

ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM SUPPLY AND THE TOURIST FLOW IN THE TOWN OF MÓRAHALOM

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***Abstract:** Mórahalom is one of the municipalities of Hungary which have undergone significant or, one could even say, unique progress in recent decades, typically in the last 15 years. In response to the newly emerging and unfolding needs, the town has been able to reconsider its existing assets, mainly its natural endowments (primarily thermal water), and to utilise them through conscious decisions and steps in order to boost the local economy and improve the residents' quality of life. The tourist attractiveness of Mórahalom is fundamentally built around the spa, which has become the basis for local developments in the past decade and a half. As a result of the implemented and ongoing developments, the town can present to the public a tourism product offer that generates a significant amount of tourist flow increasing year by year, and thus provides the local economy with additional income. By now the visibility and economy of Mórahalom is based mostly on tourism, in particular on the attractiveness of St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom and the related tourism services. This is well illustrated by the fact that until around the turn of the Millennium, the name and reputation of the town were linked to Mórakert Cooperative, Hungary's first recognized production and sales organization, but today the town is noted and famous for St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom.*

***Keywords:** tourism, spa, attractions, local economy, development, Mórahalom*

Introduction

Mórahalom is one of the municipalities of Hungary which have undergone significant or, one could even say, unique progress in recent decades, typically in the last 15 years. In response to the newly emerging and unfolding needs, the town has been able to reconsider its existing assets, mainly its natural endowments (primarily thermal water), and to utilise them through conscious decisions and steps in order to boost the local economy and improve the residents' quality of life.

Mórahalom was established in 1950 devolving from the area of Szeged and becoming a separate settlement, the temporary name of which was Alsóközpont [Lower Centre] until August 1950. Since that time, the farmstead settlement that at first was almost exclusively engaged in agriculture, has substantially transformed, expanded and regenerated mainly due to its tourism

development. The progress of Mórahalom is aptly represented by the fact that it was granted town status in 1989 and today it is a district centre with an independent catchment area, an attractive tourist destination.

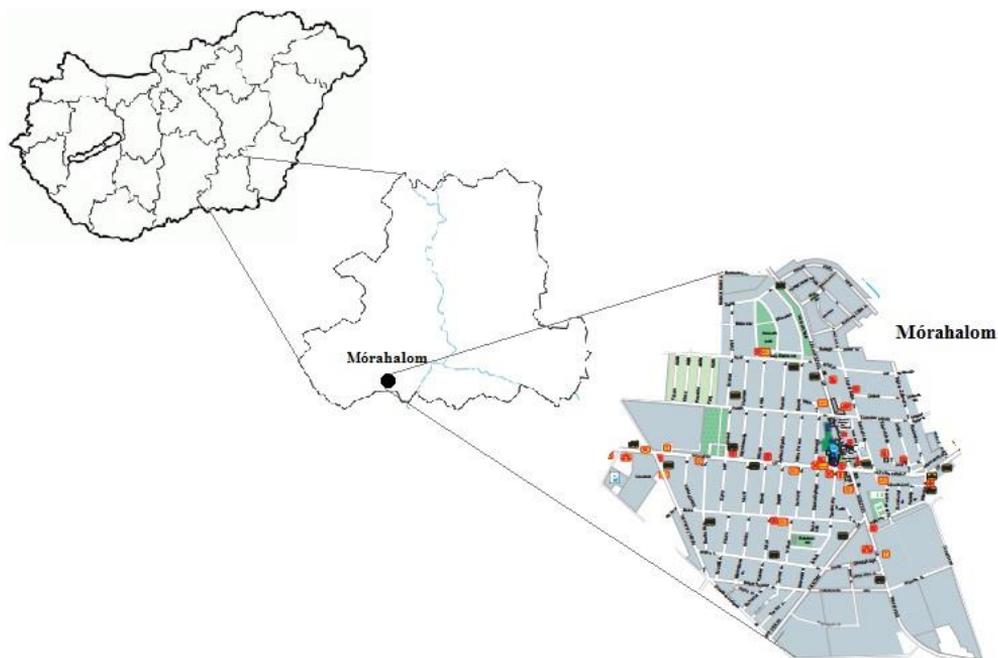
Today the visibility and economy of Mórahalom are based mostly on the tourism attractiveness of Szent Erzsébet Mórahalmi Gyógyfürdő [St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom] and the tourism services established around it. The history of the spa dates back to the 1960s, when the local, very valuable thermal spring was found, which has become the key asset of the town. In 1996 the local government identified the development of the spa and tourism development pertaining to it as the main strategic direction of urban development. The first step in the implementation of this strategic objective was the development of the spa beginning in 1999.

