

# DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIA AS A SUSTAINABLE HEALTH TOURISM DESTINATION AND APPLICATION OF GOOD PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF MEDICAL SPA, SPA AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN THE TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** *Health tourism is an emerging, global, complex, and rapidly changing segment that needs to be managed with modern management tools in the present era. Health tourism comprises around 5% of general tourism in the EU28 and contributes approximately 0.3% to the EU economy. Health tourism has a much higher domestic share than general tourism. Increasing the share of health tourism may reduce tourism seasonality, improve sustainability and labor quality, and may help to reduce health costs through prevention measures and decreased pharmaceutical consumption (research for TRAN Committee—Health Tourism in the EU. General Investigation, June 2017). Health tourism is increasing its role as a significant contributor to the development not only of regional but also of national economies. Despite certain tendencies of preferring individual tourism, it is expected that health tourism and health tourism destinations will continue to increase their influence and take bigger part in the tourism mix in the future. In the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Tourism on the Territory of Bulgaria, 2014–2030, the Ministry of Tourism has determined that tourism is a leading structuring national industry. Tourism is a stable factor contributing to the constant optimization of the Bulgarian economy through significant share in the GDP—12–18%. The strategic aim of Bulgaria is: increasing the competitiveness of Bulgaria as a destination on the world market by increasing the quality of the tourism product, strong brand of the destination and product specialization and diversification. One of the main priority of the Ministry of the Tourism is increasing the share of the specialized types of tourism, leading to a year-round and more intensive workload: balneotherapy (medical spa), spa and wellness.*

**Aim:** *The authors believe that Europe needs to consider the important role of tourism for health prevention and inform as great number as possible of its citizens and visitors about self-responsibility and health prevention combined with using natural remedies based on mineral water, landscape and climate, and counteract bad health habits. To promote spa medicine as a curative and preventive approach using natural remedies, rehabilitation techniques and education in healthy lifestyle (ESPA) are needed.*

*This article aims to present: 1) the important role of the health tourism (medical spa, spa and wellness tourism), and the fact it that can limit both the negative effects of pollution by engaging in tourism in natural areas and at the same time meet the demanding needs of the aging society to maintain good health for as long as possible; 2) to show the position of balneotherapy in the healthcare system in the leading European countries and the place of Bulgaria in it; 3) the role of balneology and its benefit for people in the times of COVID-19.*

**Materials and Methods:** *Written documentation, researches, and reports from leading public sources are used, as well as personal experience from being deeply involved in the field of the European health tourism.*

**Results:** *Bulgaria has developed a sustainable year-round health tourism focused on the medical spa, spa and wellness product. The global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed not only the tourism sector, but also people's attitude to travel—a historic time for revival and recognition of balneology and climatic health resorts.*

**Conclusion:** *Health tourism could be linked to and described as green tourism: from the environmental point of view, sustainability means minimizing any damage to the environment (flora, fauna, water, soils, energy use contamination, etc.), while trying to value the environment in a positive way through protection and conservation.*

*The current coronavirus pandemic has established more clearly than ever the indisputable role of balneology as a long-term guardian of the human immune system, with fundamental consequences for saving lives and preventing economic collapse in future pandemics.*

**Keywords:** *health tourism, medical spa, spa& wellness tourism, balneotherapy, COVID-19, TRAN Committee EU, European Spa Association (ESPA), World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), European Travel Commission (ETC), Bulgarian Union of Balneology and Spa Tourism (BUBSPA), German-Bulgarian Chamber of industry and commerce (GBCIC)*

## 1. HEALTH TOURISM AS A FACTOR FOR RESILIENT ECONOMY

Health tourism is an emerging, global, complex, and rapidly changing segment that needs to be managed with modern management tools in the present era. Health tourism comprises around 5% of general tourism in the EU28 and contributes approximately 0.3% to the EU economy. Health tourism has a much higher domestic share than general tourism. Increasing the share of health tourism may reduce tourism seasonality, improve sustainability and labor quality, and may help to reduce health costs through prevention measures and decreased pharmaceutical consumption (8). It is discussed in the *TRAN Committee—Health Tourism in the EU* that health tourism is increasing its role as a significant contributor to the development not only of regional but also of national economies (1). Despite certain tendencies of preferring individual tourism, it is expected that health tourism and health tourism destinations will continue to increase their influence and take bigger part in the tourism mix in the future (1,2,7,9).

