been famous balneological centres for more than 80 years. There are some well-equipped hospitals which belong to the National Association for Rehabilitation. The tourism infrastructure is adequate. The history of the resort Dolna Banja is related to Roman times and

the recent mineral Bath is called “Roman Bath” in the town centre. The first rural tourism society in Bulgaria was established in the same place in 1902. The resort is included in the List of Council of Ministers of R Bulgaria. The tourism infrastructure is quite good. Some projects are in progress in the Dolna Banja and Kostenetz municipalities. The resorts are in the List of Council of Ministers of Bulgaria (<http://wellspring-bgrs.info/bg/>).

BAGG evaluation scale: high potential

Reasons: The potential of the region is very high and depends on the Golf Park, private airport, beautiful Rila mountain landscape and safety. The famous ski centre Borovetz is nearby (Станева and Георгиев, 2013). The region is suitable for development for different additional touristic services as Golf tourism, Skiing, and Wellness (Illing, 2006).

District Kjustendil

There are 4 thermal springs with similar characteristics: Kjustendil, Nevestino-Barisheto, Nevestino-Topilata, Sapareva Banja.

Some of the waters are slightly mineralized with alkaline reaction. Characterized as fluorine, hydrogen sulfide, silica, sodium carbonate sulphate-containing lithium. The technical equipment of some of the wells needs reconstruction.

Medical Spa treatment

The medical spa treatment goes back to ancient Roman times. The mineral waters' healing power is used to cure diseases of the musculoskeletal system, peripheral nervous system, spinal, gynecological diseases, infertility, psoriasis, skin diseases and heavy metal poisoning. The resort Kjustendil is a very attractive balneological centre from Roman Empire times. It was known as the city of Pautalia. It is on the balneological resort List of the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria (<http://wellspring-bgrs.info/bg/>).

The resort of Sapareva Banja was known as Germanea in the same period. The balneological resort is a very popular tourist destination with ecotourism and a geyser that is unique in the Balkans (103° C) as well. It is a balneological resort which is on the List of Council of Ministers of Bulgaria (<http://wellspring-bgrs.info/bg/>).

Evaluation BAGG Scale: High potential

Reasons: tourism infrastructure, modern and high star hotels, developed spa centres and excellent medical spa traditions.

Serbian mineral springs

The main archive information about Serbian mineral springs were presented by our Serbian partner. We supplemented the information with our obtained terrain results. Using all collected information, we refined some specific mineral springs and resorts with a long spa history for the purpose of the investigation.

Vranjska Banja – 10 exploitation wells

The mineral spring is part of the so-called “Surdulichka geothermal system”. It is a high temperature spring. The waters are related to magmatic rocks. The chemical composition is enriched with As, Ca, Zn, Pb, Cu, Hg, Ni, Ci, Ba, Be, Se and U.

Gvozdena – The mineral water is slightly mineralized (490 mg / dm³), hydrocarbonate and sulphate type with content of metasilicic acid and various micronutrients. Hypothermic.

Nishka banja field – three different wells: Glavni izvor, Suva banja i Školska česma. The water contains hydrocarbonate, sulphate, radon with radium content of 0.78 Bq / dm³. The temperature of the water is moderate from 12⁰C to 37⁰C.

Soko Banja field – Soko Banja 1 and Soko banja 2. The mineral water is a oligomineral sulphide hyper thermal type. There are two different wells Joshanska zona and Sokobanjska zona with low mineralization (<http://dv.parliament.bg/>).

Topilo Banja – Low temperature spring with low hydro-carbonate content.

Medical Spa treatment of Serbian mineral springs (overall).

The main medical spa application of Serbian mineral waters is related to treatment of gastrointestinal and liver diseases, functional disorders of the nervous system, traumatic injuries, inflammatory and degenerative joint diseases, pulmonary and cardiovascular disorders, gynecological disorders, disorders of the metabolism and some cardiovascular diseases.

BAGG estimate: High potential for medical spa tourism development

Reasons: Famous resorts, unique nature along the river Nishava, rich experience, heritage objects.

Results from the survey about Public Thermal Baths in Sofia**Knjajevo Mineral Bath**

A special survey for medico-social evaluation was undertaken in Sofia in the Knjajevo district (July, 2015). 30 participants with different socio-demographic profiles took part in the study.

The age and education profiles are presented below.