Subsequently, from year to year, each development added to the range of pools, the selection of leisure pool features and services. With more than fifty years of history, the spa was awarded the four-star rating of the Hungarian Spa Association in 2006, which was considered the highest rating at the time. In 2016 it received five stars in the spa category, and the leisure pool section was classified as four stars. Between 2013 and 2016 a health resort certification process was conducted in the establishment, after the successful completion of which the spa became an official health resort in 2016, which is the measure of quality. The same year, at the public vote „Spa of the Year”, organized with the professional support of the Hungarian Spa Association, St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom was voted „Evolving Spa of the Year”, which so far has been the complex’s largest success.

Mórahalom today is primarily known as a spa resort; however, it owes its fame not only to the popular St. Elizabeth Spa, but to the continuous conscious expansion and development of the tourism offer as well. A wide range of natural and man-made attractions are offered by the town, where young and old, locals and tourists alike can enjoy themselves.

The current study presents the development of tourist flow and tourism offer of Mórahalom, a small town in Csongrád County with a population of about 6 thousand, 20km from Szeged, and 10 from the Serbian border (Figure 1). The study is linked to our research evaluating the role of St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom in the development of the local economy, and it provides an overview of the initial findings.

Figure 1. Location of Mórahalom



Material and method

The overall objective of the research is to examine and evaluate the effects of St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom on the local economy. In conjunction with this, the study aims to analyse the tourism offer and tourist flow in Mórahalom since the Millennium, and to prepare an overall inventory of the tourist attractions of the town and describe its main elements.

The data necessary for the examination of the tourism supply and demand were sourced from the National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System [TeIR in Hungarian], and the database of Móra-Tourist Nonprofit Kft., the local tourism destination management (TDM) organization.

In preparing the inventory of tourist attractions, the websites of the Municipality of Mórahalom and of St. Elizabeth Spa and event calendars made available by Móra-Tourist Nonprofit Kft. were used; furthermore, personal experience also helped the research. The hypothesis of the study is that the settlement provides a continuously expanding supply in response to the steadily growing tourism demand.

Examination of the change in tourism demand

Mórahalom has such tourism potential, natural and man-made attractions that have helped to gain a reputation in tourism not only in the region, but also throughout Hungary. What's more, due to its border location, it is a well-known tourist destination especially in Serbia, but in Romania too. The small town

became famous after the Millennium parallel to the spa developments. The spa complex improved the material conditions of the tourist reception capacity of the settlement and greatly increased the town’s attractiveness by the fact that a facility was established offering a complete package of services, which significantly increased the number of tourists visiting the town.

It well illustrates the impact and effectiveness of the spa developments that in 2004 when the redevelopment occurred, only 92,409 people visited the spa wishing to relax and recuperate, but this figure has by now exceeded 300,000 visitors per year. The development of the facility and the settlement, the expansion of services, the enhanced marketing activities have all positively influenced the development of tourist flow, which in turn have also increased the demand for accommodation.

Table 1. Changes in the number of visitors in commercial and other (private) accommodation establishments

Year	Tourist arrivals		
	The number of domestic tourist arrivals	The number of international tourist arrivals	The number of total tourist arrivals
2000	21	3	24
2001	97	4	101
2002	317	49	366
2003	1,597	372	1,969
2004	2,495	626	3,121
2005	4,533	775	5,308
2006	5,067	2,137	7,204
2007	8,036	1,332	9,368
2008	9,511	1,305	10,816
2009	8,940	1,447	10,387
2010	8,914	1,500	10,414
2011	15,929	2,799	18,728
2012	19,499	4,213	23,712
2013	19,969	5,884	25,853
2014	22,314	6,558	28,872