In Europe there are over 2 000 medical spas and health resort destinations, meaning areas with confirmed therapeutic properties of the climate that may be a remedy to limit the negative influence of harmful phenomena on society. The authors point out that health tourism (medical spa, spa and wellness tourism) can limit both the negative effects of pollution by engaging in tourism in natural areas and at the same time meet the demanding needs of the aging society to maintain good health for as long as possible. European health tourism is booming. This includes the classic medical spa as well as the medical spa sector and the countless wellness offers. According to estimates from the European Spas Association the approximately 18 000 health and wellness tourism facilities in Europe generate a turnover of more than 45 billion euros. This means that European facilities are not only an essential part of the health service in their national markets and in Europe but also important economic contributors and employees. In addition, many of these jobs are in structural-

ly weak regions—as is untouched nature and the distance to industrialized regions an essential feature of many spas and health resorts. In this regard my professional opinion is that Europe needs to consider the important role of tourism for health prevention and take care to inform the citizens and visitors about self-responsibility and health prevention combined with using natural remedies based on mineral water, landscape and climate, and counteract bad health habits (1,8,9).

European countries have the chance to maintain and develop in a sustainable way their health resorts, as well develop the balneotherapy culture as part of the European heritage and align it within today's national health systems and the European Union. To achieve this, it is very important to create the best possible conditions to develop the work regarding the medical issues. The outcome of this work should be used as a powerful tool in the tourism market and promote the European spas philosophy and local natural resources. It is very important to communicate the unique value proposition of the European balneotherapy to deal with common health problems linked with unhealthy lifestyle and the ageing of the population. Balneotherapy in many European countries has had a long tradition and is an integral part of the health attitude. Balneotherapy is provided only in spa facilities with medical background that are recognized by the state authorities (2,6,7). As such it is part of the healthcare system and must abide by strict regulations. The local natural healing resources (natural healing water, peloids, climatic conditions) have always been subject to scientific research. Based on the knowledge of scientists and medical doctors, the treatments of particular diseases have been observed, approved, and recommended. The results of these studies and reports could be used for the provision of adequate services and packages to the citizens and consumers. The links between balneotherapy and healthcare systems in different European countries is presented in Table 1 (4).

Table 1. Status of balneotherapy in the health insurance systems of European countries

No.	Country	Status of Balneotherapy in the National Health Insurance
1	Bulgaria	Balneotherapy is partly or entirely reimbursed by the National Health Insurance Fund by clinical pathways and social insurance programs
2	Denmark	Balneotherapy is not reimbursed by social/health insurance companies. In spa facilities exist offers for primary prevention.
3	Czech Republic	The spa care is partly or entirely reimbursed by health insurance companies, based on indication types.
4	Estonia	Balneotherapy is not reimbursed by social/health insurance companies. In spa facilities exist offers for prevention.
5	France	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by the national health insurance fund, according to the patient's status and income and for specific conditions
6	Hungary	Balneotherapy is partly reimbursed by health insurance companies, based on indication types.
7	Germany	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by health insurance companies, or pension insurance companies, based on indication types.
8	Iceland	Balneotherapy is partly reimbursed by health insurance companies, based on indication types.
9	Italy	Balneotherapy is part of national health care system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by the National Health Service based on income and indication types.
10	Lithuania	Balneotherapy is a part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by the State healthcare insurance company, based on indication types.
11	Latvia	Balneotherapy is a part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by the State healthcare system, based on insurance types.
12	Luxemburg	Balneotherapy is partly or nearly entirely reimbursed by health and accident insurance companies, based on indication types.
13	Niderlandia	Balneotherapy is not reimbursed by social/health insurance companies. In spa facilities exist offers of primary prevention.
14	Portugal	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly reimbursed by the public service employees' social protection.
15	Poland	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by healthcare insurance companies, based on indication types.
16	Romania	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by health insurance companies, based on indication types.
17	Slovakia	Balneotherapy is part of the national healthcare system and is partly or entirely reimbursed by health insurance companies, based on indication types.
18	Spain	Balneotherapy is not included in the National Healthcare System but is offered to the patients and costs are paid by the patients.

Source: European Spas Association, 2017

## 2. BULGARIA AS A DESTINATION FOR HEALTH AND SPA TOURISM

In comparison to the leading countries with long-term traditions in the health tourism (Germany, Hungary, Czech Rep, Slovakia), Bulgaria has started to create its reputation as a year-round destination for health tourism after being approved as an EU member in 2007. The Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism (State Agency of Tourism in that period) started

thinking about upgrading the existing tourism products—sea tourism (summer holidays on the Black Sea Riviera) and ski tourism (holidays in the mountains—Rhodopes, Rila, Pirin, Vitosha), the most logical decision, based on:

- traditions from the Thracian and Roman times;

- abundance of natural remedies, located on the territory of the country (over 600 mineral springs, from cold to hot +103°C);
- on an almost year-round basis;
- peloids (estuarine mud along the sea and peat);
- long-term scientific approach and knowledge;
- investments in infrastructure.

