**Different Concepts of Health Tourism in Europe and The Meaning of Health Tourism Worldwide**

**Marica Mazurek**

*MSc., PhD. Candidate, Zilina University, Slovakia, Europe*

[*marica.mazurekova@fhv.uniza.sk*](mailto:marica.mazurekova@fhv.uniza.sk)

**Abstract**

*Health tourism (which part is also spa tourism and wellness) in Europe has a long-term tradition. The concept of health tourism is very different in European and in North American culture as well as in Asian culture. The article will provide a framework for the distinction of different concepts of health tourism in specific countries of Europe and compare the approaches, specifically in Slovakia, Portugal and Nordic countries (Finland) in comparison to the North American concept (Canada) and Asian perception (Taiwan, Malaysia, etc.). Selected**cases might be a good example for the explanation of different approaches to health tourism in Europe.* *Methods applied in the exploratory and empirically based study were used in the framework of the secondary research. There have been used specific cases – only the examples from different parts of the world. This study acknowledges the merits of qualitative research as it provides a pragmatic response for an in-depth understanding for this exploratory research.*

***Key words:*** *health tourism, spa tourism, wellness,* *well-being, health care treatment*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Most European spas offer healthcare treatment and the leisure component is only secondary. However, the new trends, changes and globalization have influenced some amendments in this concept. Many countries in Europe started to approach closer the North American concept of spas that defines spas as a centre of leisure and relax. There is even a distinction between the concepts of health tourism and spa tourism, which could have different meaning in different cultures. Some European countries as Spain and France have followed this development. On the other hand, Germany, Austria and some east European countries as Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary still offer in their spas traditional health care treatments based on the traditional model of spas. In many of these countries exists the combination of traditional concept of spas and the modern perception of spas as the leisure product based on the demand of market. Our goal will be to explain thoroughly the concepts, to explore distinction among different especially European countries and explain new trends. Some good examples and cases will support the existing conceptual base. Benson and Stuart (1992) mentioned the definition of Kaspar on health tourism. According to Kaspar is health tourism “the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a change of location and residence by people in order to promote, stabilize and, as appropriate, restore physical, mental and social well-being while using health services and for whom the place where they are staying is neither their principle nor permanent place of residence or work.” Wellness tourism as a part of health tourism has been defined by Mueller and Kaufman (2001) as a “sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey of 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. They require a comprehensive service package comprising physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/meditation and mental activity/education. In both definitions is embedded the component of health improvement; however, there exist one important factor of distinction, which is based on motivation and the purpose of both approaches, which will enable to distinguish among several concepts. The following scheme originated by Mueller and Kaufman (2001) enables to look at this concept from several view angles.

Tourism

Illness prevention tourism

Other tourism

Day trips

**HEALTH TOURISM**

Business tourism

**Spa/convalescence tourism**

healthy

ill

Specific illness prevention

Wellness tourism

**Figure 1. Health tourism concepts**

Source: Mueller, Kaufman, 2001, s. 8.

Based on this specific distinction in motivations of health tourism users, there has to be taken also into a consideration some cultural and regional trends and differences in Europe and worldwide too. Puczkó and Smith have divided them into several clusters in the framework of European countries (Table 1).

**Table 1. Regional differences and trends in Europe in the approach to health and wellness tourism**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Region/countries | Typical focus | Typical products/services |
| Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Northern France, Switzerland, United Kingdom) | Beauty, weight loss, lifestyle improvements (e.g. mental wellbeing, stress relief), leisure and recreation private clinics specializing in certain treatments | day/beauty spas  spa and wellness hotels  thermal leisure spas  holistic activities (e.g. yoga, meditation, vinotherapy, occupational wellness, alpine wellness, selfness and mindness balneotherapy |
| Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Baltic States) | Physical recreation  Leisure and relaxation  Lifestyle improvements (e.g. diet, exercise, fresh air) | Nordic wellbeing, saunas, outdoor recreation (e.g. Nordic walking), cold therapies (e.g. crypto therapy, ice swimming), hot geysers (Iceland), thermal, medical and seaside spas (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) |
| **Central and Eastern Europe (Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia)** | **Curative rather than preventive health care therapy and rehabilitation for the body medical tourism**  **Water-based leisure** | **Medical and thermal baths**  **Spa hotels**  **Caves**  **Aquaparks**  **Wellness hotels** |
| Southern Europe (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Southern France, Spain, Turkey) | Physical recuperation and relaxation  sea-water-based wellness lifestyle elements (e.g. climate, healthy cuisine, pace of life)  MEDICAL TOURISM | Thalassotherapy  Traditional thermal and medical spas  Holistic retreats (often run by non-locals)  Religious and spiritual tourism (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Santiago de Compostela) |

Source: Puczkó, Smith 2009.