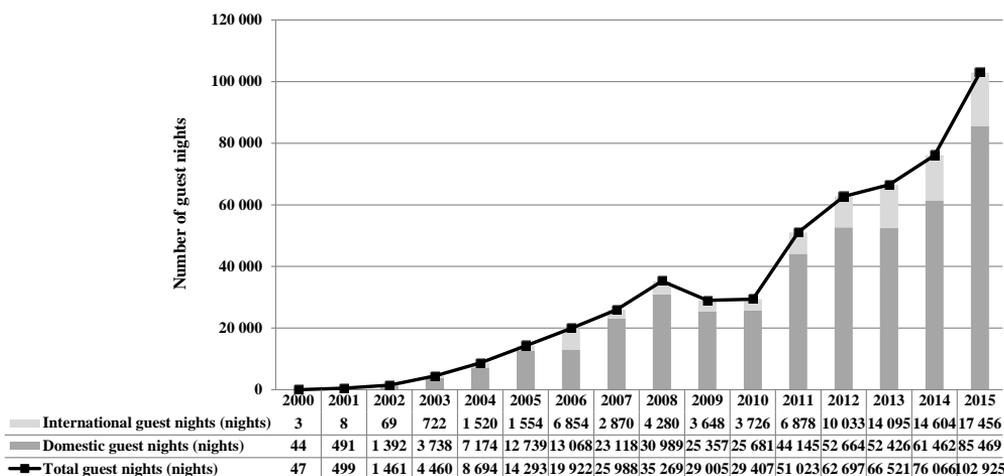
Source: TeIR

The data in Table 1 show a significant increase in tourist flow, because between 2000 and 2014, the number of visitors staying overnight increased by almost twelve hundred fold. However, the increase in flow registered in accommodation establishments was not steady. The 2004 large-scale spa development must have played an important role in that until 2007 tourist flow increased threefold, but due to the start of the global economic crisis in 2008, guest numbers fell by about four hundred people by the years 2009-2010.

This may be due to the fact that the crisis reduced disposable income, which resulted in the decline in tourism consumer spending. The fall of 3.5-4% in tourist flow lasted for two years, as in 2011 the number of overnight staying guests soared, increasing by nearly 8,000 people. Subsequently growth continued to a lesser extent, though. Based on the data in the table it can be determined that the considerable proportion (75-80%) of the occupying guests arrive domestically. Accordingly, the accommodation demand of tourists arriving in Mórahalom is determined by the domestic purchasing power.

Looking at the number of nights spent at the settlement it can be concluded that a tendency emerges similar to the change in the number of overnight staying guests (Figure 2). Growth from 2000 to 2008, then decline in 2009-2010, and from 2011 onwards dynamic growth can be observed.

Figure 2. The number of nights stays at the settlement in commercial and other accommodation establishments (2000-2015)



Source: TeIR and Móra-Tourist

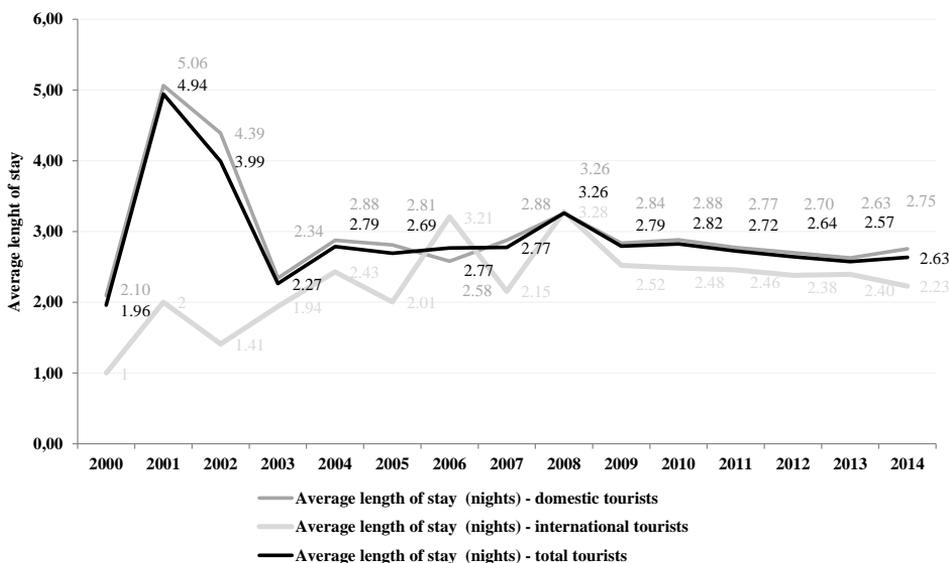
Between 2000 and 2014 the number of tourist nights increased more than 1600 times, which is more than the 1200-fold increase in the number of guests staying in accommodation. This can be explained by the increase in average length of stay (Figure 3). On the basis of the data in the period under review there is an overall increase of 25% in per capita tourist nights, but after the years of the crisis (2008, 2009), between 2010 and 2013 they decreased slightly and then in 2014 they increased again, which is definitely encouraging.

