

BALNEARY TOURISM IN ROMANIA – TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES

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***Abstract:** Currently, the potential of spa resorts is constantly developing, contributing actively to the enrichment of tourism resources. In this sense, the balneary tourism is considered the oldest form of tourism in our country due to the high volume of natural reserves and the therapeutic qualities they hold. Thus, because of the capacity to restore and rejuvenate health, balneary tourism represents an important pillar of the tourism industry, especially since Romania owns 30% of the European spa resources, concentrated in 29 tourist resorts of national interest and 32 of local interest. Considering these aspects, the present paper aims to provide an overview on the main coordinates of balneary tourism in Romania.*

***Keywords:** balneary tourism, health tourism, wellness tourism, natural resources, spa resorts*

1. Introduction

Considering the current socio-economic context, we can appreciate that the development of balneary tourism has an important role in supporting the public health, the revenues of the administrative-territorial units to which spa resorts belong, and consumers, both existing and potential patients (Kapczynski and Szromek, 2008).

Romania excels in terms of tourism potential due to areas of special geographic importance, among which are the famous balneary resorts, which, through the dynamism shown in the past, could become an economic and social pillar of great importance.

The motivations underlying the development of balneary tourism are the deterioration of the health status of the population (stress, pollution, sedentary); increasing average life expectancy; enhancing individual and collective efforts for health care and for the prevention of illness.

Under these conditions, it should be stated that Romania ranks among the first in Europe in terms of rich and various balneary resources, the arguments are mainly the following: an exceptional balneary potential represented by the 200 localities that have resources with great therapeutic value – with the possibility to be used in the treatment of over 14 types of

diseases (Minciu, 2004); natural resources completed by the existence of spa resorts for recreation and holidays, considered as "oases of health", arranged from the seaside to the massive mountains (Erdeli and Gheorghilaş, 2007).

Thus, it becomes opportune to know the main coordinates of the balneary tourism in Romania and to identify the possibilities for sustainable development of this form of tourism.

2. Analysis the main coordinates of balneary tourism in Romania

At present, balneary tourism knows a broad development under the umbrella of medical tourism concept, which includes medical services and tourism products (Yu and Ko, 2012). At the same time, according to some authors (Snack et al, 2001) balneary tourism is viewed and understood as comprising a single form of tourism, treatment tourism, a specific form of leisure tourism, which, with the increase in the number of occupational diseases caused by the stress of modern life in large urban agglomerations, has experienced a significant growth.

Taking these concepts into account to accommodate the needs of future customers, this form of tourism aims to improve the quality of life, support prophylaxis and create a general well-being (wellness tourism). Thus, the interconnection between health tourism and spa tourism, can be seen by analyzing figure 1.

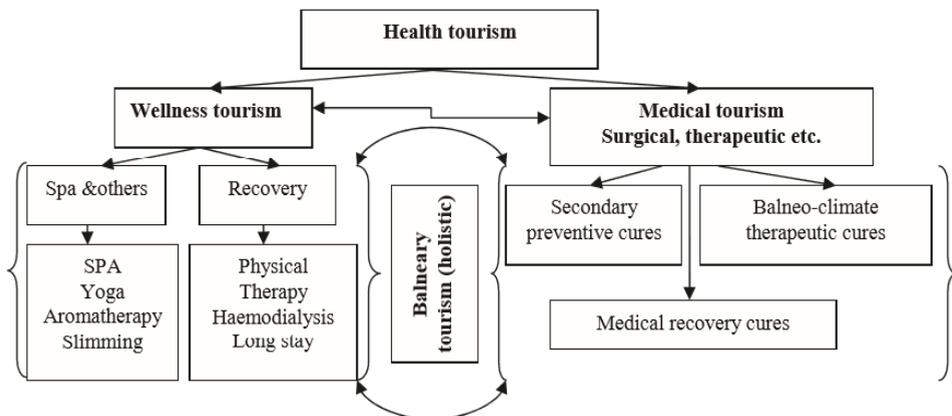


Figure 1. Interconnection between health tourism and spa tourism

Source: Iordache C., Sirbu A., Ciochină I., Coordinates of developing the balneary tourism *Management Strategies Journal*, vol. 31(1)/2016, p.310

Theoretically the components of the balneary potential are mineral and thermal waters; water of therapeutic lakes; sea water; therapeutic sludges; therapeutic gases; bioclimate; saline microclimate; salts extracted from mineral waters; medicinal plants (Neacşu et.al., 2011).

