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## Article

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## **CONCEPTUALIZATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF BALNEO, SPA AND WELLNESS ESTABLISHMENTS IN BULGARIA**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the origin, the process of development and consolidation of the health, SPA and wellness tourism in different regions of the world as well as in Bulgaria. Special attention is paid to the etymology of the words “wellness” and “SPA”, used as a basis for differentiation of their structural elements as tourism segments. Under observations are some theoretical issues, including the significant need of term clarification of these forms of tourism. Other matters of high importance comprise of the classification of health, spa and wellness resorts, the vocational training of managerial and executive staff and etc. Based on the conducted research and analysis some recommendations are made in the aim to the further development of health, spa and wellness tourism.

*Key words:* health, spa and wellness tourism, classification and product specialization of the suppliers of health, spa and wellness tourism products.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism industry has been undergoing intensive processes of diversification and supply customization for the last decades. As a result, a lot of new niches have occurred whose specialized products are aimed at meeting the needs of certain target groups.

One of the fast-developing tourist segments constitutes the health tourism (in particular balneotourism) and its correlated SPA and Wellness tourism subcategories. However, SPA and wellness tourism are developing more as individual industries and their integration with tourist business results from the need of the latter to enrich its

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product portfolio with a view to the contemporary requirements of the community, than resulting from the chronological temp of development of both individual industries.

With a view to the above a great number of questions related to the integration of the these three specific activities within the scope of the tourist product arise.

This research has an objective to investigate the contemporary understanding and definitions of balneo, spa and wellness concepts, their implication and content within the scope of the tourism sector in national and global scale. The accurate formulation and differentiation of each tourism type in turn could serve as a basis for setting the framework of the characteristics and specifications together with the evolving requirements related to the typology of the establishments, supplying balneo, spa and wellness services, as well as their license regimes. For the paper purposes research results of the global spa market are used, as well as statistical data for some of the leading spa, wellness and balneotourism destinations.

Each of the three specialized forms of tourism is built upon certain definitions.

## **DEFINITIONS OF BALNEOLOGY AND BALNEOTOURISM**

Balneotourism is developed as balneological and therapeutic practices, implemented away from the permanent place of living of individuals. Balneology is considered as “a branch of medicine that deals with treatment of diseases through mineral water and therapies based on its utilization on individuals” (2009).

The usage of mineral and thermal waters dates back to the past when people found the favourable influence of these waters on the human body. The first ones who utilized natural mineral and thermal waters were inhabitants of “Messopotamia, together with Egyptians, the Minoans, Greeks, Romans, and at a later stage Ottomans Japanese and nations in Western Europe” (Spa Finder, 2006). Balneological procedures occur always as a result from existing medical problem, whose treatment or prevention is the key motive for undertaking a tourist trip. As the latter requires professional medical supervision and servicing, this type of tourism is aimed at limited target groups, which makes balneotourism a very small market niche.

## **SPA CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS**

For the last several years another trend has been gaining popularity. It is predetermined from the need of the society to decrease the high stress levels of the contemporary way of life. As a logical answer spa and Wellness concepts occur. Their fast-growing development resulted in niche differentiation, transforming them into individual industries. A closer look at their definitions is needed in order to clarify their scope of content and extent.

Some authors consider the idea that SPA definition originates from the Latin acronym (Sanus Per Aqua that is Health through water). According to other sources, SPA is the name of a town in Belgium, which became popular during Roman times for its baths. The definition, given by the International SPA Association (2004) claims that SPA is an “entity devoted to enhance overall wellbeing through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit. According to Mueller and Kaufmann (2006, cited by the Canadian Tourism Commission) the SPA

experience contributes to a “wellness” feeling. Both authors think that it constitutes a “state of health featuring the harmony of body, mind and spirit, with self responsibility, physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/meditation, mental activity/education, and environmental sensitivity/social contacts as fundamental elements” of this type of experience. Definitions about SPA content are given by professional SPA associations around the world. The Spa Business Association (SpaBA) (the former British SPA Federation) for example uses three different concepts with a view to the chronological evolution of Spa activities. These definitions are as follow:

„Historical: A spa, holy well or spring that was a special place where natural spring waters were reputed to bring relief and cure from a range of ailments. These waters engendered strong spiritual associations and mystical understanding. Traditional: Spas with a tradition of being centres for healing and rehabilitation, being based on hydrotherapy administered under medical supervision. Recreation and relaxation are also encouraged alongside social interaction and entertainment. Contemporary: Presently spa facilities are dedicated to physical and emotional wellbeing.”