The downward trend in average tourist nights in recent years has not benefited either the accommodation providers or the settlement since the falling length of stay implies less spending, which reduces the positive effects of tourism on the local economy. A further disadvantage for accommodation providers is that utilising their vacant capacities becomes more unpredictable and harder to

organise. In summer, during the peak season this phenomenon has less impact, as capacity utilisation due to the continuous tourist arrivals is at nearly maximum levels in terms of commercial and other accommodation establishments.

The above findings draw attention to the fact that the growth of visitor and tourist flow is not enough, and increasing the number of tourist nights per capita and the length of stay in the settlement is also necessary. This recognition plays an important role in the creation of the tourism offer, in the development of tourist attractions and services matching consumer needs, taking into consideration the assets and interests of the settlement, which can increase not only the number of visitors, but also the number of nights spent in accommodation establishments as well.

Figure 3. The number of nights spent per guest (2000-2014)



Source: TeIR

Tourist tax [abbreviated as IFA in Hungarian] is to be paid by all persons over 18 years of age after each tourist night spent in any accommodation establishment. In Mórahalom in 2000, the tax rate was HUF100, which over the years increased to HUF500 (ca €0.30 per night) by 2015. In recent years parallel to the rapid growth in the number of nights spent, the rate and amount of tourist tax paid by commercial and private accommodation establishments to the local government have increased significantly. As a result, the tourist tax revenues of the local government increased four orders of magnitude in fifteen years, almost to eight thousand-fold, its amount is about HUF40 million (HUF 38,975,567, ca €130,000).

Examination of the tourism offer of Mórahalom

Also due to the large number of attractions, natural, landscape, cultural and architectural assets and resources at the settlement, Mórahalom today can provide visiting tourists with diverse, varied experiences and tourism opportunities. Since the core of the tourism product and of the tourism supply is the attraction itself, which motivates tourists to travel to the locality, it was found necessary to prepare a comprehensive inventory of attractions that includes all the assets of Mórahalom essential from the point of view of tourism. The attractions, based on their origins and characteristics, are presented in groups in Table 2.

Mórahalom and its surroundings have an exceedingly high number of protected plant and animal species and nature conservation areas. The Tanaszi-semlyék lies in the area between the town and the Serbian border, where such rarities as the early spider-orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes*), the lax-flowered orchid (*Orchis laxiflora*) and the cloth-of-gold crocus (*Crocus reticulatus*) can be found. The botanical values of Csipak-semlyék are also outstanding. Large numbers of Siberian and veiled iris (*Iris sibirica*, *Iris Spurio*), marsh gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*), lax-flowered orchid (*Orchis laxiflora*) and individual specimens of the early spider-orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes*) occur.

Madarász-tó [Madarász lake] is located to the south of Mórahalom, one kilometre from the Serbian border, and it fills the hollow between long stretches of sand dunes. On the shallow shores rare pied avocets (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) nest, but as one of the breeding species, the mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) settled in too. We can come across otters (*Lutra lutra*), which is a special asset of the landscape protection area.

The Buffalo Reserve and Csónakázó-tó [Boating lake] of Nagyszéksós are located just off the road to Röske. The buffalo came to the village in 2008, following a successful tender. The investment is aimed at restoring the former features of the Lake of Nagyszéksós, at rehabilitating the wetland habitat based on grazing by organic farming methods, at establishing a demonstration area implementing habitat reconstruction, at creating the conditions for a wide range of scientific research in the area as well as the expansion of tourism. The reserve has become a great success by now, as the extent of the area covered with reeds has decreased, the water surface has increased, the bird species that left the area are returning, and new ones have appeared, and the re-vegetation is evidence of the success of the program.