In this respect, among the most popular spa resorts in our country, we can mention: Băile Felix, Băile Herculane, Baile Călimănești-Căciulata, Băile Olănești, Baile Govora, Baile Tusnad, Sovata, Ocna Sibiului, Slănic-Moldova, Vatra-Dornei, but also those on the Black Sea coast.

According to the Romani's spa resorts guide, our country presents a great complexity and diversity of mineral waters with a diverse content of chemical, physical, thermal and mineralogical elements, having its own classification that includes 11 categories:

- Oligo-mineral waters: Containing less than 1 g / l of dissolved substances and less than 1 g / l of carbon dioxide; in the spa resorts: Baile Felix, Baile 1 Mai, Geoagiu-Bai, Călan, Moneasa;
- Carbonated waters: at least 1 g / l of carbon dioxide, mixed and used both as drinking water or medicinal water, as well as in external treatment, at Buziaș, Lipova, Biborțeni, Borsec, Vatra Dornei, Baile Tusnad etc.
- Alkaline waters: containing at least 1 g / l of sodium bicarbonate, used in the internal treatment, with a carbonated mixture like those from Zizin, Poiana Negri, Borsec; or containing sodium chloride, as in Slănic Moldova, Covasna, Sângeorz-Băi.
- Alkaline-ferrous waters: with more than 1 g / l of dissolved substances, bicarbonate anion, calcium and magnesium cations predominate; at Borsec, Zizin, Lipova and Bodoc;
- Ferruginous waters: at least 10 g / l of iron; encountered in Băile Tușnad, Buziaș, Lipova, Vatra Dornei;
- Arsenic waters: containing at least 0.7 mg / l arsenic, located at Covasna and Șaru Dornei;
- Sodium chlorinated water: with more than 1 g / l of sodium chloride, found in Băile Herculane, Someșeni, Ocna Sibiului, Sovata, Ocna Mureș, Ocelele Mari.
- Iodinated water: at least 1mg / l iodine, used for internal treatment as the hypotonic ones, with concentrations of 3-5mg / l iodine in Băile-Olănești, Călimănești and Cozia, as well as in external treatment, but with 50-70 mg / l iodine, at Bazna and Băile Govora;
- Sulphurous waters: with 1 mg / l titrable sulfur, encountered at Pucioasa, Baile Olanesti, Călimănești
- Sulphates waters: contain sulfur in its oxidized form, found at Amara, Vața de Jos;
- Radioactive waters: with a radioactivity of at least 29 m Curie or 10-7 mg / l uranium salt, used therapeutically in Baile Herculane, Sângeorz Băi or Borsec.

Romania's great balneary potential is unquestionable, but this is not enough, the experience of a holiday in a spa resort certainly implies the existence of a complex tourist product with multiple services (accommodation, food, transport, leisure, specific services), regardless of the type of natural cure factor needed to meet the different needs of consumers.

Due to the increased interest shown to various types of therapy treatments - Gerovital and antistress remedies, massages, internal cures with mineral water, inhalations and aerosols, physiotherapy, electrotherapy, baths with salt water, mineral and thermal - many places have started development work in order to increase the number of tourist arrivals.

Therefore, data contained in the table below show the existing accommodation capacity in Romania's balneary resorts, in the last three years.