Figure 1. Age profile of participants:
 20-30; 2. 30-40; 3. 40-50; 4. 50- 60; 5. 60-70; 6. 70+



Figure 2. Education profile of participants
 1. Primary
 2. Secondary
 3. BA/BSc
 4. MA/MSc
 5. PhD

Some results about the level of wellness and spa culture of participants is presented in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3. Results from Question 1: “Have you used a thermal mineral bath?”

1. Yes, I have visited
2. No, I have never been

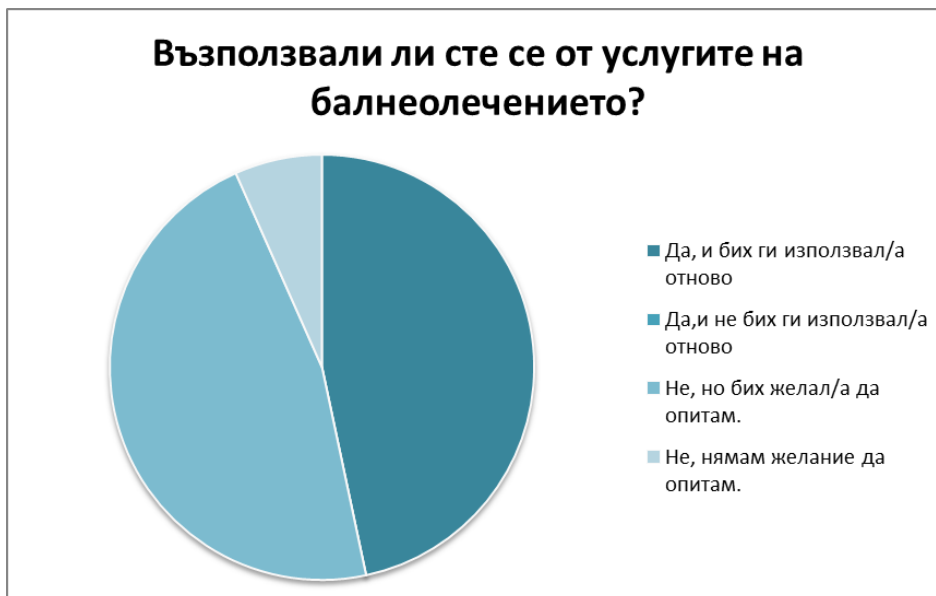


Figure 4. Results from question 2: “Have you used a medical spa treatment?”

- 1- Yes, regularly
- 2- Yes, I'd like to repeat
- 3- No, but I'd like to try
- 4- No, I would not like to

The core of our survey is associated with the participants' opinion about the need for day spas and thermal mineral baths in the city (Figure 5).

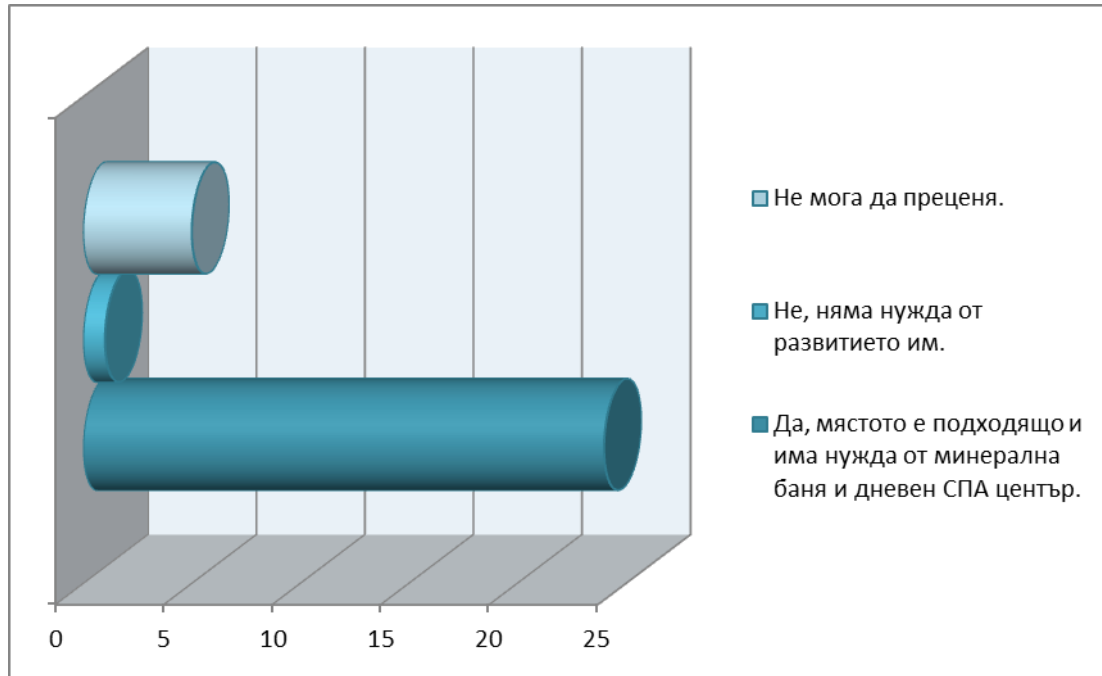


Figure 5. Results from question 4: “What is your opinion about development / reconstruction of Daily SPA Centre/Mineral Bath in the city of Sofia?”