In the recent years we are witnesses of modern and competitive, according to the EU standards, medical spa, spa and wellness facilities located in the spa resorts with national and local importance. The resorts in Bulgaria with national and local importance are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Bulgarian resorts.

	Total Number	National Importance	Local Importance
Balneo/medical spa resorts	54	18	36
Climatic sea resorts	50	5	45
Climatic resorts on the Black Sea coastline	29	12	17

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Bulgaria, 2018

Lack of recognition of health tourism as a destination is the biggest challenge for the responsible authorities—Ministry of Health, universities, national recognized NGOs, experts.

In order to develop sustainable health tourism product that is focused on medical spa, spa and wellness tourism, it is very important to develop and upgrade a specific regulation in the sector. The authors consider that the first steps of the process of positioning Bulgaria as year-round health destination is to use in an appropriate way the know-how and good practices of other European countries that share the same values and philosophy. The membership of Bulgaria in the European Spas Association family since 2007 has helped the country to create its own national standards. They are already part of the legislation in the Tourism Act, Regulation 2, 2016. It regulates the order and minimum requirements for construction, furnishing and equipment, servicing, services offered and professional and linguistic qualification of the personnel, which must be met by the Bulgarian medical spa centers, spa centers, wellness centers, and thalassotherapy. The Black Sea Riviera is a prerequisite for the creation of a separate thalassotherapy center legislation (2,3,9).

The process of creating the regulation, adapted to the rapidly developing spa tourism in Bulgaria, took 6 years and was guided by the experts from the European Spas Association, supported by experts from the Bulgarian Union of Balneology and

Spa Tourism (BUBSPA), experts from the National association of rehabilitation medicine, experts from the Medical University of Varna, experts from the National Sports Academy, experts from the Ministry of Health, experts from the Ministry of Education and coordinated by the Ministry of Tourism. In the period 2016–2021, the regulation has helped the country to create the first step of its plan to develop year-round tourism based on spa and wellness tourism, part of health tourism. The main focus is on the prevention and the promotion of human health using the local natural healing resources. In the current development of health tourism, Bulgaria focuses on

two of the components of health tourism: spa tourism and wellness tourism. The Ministry of Tourism has started to certify spa and wellness centers in the country according to clear criteria (3). The number of certified centers is presented on Fig. 1.

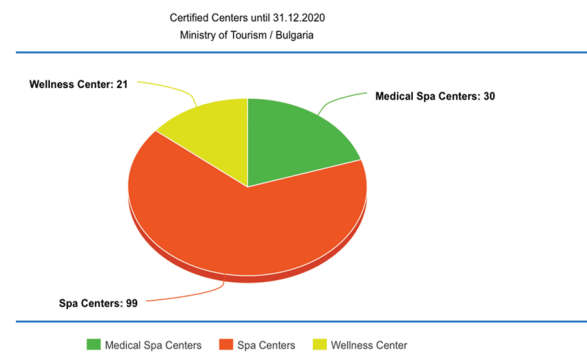


Fig. 1. Certified centers for spa and wellness tourism in Bulgaria

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Bulgaria, 2020

In the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism on the Territory of Bulgaria (2014–2030), it is underlined that with the new tourism act approved in 2013 there are new aims, which are placed as priority. They are as follows:

- conditions for sustainable tourism development and a competitive national tourism product;

- creation of conditions for development of alternative types of tourism—health tourism (spa tourism);
- travel to spas combining medical and health components;
- wellness tourism aiming to enhance health and medical tourism;
- travel for the purpose of medical treatment;
- introduction of uniform criteria for performing tourism activities and providing tourism services;
- ensuring the protection of consumers of tourism services.

Focusing on developing health tourism Bulgaria aims to solve key problems of its tourism industry and to use the advantages after solving them in the following fields:

- **Seasonality (Seasonal Employment)**

Reducing the seasonality: international tourists who are traveling for health tourism normally are using the off-season for their medical spa holidays. The role of the destination is to create stimulation through national programs for prevention (financially supported by the government). Through these methods the domestic market will be stimulated to use the medical spa, spa and wellness centers off-season.

- **Overtourism** (in some urban cities located on the coastline) was managed by developing health tourism.

The destinations received the chance to start rebranding their image as mass summer holiday destinations to year-round health tourism destinations. One good practice is developed already by the management of the resort Sts. Constantine and Helena near Varna.

- Tourist profile (type of tourists):

To diversify the tourist profile and to attract tourist segment who is able to appreciate good quality and sustainable tourism product, and afford the payment for the services.