Table 1. Existing accommodation capacity in Romania's balneary resorts, in 2016-2018

| Types of tourist accommodation structures | 2016 | | 2017 | | 2018 | |
|---|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| | Number of establishments | Number of beds | Number of establishments | Number of beds | Number of establishments | Number of beds |
| Hotels | 126 | 25686 | 132 | 25982 | 133 | 24913 |
| Hostels | 9 | 456 | 10 | 513 | 9 | 437 |
| Motels | 15 | 548 | 15 | 541 | 14 | 503 |
| Tourist villas | 73 | 1790 | 84 | 1773 | 80 | 1918 |
| Tourist chalets | 7 | 177 | 8 | 205 | 9 | 221 |
| Bungalows | 7 | 108 | 57 | 271 | 57 | 271 |
| Camping sites | 7 | 672 | 8 | 760 | 6 | 612 |
| Tourist halting places | 6 | 440 | 5 | 378 | 5 | 378 |
| Houselet-type units | 6 | 472 | 6 | 448 | 7 | 552 |
| School and pre-school camps | 7 | 749 | 7 | 751 | 7 | 747 |
| Tourist boarding houses | 188 | 4012 | 200 | 4063 | 204 | 4240 |
| Agro-tourist boarding houses | 35 | 676 | 45 | 946 | 63 | 1381 |
| Total | 486 | 35786 | 577 | 36631 | 594 | 36173 |

Source: INSSE, 2019

In 2017, the number of accommodation units have increased with almost 3% compared to the previous year, and with 22.2% compared to 2015.

Analysing the data contained in the figure below, we can appreciate that in 2018, aproximative 70% of the acommodation capacity was ensured by hotels, 11.7% by tourist bording houses and 3.81 by agro-tourist bording houses.

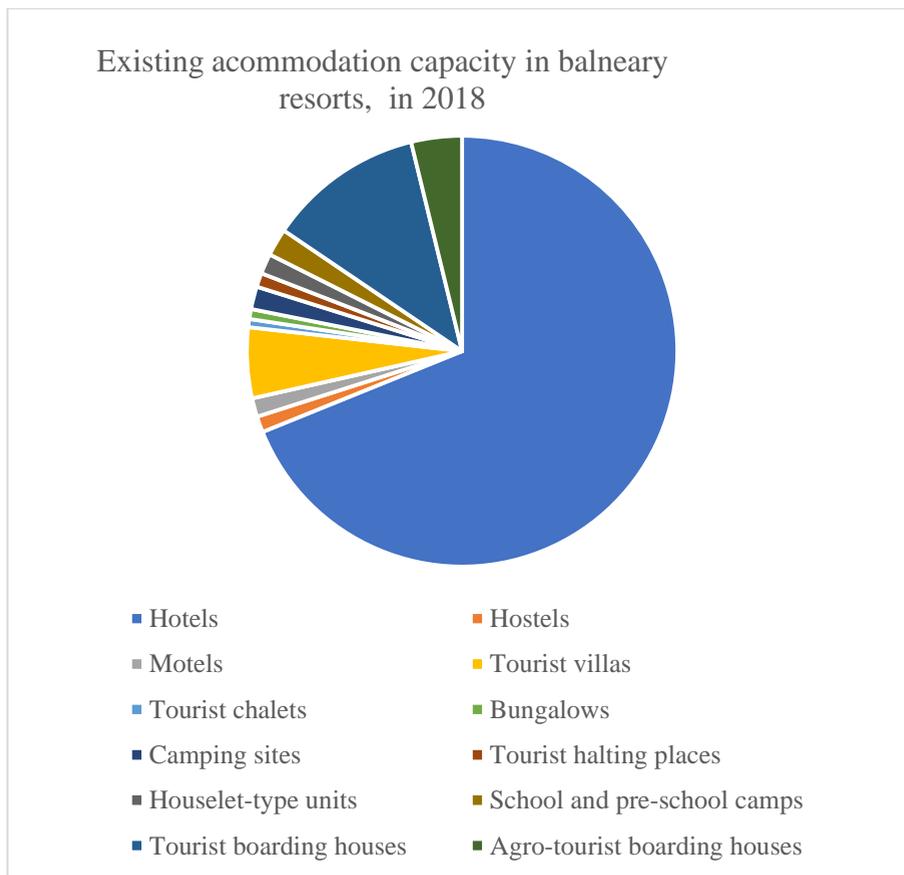


Figure 2. Existing acommodation capacity in balneary resorts, in 2018
Source: INSSE, 2019