1. I have no opinion
2. No, I think is not necessary
3. It is very important and healthy

The participants realized the possibilities of thermal mineral waters as a factor of wellbeing. The benefits of spa and wellness can improve their health and quality of life.

The perspectives and model of wellness and medical spa tourism organization in cross-border regions. Discussion

The use of mineral waters for therapeutic and prophylactic purposes is most effective in each resort. The use of fresh, wholesome mineral water at the spring source is an advantage because of all the natural ingredients. When we discuss the conditions for tourism development in the cross-border region, we have to focus our attention on a complex number of factors such as climate, infrastructure, tourism traditions and experience, professional expertise of employees and tourism policy. The main reasons for successful spa development are unspoiled nature, management of wellness tourism in the context of quality of life and an holistic approach to tourism development.

We can describe three basic wellness principles for ensuring the holistic effects of treatment (Figure 6):

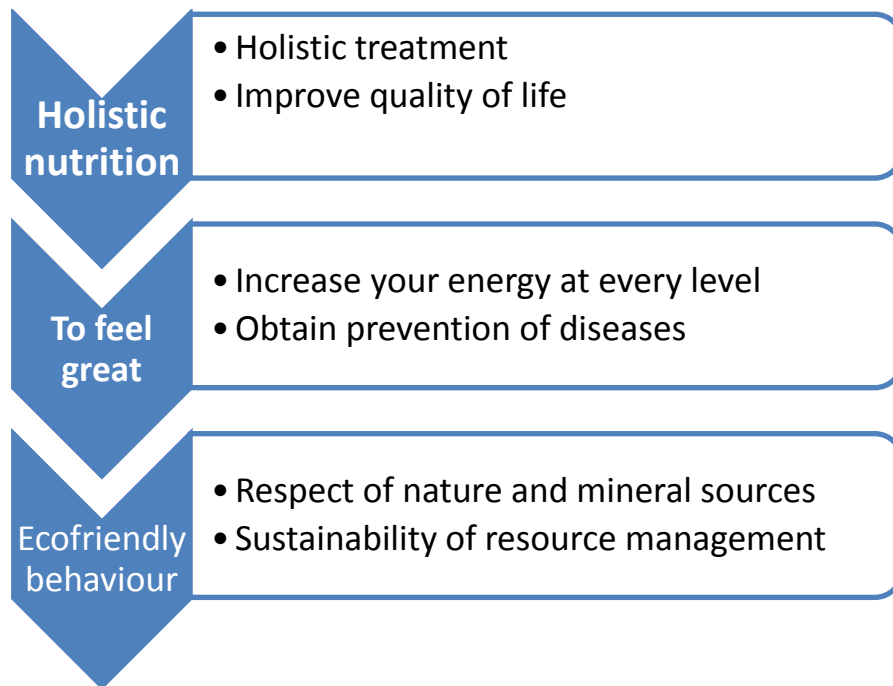


Figure 6. Wellness Principles for an holistic effect

The comprehensive study has proved that the medical spa and spa network in Bulgaria is well developed in attractive natural areas. The leading spa tourism destinations are associated with regions with inherited traditions from balneological resorts as Kostenets, Momin Prohod, Bankya, Sapareva Banya, etc. The good geographical location, the available facilities and good quality of spa equipment in the centres are however not sufficient conditions for the successful development of the sector.

Obviously, a new management concept is necessary, which contains information about the quality of the environmental components –air, water, soils, food, etc., and it should be at the centre of individual management plans for a given site. There also needs to be specialized training of management staff and activities of professional organizations in this field (Станева, К., Е. Маринов, 2014).

On the basis of the assessment of the medical spa and spa network and the market of these services in the cross-border region, it is possible to determine the main objectives of professional spa organizations in Bulgaria. It would be appropriate that the members of professional associations should initiate the implementation of the necessary education and training providing relevant professional competence of the personnel involved at different levels of management. They have to work intensively on the certification of spa services, the introduction of a Quality Management System (QMS) and the system for health risk assessment (Health, Safety and Environment – HSE) to ensure good recognition of Bulgarian spa tourism services on the international market, to seek innovative approaches to the development of advertising and marketing products for achieving good competitiveness of the sector.