## WELLNESS CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

The Wellness concept is also a subject to different interpretations and understandings.

According to Mayers, Sweeny and Witmer (2005, cited by Smith and Kelly) wellness constitutes a „way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which the body, mind and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community”. Smith and Kelly (Smith and Kelly, 2006) adopt the following concept of wellness – „a healthy balance of the mind-body and spirit that results in an overall feeling of wellbeing”. The wide sense of “wellness” implies a deep philosophy and life rules, leading to a better way of living, which in turn contributes to the wellbeing of the human spirit. The latter is achieved through efficient management of the elements of everyday life. The essence of wellness comprises of the following spheres of influence – physical conditions of the human organism, social communication, intellectual growth, emotional status and spirit, professional development and career. The wellness concept is inspired by the best world philosophies such as ayurveda, feng-shui, reiki and etc., while at same time it makes use of the basic principles in the esoteric doctrines of kabbalah and shamanism. As a philosophy wellness has an aim to unite the wise thoughts of the mankind treasury and apply it to everyday life of people. Achieving an overall wellbeing of the human body and spirit requires a complex approach which combines different techniques, procedures and treatments, including physical treatments over human body together with emotional and spiritual exercises. The end purpose of the therapies and procedures is to create feelings of enjoyment, tranquility and relaxation for the individual.

In regard to the above definitions it is evident that there is a lack of clear and accurate interpretation of what exactly spa and wellness constitute. The given examples, taken from the industry practice, reveal that there is not a consentance related to the issues, directly linked with the basic elements, which form the structure of spa. In other words it is very unclear if these elements should be the used means, the desired purpose (wellbeing of the individual) or both altogether. Furthermore, the scope of the desired wellbeing, achieved through Spa and wellness treatments is not strictly determined. The majority of concepts consider both types of specialized activities

aimed at achievement of physical, emotional and spiritual renewal. As a result the definitions spa and wellness are similar to one another and very often replaceable. There is not a clear distinction between them which in turn results in misuse and development of combined spa-wellness centers and products.

An example to confirm the above statement could be given by the Global Spa Summit<sup>2</sup>, that uses the following definition for the purpose of conducting research within the global spa market. According to it “Spas are establishments that promote wellness through the provision of therapeutic and other professional services aimed at renewing the body, mind, and spirit.” It is obvious that according to this definition spa treatments strive to lead to wellness effects.

For the purposes of tourism it is of great importance to understand the meaning, used in both terms – spa and wellness tourism.

According to Smith (2008) Spa tourism is type of tourism, “focused on the effect of relaxation and curative influence on the human body, achieved by the means of water-based procedures, such as mineral waters, thermal pools, vapor-baths and saunas. The emphasis is placed upon the healing properties, leading to recovery and renewal of the body.”

With a view to this definition the emphasis in spa tourism is laid upon the physical status of the human organism. This in turn does not cover the overall meaning of spa concepts, whose effects is aimed at achievement of a balance among physical, emotional and spiritual renewal.

The definition, given by Mueller and Kaufmann (2000, cited by Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) defines wellness tourism as „the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health. They stay in a specialized hotel which provides the appropriate professional know-how and individual care. Furthermore, they require a comprehensive service package including physical fitness (physical exercises) healthy care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/meditation and mental activity/education.”

## CRUCIAL PROBLEMS FOR SPA AND WELLNESS INDUSTRIES

Within the conference programme of the Global SPA Summit, held in June 2009 a survey among participants reveal the most distinctive problems before both sectors on the global market. They are as follow:

1. Lack of clear definitions, standards and best practices - 29 %
2. Education and vocational training of staff – 21 %
3. Low margins – 15 %
4. High labour costs -11 %
5. Lack of benchmarks - 7 %
6. Oversupply – 6 %
7. Labour shortage – 4 %
8. Technology – 4 %

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<sup>2</sup> Global Spa Summit is an international initiative, founded in 1997. It is established with the aim to cement together key professionals in Spa and wellness sectors, hospitality industry, finance, real estate, medicine and other related industries and sectors. Their purpose is to keep updated information about the development of the spa and wellness activities in global scale and that way to contribute to their further development. The first of its kind research “The Global Spa Economy” is conducted by SRI International, the former Reaserh Institute of Stanford.