- Building a reputation and rebranding:

To build a reputation as a whole year round destination is important to upgrade the image of a popular summer holiday tourist destination. One of the successes is the cooperation with the German-Bulgarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (GB-CIC) and the Bulgarian Union of Balneology and Spa Tourism (BUBSPA) in 2019. In the frame of the cooperation, a program for social corporate responsibility called Health Prevention Care was created. The program aims to stimulate business representatives in Bulgaria to invest in the health prevention of their employees, which could increase the working

capacity of their workforce. Such initiatives need to be implemented in the Bulgarian legislation. In addition, there is a need to create a financial mechanism using the know-how of other EU countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, etc. Slovakia has a system that supports the local tourism market through a mechanism oriented to the people over the age of 50 so business companies are stimulated to invest in the human capital.

Regarding the other component—the reputation—it needs to be created using modern management and marketing tools. A serious step was taken in this regard and in September 2019, with an official letter, the Federal Association of Health Insurance Funds (GKV-Spitzenverband) included Bulgaria in the list of member states of the European Community, contracting parties to the agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland. In these countries, outpatient assistance services in recognized resorts (Article 23, Paragraph 2 of the Social Code (SGB V)) are eligible for reimbursement. In this regard, selected services received in Bulgaria for preventive medicine (ambulatory services) are reimbursed by the health insurance of the home country of the tourists.

### 3. HEALTH TOURISM IN THE TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed not only the tourism sector but also people's attitude to travel—a historic time for revival and recognition of balneology and health resorts.

Health tourism has much better future:

- The development of health tourism serves citizens, regions, national and international demand.
- There is effective integration of citizens and an opportunity to strengthen the immune system and a healthy lifestyle.
- Balneology is a unique science and tradition in Europe that needs to be recognized, supported and better integrated into EU health policy.
- Health tourism saves healthcare costs and contributes to better tourism revenues.
- Health tourism provides work in rural areas.
- It is time for prevention and rehabilitation through balneology. Fighting COVID-19 does not just involve vaccine.

By monitoring ongoing statistics, opinions of epidemiologists and medical specialists, we encounter daily the term *vulnerable part of population*, which includes seniors in the first place, then people with specific diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, oncological diseases, autoimmune diseases, re-

spiratory diseases and people on long-term pharmacotherapy. All these are the most common diseases mainly related to the lifestyle. Insufficient activities in European health policies for primary prevention of the so-called lifestyle disease should be a warning for us. Obesity as one of main risk factor for diabetes, cancer, heart diseases, respiratory diseases, and many others is strongly linked with an unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, lack of stress management, lack of education in healthy life style, in short—lack of primary health prevention.

The European Spas Association has always strongly promoted the importance of prevention programs in traditional European medical spas based on the knowledge of modern medicine. The target of these spa activities for society is to maintain the productivity of the citizens by reducing future expenses in healthcare and social care. On the other hand, the spa therapy target for individuals is increasing the HLY index (healthy life years) and protection of independence in older—not just prolongation of life expectancy.

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrates the importance of the good health condition as added value for the course of the disease and its complications in every age group. On this basis and facts, much more efforts must be taken in regard to health policy of European countries for health prevention and also for treatments in medical spas of Europe as updated spa programs are now being prepared in medical spas for the patients after severe case of COVID-19 (7).

Bulgarian health tourism destinations have an extremely important role for better sustainability of human health! The complex climate and balneotherapy stimulate the sanogenesis process in the human body and reduce the recurrences of chronic diseases. There are a number of scientific clinical and experimental studies on the sanogenesis effect of climate and spa treatments on the human body, which

lasts for a period of 3 to 6 months. It has been proven that the annual conduct of complex climate and balneotherapy for some chronic diseases of the internal organs leads to less complications and, accordingly, to a reduction in the hospitalization of patients. In Bulgarian climatic health resorts located at the seaside (Albena, Sts. Constantine and Helena, Sunny Day, Golden Sands, Topola), or in the mountains (Pamporovo, Borovets) or in the historical thermal spas (Sandanski—the most popular resort for treating bronchial asthma), it has been proven that the climatic conditions have an extremely positive effect on human health and well-being according the expert opinions of the Ministry of Health (3,9).

Thanks to the knowledge of air hygiene and bioclimatology, the spa guests and therapists in **climatic health destinations** are able to tailor the available climate stimuli, which have positive effects on health, entirely to individual needs. In the case of respiratory diseases some of the **mineral waters are used for drinking therapy, inhalations, gargling, and nose flush or baths.**

The current coronavirus pandemic has established more clearly than ever the indisputable role of balneology as a long-term guardian of the human immune system, with fundamental consequences for saving lives and economic collapse in future pandemics.

Health tourism could be linked to and described as green tourism: from the environmental point of view, sustainability means minimizing any damage to the environment (flora, fauna, water, soils, energy use contamination, etc.), while trying to appreciate the environment in a positive way through protection and conservation.

***EU health tourism: Win – Win – Win:***

- customers win;
- EU health care wins;
- European spa centers win.

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