The focus of wellness and spa managers has to relate to certification systems at every level which guarantees the achievement of positive results in two main areas- financial and marketing in the long term.

The lack of a working model for control of health risks, environmental and safe working conditions in spas is a disadvantage of tourism development. We need an HSE model and implementation of Standards. Bulgaria is orientated towards a modern system of quality control and screening of standards. Some regulations are being prepared. What kinds of standards do managers need? They have to ensure a good level of quality of life of clients, personnel and local people:

1. Health risk control which will impact on the health of people
2. Safety work a place which will contribute to a safe life
3. Environmental quality which will impact on the health of the environment.

The tourism policy in this field needs ecologically friendly concepts and products, including eco-spas with typical ethno-traditional techniques for a given geographical region, natural products, mineral cosmetics, bio/organic foods, etc. Ecotourism and all forms of alternative tourism, including geomedical tourism, could be used as a complementary instrument for the development and enrichment of the services offered in the spa sector. Ethno-spa tourism in a number of European countries (Croatia, Serbia) is well known. Picturesque sites with well-preserved nature can be introduced as a key element of the proposed spa tourism destinations, a good ecological environment in combination with the acknowledged good practices provide the possibility for developing sustainable and harmonious spa tourism in the Bulgarian-Serbian Cross-border region.

Figure 7. The Pyramid of Sustainability: Medical Spa and Wellness development



Conclusion

1. The cross-border region is characterized by different types of mineral waters, applicable for 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 of products.
3. Finding a good balance between the unique environment, highly qualified personnel, quality of services and innovative products such as Geomedical tourism will contribute to the business success of wellness and spa tourism.
4. The key role for progress in this field lies in reconsideration of the possibilities afforded by the existing natural environment and the material facilities. Changes are also needed in the overall organization of the sector to introduce innovative tourism products and to use good practices for development of the cross-border region.
5. The tourism policy needs eco-friendly concepts and products, including eco-spas with traditional ethno-methods of spa therapies, pure natural and mineral cosmetics and bio/organic food.
6. Tourism services need to be holistic in order to contribute to wellbeing, wellness days and a healthy life.
7. The unique, authentically preserved natural places, heritage sites, healthy food and tourism infrastructures are suitable for the development of Wellness tourism as an innovative tourism service in the cross-border region.

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Health and Tourism in Serbia

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Introduction

This extended case study of Serbia consists of detailed research on the history of healing traditions in Serbia, such as herbal remedies, religious healing practices, food and nutrition and water-based treatments. It also includes a commentary on contemporary health practices, such as massage, beauty treatments, sports and fitness. The latter part of the case study focuses on spas and wellness programmes in Serbia as well as on health and wellness tourism including medical tourism, but also nature-based locations such as ethno-villages and *salaš*. This case study supports and complements the short case study of Serbia presented earlier which emphasized the growing importance of traditional food and cuisine and religious activities, as well as visiting mountains and using natural healing resources. The use of herbal remedies has remained important until nowadays. Medical tourism is in its infancy, local residents seem to be using spas less than their parents and grandparents, and very few foreign tourists visit Serbian spas at present, therefore it is important also to consider other forms of healing and health tourism in Serbia, such as authentic Serbian wellness programme and forest bathing therapy.

Healing

The establishment of Serbian medieval state healing practices started to develop under the influence of different cultures living and trading on the Balkan Peninsula. On the one hand, Serbs brought from their homeland knowledge of rudimentary Slavic medicine with quite a high understanding of anatomy, while, on the other hand, they were influenced by medical knowledge from Byzantine, Italy and other Western European countries (Katić, 1981). Early healing practices in Serbia mostly relied on the use of herbs and on their great curative properties. Herbal healing was so predominant in medieval Serbia that it even became a synonym for medicine in general (Bojanin, 2013). Some of the first and most important Serbian medical texts come from the medieval period and partly represent translations of important ancient works from Greece and Byzantine and western works from Salerno and Montpellier medical schools. These are *Chilandar Medical Codex*, from 13th- 15th century, *Hodoš Code* dating back to the end of 14th century and other medical essays called '*lekaruše*' (Katić, 1981). *Chilandar Medical Codex*, besides records about illnesses, their indications and treatments, contains two important treatises on simple and compound remedies.