The attractions are the key components of the tourism supply that encourage tourists to visit the site. Although the main attraction of Mórahalom is the spa, in order to expand the appeal of the town, it is also required to develop the attractions and other elements of the tourism product. For this purpose, in 2014 the Mini Hungary Park was established, which presents the architectural symbols, historic relics of Hungary in 1910 using models of a scale of 1:25. The Green Community House and Forest School organise tours,

workshops for nature lovers, researchers, and they also serve as a destination for primary and secondary school students’ excursions.

Table 2. Natural and man-made attractions of Mórahalom

Natural (values) attractions	Man-made (values) attractions	
<p><u>Lakes, waters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boating lake of Nagyszéksós - Madarász lake - Lake of Széksós - Thermal and mineral water <p><u>Flora and fauna:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Buffalo Reserve - Indigenous animal and plant species - Protected animal and plant species <p><u>Protected areas:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Csipak wetland - Tanaszi wetland - Körös-ér Landscape Protection Area as a territorial unit of Kiskunsági National Park 	<p><u>Religious sites:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saint Ladislaus King Church - Jehovah’s Witnesses - Kingdom Hall <p><u>Folk culture:</u></p> <p>Gastronomy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kralleri Winehouse - Strudelhouse <p><u>Community and cultural facilities:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Béróhőgyi Sports Centre - Futó-Dobó Equestrian Centre - Green Community House and Forest School - Nagyszéksós chalet - Sports centre - Homokhát Memorial house - Menyhért Tóth Town Library - Aranyszöm event house <p><u>Spa, wellness center:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saint Elizabeth Spa - Elixir Medical Wellness Hotel <p><u>Historical and cultural heritage:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First World War memorial 	<p><u>Exhibition mplaces:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mini Hungary Park - Doll museum <p><u>Events and Festivals:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demolition derby - Rotary Charity Running Day - Motocross Track race - Christmas Town - Day of Older Persons - Patkó Equestrian Theatre - Homokháti pilgrimage - „Splash with Europe” roadshow - Strudel Festival - Buffalo Festival - Homokháti Sokadalom (Homokhát Crowd) - Folk dance gala - Jump Rope Gala - Majorette Gala - Nature tours (Bunker tour, Mushroom tour, Star tour etc.) - National Fair and Livestock Sales - Show Jumping Competition - International folk dance festival - Pálinka Competition and Greaves Festival v

Sports enthusiasts can choose from plenty of options in the town, as they can try motorcycle speedway in Béróhőgyi Sports Centre, and riding and show-jumping in the Futó-Dobó Equestrian Centre. There are two real turf pitches and one artificial soccer field at the sports complex on Móradozsi körút [boulevard], and on the first floor of the facility a modern, well-equipped fitness park welcomes visitors. Next to the sports courts, now a standard-size sports hall and a swimming pool are under construction as well.

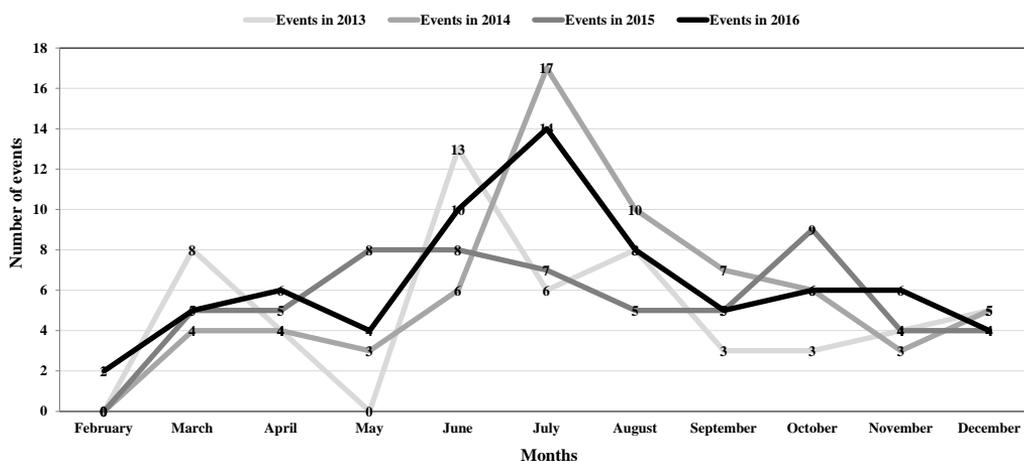
Theatre fans also like visiting the town since in the summer season, equestrian theatrical performances can be viewed in the Futó-Dobó Equestrian Centre, performed by the actors of the National Equestrian Theatre. In 2016 five different performances were held, which meant nine sold-out performances, with ca 9,000 people. However, theatre lovers should not be disheartened by the passing of the summer, as the Aranyszöm Rendezvényház

