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THE POTENTIAL OF BULGARIA AS A SPA DESTINATION

EL POTENCIAL DE BULGARIA COMO DESTINO DE SPA

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Abstract

Both the geographical location of the country and the unique nature are excellent bioclimatic precondition for complex influence over the human body. This favorable ecological nature ensures actual possibilities for even longer season and for more effective exploitation of the bioclimatic recourses for repose, treatment and prevention for a series of socially significant diseases. By having this potential Bulgaria can turn into one of the most wanted places for people in search for health and recovery. SPA Tourism is traditional and inseparable part from the aspects that represent Bulgaria as a touristic destination. There are only few countries in Europe that can compete with Bulgaria for its abundance and variety of thermo mineral springs with different physical and chemical content and mud-curing raw materials.

Keywords

Mineral sources – Balneology – Bioclimatic resources

Resumen

La ubicación geográfica de Bulgaria crea excelentes condiciones bioclimáticas y combinaciones naturales únicas o raras para efectos complejos sobre el cuerpo humano. Esta naturaleza favorable ecológicamente limpia proporciona oportunidades reales para extender la temporada y para un uso más efectivo de los recursos bioclimáticos para la recreación, el tratamiento y la prevención de una serie de enfermedades de importancia social. Con este potencial, Bulgaria puede convertirse en uno de los destinos más codiciados para las personas que buscan salud y recuperación después del agotamiento o el estrés. El turismo de balneo es un elemento tradicional de la imagen de Bulgaria como destino turístico. Pocos países en Europa pueden competir con Bulgaria por la abundancia y variedad de aguas termo-minerales con diferente composición fisicoquímica y materias primas embarradas.

Palabras Claves

Fuentes minerales – Balneología – Recursos bioclimáticos

Introduction

SPA Tourism is one of the main products that Bulgaria offers and also a chief way for exploitation of considerable amount of resources: hot, warm and cool mineral sources, curing mud, etc. that can be find here in great quantities. The researches show that the interest in SPA tourism in Europe grows constantly, that is partly due to the demographical trends.

Bulgaria needs to create a new business and economic branch – balneology and health tourism. Hitherto, balneology has existed in Bulgaria only as a social field in the health services without any specific economic connection between it and tourism.

The new economic circumstances in the country bring into the spot the need of new economic field like balneology and tourism based entirely on the foundations of market economy. If exploited properly this field will have great economic effect in the country, for it depends only on its capabilities – the unique nature and all the wealth it possesses – mineral springs and mud fields.

Research and analysis

Preconditions for the development of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

The preconditions for the beginning and the development of SPA tourism can be found in Bulgaria's astronomical, natural economical and geographical position.

The fact that Bulgaria is closer to the equator, than to the pole determines a considerable amount of solar radiation. Bulgaria is situated on the border between the temperate and subtropical zone in Europe and that determines the transitional character of the natural conditions in the country. On one hand the climatic conditions are due to the Atlantic Ocean and to the Mediterranean Sea too and on the other hand the country has been crossed by major roads from the beginning of the middle Ages that have both continental and transcontinental significance. The public, the economic and the political development of the country combined with the excellent climatic conditions and the natural sources (mineral springs, wood massifs, etc.) are very good pre-conditions for the development of the SPA and recreational tourism.

SPA resorts in Bulgaria have long history. The Thracians who inhabit the territory of Bulgaria praise the spring waters. The development of the resorts can be tracked back to its formation based on the Thracian medicine. Even ancient Greeks used and worshipped Bulgarian mineral springs and this can be seen on their coins. Swimming pools were built near the springs and they were used for balneology. During the Roman Time – 1st / 7th c, balneology resorts were highly praised because they were used by the legions to strengthen their forces. Mineral springs were classified for the first time at that time. The Romans built their cities around country sides where healing mineral springs were to be found. They highly praised all gods and goddesses connected with water and health. Around Kiustendil, Sofia, Hisaria and Sapareva_Bania there are remains of thermals, balneology facilities, asclepiions_and nimfeumas. During the middle Ages thermal springs were used mainly for hygienic purposes. The increased interest towards balneology has been attracting foreign tourists from the beginning of the 20th c.

Nowadays Bulgaria still can offer hydrothermal resources that are unique for their structure and healing virtues. The climate is healthy and in some regions it also has healing effect. The warm waters of the sea, the fresh greenery and the clear mountain air combined with different remedial treatments have a great effect on numerous diseases. The SPA centers are located in some of the most picturesque places in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria has a long tradition in balneology. The healing virtues of our springs are well-known from ancient times. The Thracians that are known as the first European inhabitants and also known as skilful healers knew all about the healing virtues of the water and used it to cure different diseases. Later these traditions were passed to the Romans - people from all parts of ancient Rome went to Thrace to cure themselves in the 'wholly springs'.

The unique south European climate, the all-year round resorts, the amazing nature, the rich culture and history together with the natural sources gives Bulgaria the chance to develop a new business and economic sector, which will give a great share in the Gross Domestic Product of the country and which can draw external investments.