**2. GOAL, MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The above delineated division of approaches might be helpful to start to explain the differences in perception and application of health tourism in specific countries and a priority will be the explanation of approaches in Central and Eastern Europe; however also some cases will be used from western and southern Europe and compared with the North American and Asian perception and approaches. The goal is to find differences in approaches and grasp the dividing line between perception of health tourism, spa tourism and wellness tourism according to the geographical, cultural or historical roots. This study might be useful for academics and practitioners in health tourism, spa tourism and wellness tourism industry as well as for students. Materials have been collected during a period of couple years especially in Slovakia and Canada, but also in Hungary in the framework of work of the international project “Regional wellbeing in the Balkans” with the co-operation of BKF University of Applied Sciences, Budapest, Hungary. Methods applied in the exploratory and empirically based study were used in the framework of the secondary research. There have been used specific cases – only the examples from different parts of the world. This study acknowledges the merits of qualitative research as it provides a pragmatic response for an in-depth understanding for this exploratory research. One of the key strengths of case study is the flexibility of method and the potential for practical application to use varied evidence, multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process, for instance: interviews, observations, documents, arte-facts (Yin, 2003; Vissak, 2010). In our study, we will only use the secondary existing materials from literature, studied journals and research studies and from materials existing on website. The interviews and observations as a primary research tools have not been used in this stage of research, but might be a possible tool for further in-depth research in a specific depicted region, country or a specific health tourism facility. The exploratory research might be sufficient by the application of secondary data based on the above mentioned sources and materials.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of secondary research indicate that in Europe exist traditional spas and countries with the old fashioned models of spas (in former Austrian-Hungarian Empire countries as for instance Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Hungary, etc.), but in Europe are common also new concepts in such countries as France, Spain, Nordic countries, mostly western European or Scandinavian countries (as stated in Table 1). To be closer to the concept of spa tourism in the traditional European countries we need to explain some concepts of health -care tourism. “We define health-care tourism as the attempt on the part of a tourist facility (e.g. hotel) or destination (e.g. Baden, Switzerland) to attract tourists by deliberately promoting its health-care services and facilities, in addition to its regular tourist amenities. These health-care services may include medical examinations by qualified doctors and nurses at the resort (spa) or hotel, special diets, acupuncture, transvital injections, vitamin-complex intakes, special medical treatments for various diseases” (Goodrich et al, 1987, p. 217). Based on this explanation, there are many countries with health-care tourism facilities – Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, the USA, The United Kingdom and others (Goodrich et al, 1987, p. 217). These services could be offered in the traditional health care facilities or in some hotels as part of the offered wellness program, but the most traditional form of offering are spas with the full medical service and supervision. Spas are located close to the thermal water resources and the healing influence of the mineral resources is used for the treatment of different diseases. Healing power of thermal water, sulphur mud, rehabilitation treatments, electrotherapy, mechanic therapy, oxygen-therapy, reflection massages, and acupuncture creates the interesting product of spa tourism.

# **3.1. The New Concept of Spa Tourism Versus The Old Concepts and Their Success**

UNWTO defines spa tourism as a tourism that requires the existence of health care facilities and uses the natural resources of a country, especially a natural mineral springs and climatic conditions (IUOTO, 1973, p. 7). This definition is used in the explanation of some concepts of tourism in European countries. The most famous spa tourism countries in Europe are Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia. European spa tourism has two streams of development (Knop, 1999, Gucik, 2006, p. 24). It is a health care concept of spa tourism and spa tourism as wellness as has been already explained in Scheme 1. One stream of European spa tourism deals with a provision of the traditional health care and has a strong medical background. The most famous representatives of this stream are Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. In these countries is typical very strict medical supervision of patients and the spa visitors are treated upon their diagnosis. The treatment requires specific medical examination and patients are under strict supervision of their physicians. The above stated countries are besides Poland the former states of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and Germany. Health care system of these all countries is based on Bismarck model of health care with traditional approach to health care. The second stream represent Mediterranean countries, where exist the concept of spa tourism as wellness (Spain, France, Italy). This concept is more market oriented and takes place in the luxury hotels and wellness facilities. The health care concept has only secondary role. In the countries of northern Europe (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland) spas are understood as means of prevention against the civilization diseases (Gucik, 2006, p. 24). The main trend of the 20th century is the concept of wellness and beauty that it based on marketing approach and the attempt to improve wellbeing. The traditional spa tourism streams had to admit that this innovative approach to spa tourism and spas started to combine the traditional approach to spa tourism, because spas have to be more effective and profitable. Traditional approach to spa tourism did not allow create sufficient profit and spas started to implement different entrepreneurship activities based on wellness. Traditional customers of wellness tourism are well-off people as entrepreneurs seeking relax and escape from everyday stress, but recently also people seeking new way of relax, balance in their lives. Wellness became a new trend of the third millennium (Gucik, 2006, p. 28). The author (Ibid, 2006) summarizes the variety of different services offered in wellness facilities as they are defined in the table.