[events centre] enhances the repertoire by hosting the performances of guest theatre troupes. We can see plays performed by Gergely Theater, Szigetszentmiklós Theatre and also Katona József Theatre.

The range of attractions is expanded further by events held in the town, which make the presentation of the local tourism assets colorful, more animated and lively, thus enhancing the attractiveness of the town. Different programs allow the presentation of the traditions, cultural heritage of the settlement and small-town hospitality, enriching pastime and entertainment options for tourists. In addition, they provide an opportunity for local residents to meet, to get involved and actively participate in the programs, for tourism organizations to co-operate with the local government, local farmers, businesses and NGOs, and furthermore, they promote the economic exploitation of the various elements of local culture (folk culture, agricultural produce, food, crafts items) while shaping local identity and the image of the town. A number of programs promote the traditions, culinary products and the hospitality of the small town. The gastronomic events are highly successful every year, such as the buffalo festival, the strudel festival, the pálinka [fruit brandy] and pork scratching festival. The sparkling town programs involve local residents because it is important for the town administration that the locals, the accommodation providers, entrepreneurs and farmers could co-operate successfully in order to meet the needs of visitors arriving in the town at the highest possible level.

In recent years the number of events held in the town has increased significantly (Figure 4), most of which have been organised in the town centre and its immediate surroundings.

Figure 4. The number of events held monthly in the town (2013-2016)



Source: Móra-Tourist

Nowadays nearly seventy events are organised in the town, which is on average six each month, but as it can be seen in the diagram, the number of events culminates in the summer months. In addition, it is also apparent that nowadays some event or program is organised every month in the town, most of which are mainly planned for weekends, long weekends and public holidays.

While at the beginning of the 2000s, the repertoire of events in Mórahalom was of an insignificant number and variety, by now both the locals and visiting tourists can choose from a lot of types of varied programs with different themes. In addition to what is considered a traditional festive commemoration, May Day, the Town Day and the Town Christmas, now we can participate in specialities as well, such as the „Splash with Europe” Road Show, the Global Wellness Day, Midsummer’s Night or the Night of the Pools that are specifically linked to the spa and take place on its territory.

Besides the events organised here, the spa’s reputation is enhanced by awards and honours recognizing the value of the developments and the work done here such as the health resort certification, which was acquired by St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom in 2016. The rigorous certification procedure has been complied with by twenty-six health resorts in the country. The Hungarian Spa Association established a national certification trademark system whereby Mórahalom spa received a four-star spa certification in 2006. The four stars were considered the best at the time but in 2014 the five-star certification system was introduced, coupled with the use of a trademark for five years. The Mórahalom spa was reclassified in 2016, and received a five-star spa and a four-star leisure pool certification. In 2016 termalfurdo.hu organised the vote Spa of the Year the second time with the professional support of the Hungarian Spa Association where they were looking for „Spa of the Year”, „Evolving Spa of the Year” and „The Locals’ Favorite Spa”. (The categorisation occurred on the basis of the number of pools, the size of the settlement and the spa’s visibility.)