Nowadays in Europe there is a constantly rising interest in balneology and health tourism. Many people all over Europe put on first place those resorts that offer healing tourism, balneology and recreation for many of them are exhausted and growing old; other types of resorts come after them. The variety of natural and cultural sources Bulgaria has makes the successful combining of all these types of tourism possible. For example our neighbor – Greece summons half of its Gross Domestic Product from the sea tourism and still it has to cope with the competition that Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and Turkey impose.

Since Bulgaria does not have serious rivals in the sphere of balneology and healing tourism this can provide a considerable share in the gross domestic product. The unique healing springs and mud fields in Bulgaria are to be found almost nowhere else in Europe. Thanks to the various mountain reliefs, its closeness to the Mediterranean Sea, the vast sea coast, the favorable geographical location and the climate, Bulgaria has significant advantage in this sphere, compared to other countries in Europe.

In Bulgaria there is such a great variety and abundance of thermal springs and mud fields that it is impossible for more than a few countries to compete with it.

There are more than 550 fields and about 1600 mineral springs with a capacity of 4900 liters per second in Bulgaria that have been examined. Bulgaria has at its disposal more than 800 springs that have identical or even richer content in comparison with some of the world's most famous balneology resorts like Baden-Baden and Vichy. It is a pity that only 5% of them are being used for balneology purposes. 90% of the mineral springs in Bulgaria have unique healing abilities and 80% of the springs are weakly mineralized with temperatures varying between 21 and 101 degrees. There are more than 600 natural mineral springs and about 400 drillings mostly in the northern part of the country and all over the Black Sea. The main reason for that are the clefts in the terrestrial layers. The best well-known springs are those in Vyrshetz, Voneshta voda, the village of Banya, the town of Bankya, Devin, Velingrad, Pavel Banya, Slivenskite bani, Starozagorskite bani, Haskovskite bani, Strelcha, Kiustendilskite bani, Sapareva Banya, Sandanski and many more.

All this mentioned above is an excellent pre-condition for the development of balneology tourism and the treatment of many different diseases.

Many peat-beds and the rich firth fields that also have excellent quality are another valuable and natural resource.

What is very important to mention is that most of the places used for balneology are situated in regions with very favorable climate and thus way one can combine balneology with the good effect the climate has.

Bulgarian balneology has a long tradition in the field. Modern balneology centers now are offering even greater specter of products that are made to attract more people, not only those with health problems but also healthy ones that needs only recreation and to relieve from every-day stress.¹

Officially there are 142 resorts of which 74 are of national importance and 68 of local importance.

It is an undoubted fact that Bulgaria really has a potential to develop balneology tourism.

Situational (SWOT) Analysis on Balneology Tourism

For the purposes of this SWOT Analysis we must point the advantages and disadvantages of balneology tourism, together with the possibilities that can be realized so to improve its state.

Advantages:

- The natural potential is highly competitive
- There are more than 600 mineral springs in Bulgaria, situated in about 240 deposits with a capacity of 270 million liters. More than 75% of them are hot and warm springs with temperature varying between 37 and 101 degrees. In Bulgaria one can find almost all kinds of mineral springs that are known in the world. Bulgaria has many fields with healing mud near Pomorie, Shabla, Marikostinovo, Banya and Kustendil;
- There are 142 resorts of which 58 balneology resorts, 56 winter resorts and 28 sea ones;
- The climate is very healthy and favorable for many kinds of diseases in different regions of the country;
- There are many modern balneology hotels situated as well as along the Black Sea coast and in the central parts of the country – Devin, Velingrad, Hisar, Sandanski, Bansko;
- Long tradition in balneology treatment;

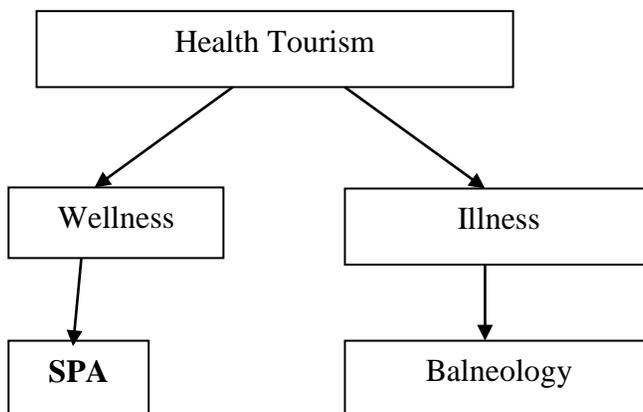
¹ M. Vodenska, Bases of Tourism, Matkom, Sofia, 94-9.

Disadvantages:

- Health tourism is not a priority for the state tourism policy;
- Bulgaria is not included in the European health destinations list;
- Not enough qualified personnel;
- The lawful order that is connected with this division of tourism is not sufficient; it needs some amendments and to be renovated;
- There is no ready strategy for developing health tourism;
- No normative order for the structure, the function and the categorization of balneology centers;
- Lack of SPA, wellness and balneology advertisement abroad;
- Lack of actual and adequate operative information – the state of the balneology centers in Bulgaria is really poor; 99% of the centers are old and have pressing need of modern equipment;
- There is no legislation at all concerning this field so together with the Ministry of Ecology and Environment such must be formed for the use of the natural mineral springs and mud fields; the latest ones are declared as government property and the concession law is not sufficient for this purpose;

Risks:

- In Bulgaria SPA is miss confused with Balneology, for they both form one section; since they refer to one sphere this helps for the development of different types of tourism and they can co-operate too;



As you can see on the diagram the main difference between these two branches is that SPA centers are visited by healthy people in search for relaxation and recreation, while balneology centers are used to treat different kinds of diseases.