The flows of tourists staying in spa resorts registered an increase of 11.1% in 2017, surpassing the general downward trend over the period 2011-2014. The table below illustrates the evolution of arrivals and overnight stays in Romania’s spa resorts during the reference period for both Romanian and foreign tourists.

Tableul 2. Evolution of arrivals and overnight stays in Romania’s spa resorts, in 2015-2017

| Year | Arrivals | Romanian tourist | Foreign tourists | Overnight stays | Romanian tourists | Foreign tourists |
|------|----------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 2015 | 779.325 | 735.869 | 43.456 | 3.917.389 | 3.747.388 | 170.001 |
| 2016 | 851.040 | 804.955 | 46.085 | 4.192.978 | 4.021.567 | 171.411 |
| 2017 | 945.257 | 896.515 | 48.742 | 4.204.898 | 4.032.534 | 172.364 |

Source: INSSE, 2019

As a result of the distribution of arrivals between Romanian and foreign tourists, we find that the first represent over 90% of the arrivals in the spa resorts, a domination that remains constant despite the positive evolution of the number of arrivals of foreign tourists.

The high interest of the Romanian tourists for the spa tourism also has a social component given by the treatment tickets system settled by the National House of Pensions. In this context, the length of stay of the tourist with a treatment ticket is much higher than the one of a average tourist or visiting a spa resort for another purpose. It is therefore very likely that the share of overnight stays in spa resorts based on treatment tickets is much higher than in arrivals, exceeding 50%.

As regards the distribution of overnight stays between Romanian and foreign tourists, the share of foreigners in total is even lower than in the case of arrivals, which translates both in the lack of attractiveness of spa products and the preference of foreigners for short stays.

In the analyzed period, respectively 2015-2017, there is a decrease in the average length of stay in spa resorts, even though it remains the tourism sector with one of the longest average stays, at national level, due to the social balneary system based on treatment vouchers which requires long-lasting cures.

The great problem of many spa resorts in our country remains the extremely unbalanced seasonality with a summer season that records an average up to seven times more overnight stays per month than winter, early spring and autumn periods. Balancing this already classical seasonality for the spa resorts whose activity is based on the treatment voucher system remains a key stake for the spa resorts in our country.

Thus, balneary tourism requires permanent adaptation to changes in the market, considering the following trends: increasing demand for resorts offering treatments for multiple illnesses; manifestation on the tourist market of the "treatment-holiday" demand, which implies a diversification of the leisure offer associated with the prophylactic treatment; high

attendance of tourists practicing social tourism, aspect that will emphasize the mass character of tourism.

3. Conclusion

Through its valences (treatment, rehabilitation and relaxation) and regarded as medical tourism, relaxation tourism and wellness tourism, balneary tourism is characterized by dynamism and complexity. Under these circumstances, Romania's great balneary potential has led to an increase in tourist traffic over the period 2015-2017 exceeding the overall downward trend in the previous period. An important role in this respect were also the treatment tickets that were settled by the state, whose share in the overnight stays exceeds 50%.

A significant number of spa resorts in our country, although they have many therapeutic factors, lack investment in infrastructure and have few leisure opportunities, which makes 90% of tourists being Romanian and many of them elderly people who come with treatment tickets.

We should not forget the seasonality that affects the spa tourism in our country, which can be diminished by the diversification of the spa products and the targeting of other tourist segments. Therefore, for a sustainable development, the balneary product should include, along with treatment, more leisure activities, including participation in cultural and sports events, ensuring both the superior valorization of the potential and the creation of identity elements for the spa resort.

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