St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom achieved one of the greatest successes in the competition as on the basis of audience votes, it won the title "Evolving Spa of the Year 2016." By doing so the spa left such renowned competitors behind as Makó Hagymatikum, Szentesi Üdülőközpont, the Spa and Pool of Csongrád, Török Sándor Spa and Gyarmati Dezső Swimming Pool of Hódmezővásárhely and the Beach and Camping of Sziksósfürdő. Since the announcement of the results termalfurdo.hu has been advertising the spa of the small town on the sand dunes with a logo shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. „Emerging Spa of the Year” in 2016 is Saint Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom



Source: termalfurdo.hu

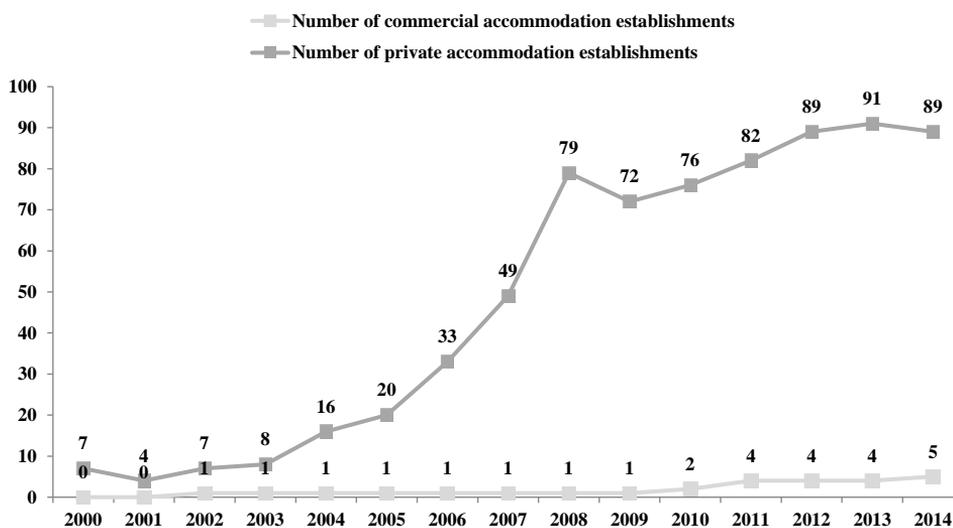
In addition to the attractions, other important components of the tourism supply are accommodation and the services available through them, which contribute to extending the time spent in the town, thereby increasing the income from tourism. The tourist flow steadily growing since the 2000s has led to the establishment of new, higher-quality commercial and private (other) accommodation establishments. The first commercial accommodation, Thermál Panzió, was built in 2002, followed by Colosseum Hotel opened in 2010, and the holiday apartments operated by the Tourist Information Office.

The town's newest commercial accommodation was opened in October 2015 under the name of Elixir Medical Wellness Hotel. Both the commercial and private accommodation providers responded to the growth in demand. Thus, the growing demand generated an expansion of supply and the emergence of new businesses, thanks to the favourable profitability potential of the local tourism market. Changes in the number of accommodation establishments between 2000 and 2014 are shown in Figure 6.

According to the data during the period under review, the number of commercial establishments increased from zero to five, while the number of other (private) accommodation establishments increased more than twelve-fold, from 7 to 89. This is due to the fact that the locals, residents and businesses alike have recognized the potential of tourism, so in order to achieve profits, they started using their existing properties, their unused premises, on occasion buildings specifically created and laid out for receiving guests, for the purposes of tourism.

Everyone can find the most suitable one among the wide range of accommodation establishments in Mórahalom. Parallel to the increase in accommodation supply, the competition among accommodation providers also increased, which generated new types of quality accommodation. Thus now we can relax in luxury holiday apartments with jacuzzis, lakeside, quiet farmhouse guest houses or at accommodation in a block of flats.

Figure 6. Changes in the number of commercial and other accommodation establishments (2000-2014)



Source: TeIR

The spa that is open every day of the year and is accessible to disabled guests provides excellent and constantly improved conditions for tourists who visit the town for leisure, relaxation and healing. During the peak season the establishment with four types of curative thermal water and twenty-one pools and the centre providing complementary, wellness, fitness and medical services are accessible through two entrances.

Closing remarks

The tourist attractiveness of Mórahalom is fundamentally built around the spa, which has become the basis for local developments in the past decade and a half. As a result of the implemented and ongoing developments, the town can present to the public a tourism product offer that generates a significant amount of tourist flow increasing year by year, and thus provides the local economy with additional income.

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