- The declaration of the properties, the role of the private enterprise and the state enterprises may cause a delay in the formation of a new general legislation;
- Balneology needs a great amount of investments for new technology, most of which are coming from outside and the country is not capable at the moment to provide the needed;
- The country unfortunately can offer very little financial support for new equipment in the balneology centers;

Perspectives:

There are many perspectives for the development of this branch in Bulgaria, and they are as follows:

- All subdivisions as SPA, Wellness, Illness and Balneology can be united in one – Health Tourism;
- Advertisement and sales must be improved so Bulgaria will be able to present herself in front of the world;
- Investments from in and out must be enrolled for the purpose of the existing balneology centers in the country;
- Some assistance should be obtained for the research and project activities;
- Research information exchange;
- Bulgaria must apply for membership in the European Balneology structure;
- The information system of all resorts in Bulgaria must be unified and we must fulfill the European standards;
- Standardization of our legislation order to the one of the European Union;
- Balneology centers must be classified according to the European standards and must be included in the international brochures;
- Assistance in the qualification and extended qualification of the personnel in the specialized European training centers;
- A plan for health tourism development should be elaborated;
- To provide different chances for multifunctional use of the resorts all year-round together with their sources;
- Protection and preservation of the natural resources;
- The building, the equipment, the offered services, the personnel skills and the statue of wellness, SPA and balneology centers must be determined;
- A law concerning the structure and the development of the balneology resorts must be published;
- Defining certain standards of the offered services in the SPA, Wellness and Balneology tourism;
- Rational use of the mineral healing springs;
- Organizing events to promote and make the hydrothermal resources of the country popular;
- Offering health programs as part of the whole tourist program;²
- Establishing and fulfillment of the national strategy for balneology tourism in cooperation with the legislative and executive powers;
- Formation of infrastructural model for balneology and healing tourism as part of the economic sector by using the local traditions and the world's tendencies combined with the excellent specialists we have in the field;
- National investment fund for the development of balneology tourism in the country, that will be used for the re-equipment of the old balneology centers and for the building of new ones.

The infrastructure pattern may be divided into two important elements: national, with one common idea for the whole country and individual, concerning individual natural source. The pattern also should include financial elaboration for the economic sector

² http://www.tourism.government.bg/files/politics/file_216_bg.pdf

development and its future share in the Gross Domestic Product. This is needed to show the development of the economic sector to the world and European financial institutions for the purpose of acquiring financial help.

Summary

Balneology tourism has always been part of the appearance of Bulgaria as a tourist destination. Only a few countries in the world can compete with Bulgaria having in mind the variety and abundance of different thermo-mineral springs. The location of the country offers excellent conditions and unique combinations for complex influence on the human body. The nature we have offers a great variety of possibilities concerning prevention and treatment for different diseases. Having such a potential Bulgaria can easily become one of the most wanted places for people looking for relaxation, recreation and treatment. The only obligatory thing to be done is to put this tourism product on a higher level. The development of this type of tourism however must attract certain investments for a new modern infrastructure so to be able to meet the requirements of the world market.

Optimization of the conditions for researches in the field of balneology is to come. This will increase the local electronics and equipment production which is well-developed in Bulgaria. Thus way people involved in balneology, designers, technologists, and architects will be able to reveal their true potential and abilities and this will decrease the number of emigrants. The branch will also influence favorably the development of the infrastructure in Bulgaria and will increase the investments.

Balneology tourism in Bulgaria has a tradition. Many of the mineral springs can be found in the mountains and the highlands, which possess excellent climatic conditions and have great landscape qualities. Near them there are mountain springs and pine greenery among unique environment of great physical and therapeutical significance. Bulgaria is rich in different kinds of herbs and plants that are used in the aroma therapy and the phytotherapy, as well as the extraordinary honey products.

In the balneology centers the personnel is highly-qualified and ready to meet the customers' demands. The great variety of the offered programs there increases constantly with new exotic, original and modern features. This is obligatory if we want to meet the requirements and searches of the international market. Our balneology resorts improve constantly and attract more people looking for relaxation, recreation and treatment.

Conclusion

From all we said so far it appears that Balneology tourism in Bulgaria is a specific branch with great perspective to develop. There are many issues to be solved but we also have even more ideas how to do this and not to forget that our country can take adequate decisions concerning it. We expect that with the help of the state agency and the private contractors it will reach a good level and will incorporate with the state economy.

So we can say that despite the fact that balneology tourism is not something new for Bulgaria it seems to develop faster and faster lately. It appears after all that we have everything needed to develop this branch.

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