9. Medical liability – 2 %

10. Funding limitations – 2 %.

It is obvious that the disability to distinguish spa and wellness content and extent is considered as the basic problem for the industry. At the very same time there is a large number of limitative factors which hinder for it to happen.

The main reason for the variety of definitions and terms is due to the large number of interpretations related to spa content. They in turn are dependent on the diversity of understandings about the desired results. And the unstable characteristics of the latter exist because almost every culture and nation has their own customs and traditions aimed at achievement of better status and condition of the organism. During their historical evolution people from different nations on the European continent were dependant on a great number of thermal and mineral springs which resulted in creation of traditions in usage of natural waters, whose target aim was to achieve a state of well-being of the human organism.

Countries like China, Thailand and other Asian states took use of ancient massage and manual therapies and procedures which were put into practice for the needs of spa and wellness technologies. For that reason water-based therapies are not mandatory elements for the suppliers of spa and wellness services in these countries.

Despite the existing differences regarding the used means, there exists a common feature, representing an endeavour of spa and wellness services to contribute to the overall well-being of the organism. The latter differs in terms of its scope of content from culture to culture. Some of the most important reasons for this differentiation represent religion, value system of the communities, intrapersonal relations as well as the standard of living of the population. A proof, supporting the above statement concerning the role of religion could be given with the following example. Countries where Buddhism, Hinduism or other eastern religions are popular, the concept for the “well-being” is built upon the idea of a balance and harmony of the body, mind and spirit. On the other hand in countries, where Christianity is the key religion, the accent is laid upon the physical impact on organism, which in turn leads to improvement of the overall well-being of the individuals.

It is obvious from the above that the existing definitions of spa and wellness reveal authentic understandings and interpretations of “human wellbeing” for different cultures and nations. This is the main reason, for which it is not possible to create a common definition, combining all existing aspects of spa and wellness concepts. For that reason terminology should neither be standardized nor unified. The opposite would inevitably demolish the specific features, inherited from generations. What both industries need is customization of spa and wellness concepts for different nations on the basis of their customs and traditions. That way an equality will be achieved among countries while the latter will be able to preserve their traditional methods and techniques in spa and wellness sectors on the global market at the same time. The advantages arising from the application of a customized conceptualization will create favourable opportunities for each country to develop their own classification of the specialized establishments, supplying spa and wellness services.

Development of special indicators to register the economic activity and efficiency of spa and wellness markets and their participants is another measure, closely connected with the idea for customized conceptualization. This in turn will ensure comparability among these niche markets in different countries. At the current stage

there is not an efficient operating methodology and set of indicators that register the specific character of spa and wellness tourism activities at national scale.

This research also lays an emphasis upon the operational classification of the establishments, offering spa and wellness services. As a result from the majority of definitions and understandings of spa and wellness, there exist a differentiation in the classification system of the establishments, which varies among countries and international non-government organizations.

The International Spa Association (ISPA) adopts the following classification of establishments, offering spa products:

- Club Spa;
- Cosmetic Spa
- Cruise Ship Spa
- Daily Spa
- Destination Spa
- Medical Spa
- Mineral Springs Spa
- Resort/ Hotel Spa

Australia, on the other hand uses the classification below:

- Day spa – they comprise of the following subcategories – Day spa, Wellness Spa, Bathhouse Spa, MediSpa and CosmediSpa.
- Destination Spa, which in turn are divided into the subgroups of Resort Spa, Hotel Spa, Spa retreat, Health Spa
- Natural bathing spa. They are divided into Natural spring spa, Hot spring spa, Natural mud spa and Sea water spa.
- Related Spa – Salon spa, Dental Spa, Nail spa.

Great Britain has adopted two classifications for the categories of the spa establishments. The first one represents the ISPA classification (International SPA Association) which is supplemented by the categories of the SPA Business Association (SBA). For that reason in Britain there is a special category referred to SPA towns. On the other hand the Specialized consulting company Topaz Consulting Group has created the categories Natural Spa and Sport & Fitness Spa.