**Table 2. Variety of treatments and services in wellness resorts**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Acupressure  Acupuncture  Aromatotherapy  Bach Flower therapy  Bio-lifting  Spinal exercise  Chinese medicine  Depilation  Color therapy | Physiotherapy  Hammam  Homeotherapy  Music therapy  Chirotherapy  Cleopatra bath  Acidotherapy  Lymphoma drainage  Manicure, pedicure  Massage of ear lobs | Steam bath  Peeling  Skin massages  Reiki  Light therapy  Shiatsu  Stretching  Sport massage  Thalasso therapy  Wraps from sea weeds |

Source: Gucik, M., 2006, p. 28

Based on the research in the European Union 67% of spa visitors seek the treatment of diseases and the relief of health problems and almost 50% seek the relief from everyday stress. Most visitors require pristine and not polluted environment of the spas (Gucik, Sipkova, 2004, p. 86). European spa tourism strictly applies the standards of quality in their spas (ISO 9000). These standards of quality are implemented also in the health care facilities and hospitals. Interesting fact is that spas and the stay of patients in Europe is financed from multiple financial sources created by the coverage from the Health Care insurance companies and from own financial sources. The exception is only France and Spain which implement more independent approach and patients have to pay for spas from own financial sources. Doctors strictly decide about the necessity of every spa treatment. Typical country with this concept among above mentioned countries is Slovakia. Slovakia is well-known for 1300 mineral springs with curative water of high quality. 21 thermal spas are divided into balneological spas (Piestany, Sliac, Trencianske Teplice, Bardejov, Dudince, Rajecke Teplice, Vysne Ruzbachy, etc.) and climatic spas (Strbske Pleso, Novy Smokovec, Stos, Tatranske Matliare). Most of these spas are not only wellness places, but also places for treating of medical conditions (respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular, immunological and infertility disorders) and after surgeries conditions. Despite of the existing comparative advantage in a form of natural resources in Slovakia, a country has to apply commodification in spa tourism and the implementation of wellness, more leisure facilities with the entertainment, social and cultural functions. This is an example of the existing comparative advantage, which endowment by the application of marketing approach could be important for the growth of competitive advantage. Slovakia might be one example of traditional approach to spa tourism with a combination of wellness tourism products and marketing approaches to health tourism.

On the other hand, some mentioned regions and countries as Nordic or Scandinavian countries do not own such a richness of mineral springs and traditions as in Central and Eastern European countries and they attempt to focus on health prevention and relax, wellness concepts (new approach to health tourism). Typical country is for instance Finland with plentiful wellness programs using sauna, Nordic walking, cold water treatment (water therapies, massages, herbal treatments and body soaks). One of good example is Haikko Wellness in Porvoo, Finland offering except traditional wellness treatments also so called cold treatments, which have a really long history and have been used for centuries to release pain, swelling, especially as a result of rheumatic problems. It might be very helpful to treat sleeping disorders, stress, skin problems (psoriasis, etc.). The treatment time is only up to 3 minutes and the temperature is – 110 °C. An important product in this facility is also so called “Wellbeing at work” program, which offers services to the employers in a community in order to improve health of their employees and especially overstressed managers. Nordic well-being is typically oriented towards nature and outdoor recreation combined with healthy gastronomy and cleanliness of air, landscape and water, for instance lakes (Tuohino et. al, 2010).