Another example illustrating the differences in the categorization of the spa establishments is the adopted system in Germany. It is developed by the German Spa association (Deutschen Haeilbaderverbandes). It comprise of the following types of establishments:

- Mineral and Thermal Spas/Springs
- Climatic Health Resorts
- Kneipp (Hydropathi) Spas and Health Resorts

The above examples, illustrating the classification of the spa establishments in Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany reveal different interpretations of the spa experience and the means used for its achievement.

## **BULGARIAN SPA AND WELLNESS SECTORS – UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

It is interesting to see what is the status and the role of Bulgaria as a spa and wellness destination on the European continent as well as in terms of the global marketplace.

The country lacks officially adopted concepts for spa and wellness applied to these industries as well as to the tourism-oriented specialized activities (spa and wellness

tourism). A variety of interpretations concerning the typology of the spa and wellness establishments is used. Despite the fact that spa and wellness hotels are defined in the Regulation for categorization of tourist sites, the industry lacks specific requirements related to the erection of spa and wellness centers (built as individual sites or representing integral part of tourist complexes), requirements related to the product and service portfolio as well as the used means, techniques and treatments. The latter results form the lack of spa and wellness definitions. Definitions, that have to be implied within the Law on Tourism and serve as a basis for determination of the types and categories of the specialized establishments, their accreditation and license regime.

With a view to the above, the following conceptual model could be applied in Bulgaria (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Conceptual model on Spa and Wellness industries in Bulgaria

Concept	Main objective	Basic means	Typology
<b>Spa<sup>3</sup></b>	Improvement of the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the individual and the human organism through water	Water – fresh, sea, mineral and spring water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard SPA – for all treatments and therapies is used fresh water</li> <li>- Mineral SPA- for all treatments and therapies is used mineral water</li> <li>- Spring SPA – for all treatments and therapies is used spring water</li> <li>- Sea SPA – for all treatments and therapies is used sea water</li> <li>- Combined – if more than one type of water is used the common name of the establishment is Combined SPA.</li> </ul> <p>Further indication on the category is given by its profile – for example a Combined Spring and Sea Spa.</p>
<b>Wellness</b>	Achievement of an overall well-being through balanced influence on human physical, emotional and spiritual health.	<p>Combination of minimum three services from the any of the both categories:</p> <p><b>I Physical health:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customized regime of physical exercises improving the motive activity of the body;</li> <li>- Personal nutrition diet/ regime;</li> <li>- Massage and manual treatments and procedures for physical renewal of the body;</li> </ul> <p><b>II Emotional and spiritual health:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- acquaintance with Eastern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standard Wellness – when a combination of at least three services from the both categories (physical and emotional/spiritual health) are provided.</li> <li>- Specialized Wellness – when the provided services fall under one of the both categories.</li> </ul> <p>Category physical health – Body wellness;</p> <p>Category spiritual and emotional health – Mental wellness;</p>

<sup>3</sup> All services, supplied in SPA centres, not water-based (such as massages, manual therapies, aromatherapies, aerotherapies and etc.) represent additional services, because they are not implied in the SPA concept.



		and/or Western philosophic teachings and practices – meditation, yoga, ayurveda and etc. - educational programmes in the filed of health; - psychological consulting; - special therapies aimed at spiritual renewal, such as aromatherapy, colour therapy, aerotherapy and etc.	
<b>Spa and Wellness</b>	Achieving balance between physical and emotional health through water-based or other procedures and therapies.	Combination of means applied to the individual concepts of SPA and Wellness.	Standrad SPA and Wellness – supplies water-based therapies with fresh water and a combination of wellness procedures, improving both the physical and emotional/spiritual health of the individual.  Specialized SPA and Wellness – the names of the specialized establishments derive from the combination of elements from each of both concepts.  For example Sea Spa and Body wellness means that the establishment offers water-based therapies and procedures with sea water, aimed at improvement of the physical health of individuals (such as fitness exercises, specially developed nutrition diet, massages and etc.).

Source: Regulation on the categorization of accommodation, restaurant and entertainment establishments, 2007

Spa and wellness concepts could differentiate from balneological therapies and accordingly from balneotourism as the latter requires a professional medical services and supervision.

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