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| --- | --- |
| In southern European countries are spas and especially wellness centers situated in hotels along the seaside. One of the popular product is for instance thalassotherapy, which is offered in Greece, Spain, France and Italy. Excellent wellness facility, which is popular among the western tourists from Great Britain, France, Germany, but also North America, is Algarve in Portugal, where a complex of hotels offers not only spa and wellness products, but also golfing, delicious cuisine. In other south European countries and also in Asia is a concept very similar, e.g. a combination of a pristine seaside scenery, marvelous beaches, good weather, sunshine and special wellness products, sport activities. Wellness is a good product for off-season period focused especially at seniors seeking to boost their health potential and socialize. For instance, in Turkey is very popular among seniors from Germany, Scandinavia, Great Britain and Turkish tourism resorts are fully prepared for this segment. However, many countries in Europe, especially southern Europe, but also Nordic countries are able to create interesting product offer and attract a potential marketing segments as seniors. Similar products of wellness products in winter period are for instance popular for Scandinavians and Germans also at splendid islands of Croatia, for instance at the island Hvar, Brac, etc. In Europe, for instance The Canary Islands are very well prepared for wellness tourism due to its climate and facilities. Wellness is really becoming an interesting niche product with a high potential of profit creation in the future due to the growing number of seniors in Europe and worldwide as well. |  |

When we studied similar trends in Northern America, wellness is becoming very popular and the reason is similar as in Europe, e.g. growing number of seniors, stressing jobs and growing number of civilization illness due to pollution and stress. Spas in North American culture are fully market oriented and paid from own financial sources, but they are offering similar products as in Europe. One of such examples could be for instance spa in Canada, Toffino in British Columbia. This is a typical Canadian approach to spas and wellness, which is a combination of different healing procedures with sport activities. In Tofino, for instance is possible to enjoy almost untouched geothermal hot spring in the Maquinna Provincal Park and combine the activities with bear and bird watching, hiking, bicycling, fishing. Popular are also traditional spa products based on traditional cleansing techniques of the indigenous people. . In Canada is very popular a combination of wellness with culinary tourism, which is also suitable for segments of well-off people in this region because they belong to the group of so called baby-boomers, e.g. seniors. Wellness with a combination of healthy life style and culture is a really popular trend now in North America. Spa in North America is for this reason more leisure activity than health oriented activity and the programmes are targeted at physical, emotional and spiritual self-improvement. Australia has a similar concept as the Northern America, where is not a strong spa culture, but growing is the leisure components of wellness focused at relaxation, fitness, stress reduction and beauty (Smith and Jenner, 2000; Douglas, 2001).

Similarly in Asia, the growing number of population and stress in jobs are worsening living conditions and create a demand for wellness and spa products. One example could be used from Taiwan. Based on the research (cited in Chang et al. 2003) as stated Lee and King (2008) for “the most desired lifestyle for Taiwanese involves the maintenance of good health (59%). Health and wellness are very important in Asian culture. The authors Lee and King (2008) mentioned that “the number of Asia destinations have tapped into this lucrative market”. One example could be Japan with a plentiful hot springs and also Taiwan. An enormous growth of spa tourism has been recognized in Thailand and in Malaysia. Both countries were able to create an interesting product as the combination of cultural diversity, heritage and wellness products. An interesting tourism product in spa tourism in Taiwan, for instance, are hot springs, which were discovered by a German businessman in 1894 (Peitou hot springs). Taiwan has an enormous potential in spa and wellness tourism and the amount of 230 hot springs might be a good potential for future for the growth of spa and wellness tourism in Taiwan. In Asia is typical also in wellness treatment for instance upon Malay, Chinese and Indian traditions to offer typical Chinese medicine, ayurveda, energy healing an ramuan spa treatments.

**4. CONCLUSION**

The goal is this study was to find differences in approaches and grasp the dividing line between perception of health tourism, spa tourism and wellness tourism according to the geographical, cultural or historical roots. Three continents have been chosen for this comparison and we tried to distinguish the concepts based on motivation of segments, which might be influenced by their health state (ill or healthy) or a desire to keep their health (wellness). Some examples from Europe and its regions, from Northern America and Asia have been implemented into the study and based on it we can assume in the end that European spas have been more traditional, especially in Central and Eastern Europe or former Austrian and Hungarian Empire countries and provide more medical care and health treatments for people with health problems. New trends and especially economic reasons; however, force these countries to create also new product offer in a form of wellness. For this reason, blending of traditional health tourism products and wellness products are typical for European spas as well. The North American concept based predominantly on leisure and relax is strictly market oriented. Services offered in spas have to be fully covered from private financial sources (in comparison with dual forms of financing in some European countries). Asia is a potential product for further development of mineral springs in spa tourism and offers besides traditional wellness treatments also a range of typical East Asian medical approaches. Health and culture, heritage and a balance of life, seem to become not only a product of Asian wellness facilities, but a way of their existence and life. Health tourism is becoming more popular nowadays especially to the growing number of ageing population and their desire to live longer, healthier and happier. This concerns also younger generation and might prevent many obstacles and problems in their later period of life. The topic of health tourism offers for this reason new aspects for further research and improvements in managerial sphere.

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