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Spa Tourism in Serbia and Experiences of Other Countries



**THEMATIC
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WELL-BEING AS DRIVING FORCE FOR ECONOMIC RECUPERATION OF TRADITIONAL SPAS, LLEIDA, SPAIN

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Abstract

Throughout history, care and well-being are concepts that have been always present in many societies and cultures. Nowadays, this concept becomes a continuously growing field as consequence of people's will to reach a specific quality of life. Construction of spas had an important growing period in the 19th century, although just a little segment of society could enjoy them. Nowadays, this spa tradition was almost lost, but it has recently increased demand thanks to the services for people who need to reduce their daily stress or those who are just doing some sort of body care. Therefore, spas all over the world have been recovered, extended and modernized to focus on these target market demands. Actual trend of mindfulness therapies involve wellness and health tourism as an economic and social driving force in places where these facilities are located. The aim of this research is to analyze specific rural area in Spain, Lleida, related to two different aspects:

- *Growing demand of society in its search of well-being and body care (concept of "health-express") and*
- *Contribution to economic and social developments of these areas.*

Keywords: *spas, health-express, health tourism, well-being, economic driving force, Spain*

Introduction

The pursuit of health is one of the oldest motives for tourism, but during the Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, well-being and the possibility of enjoying the spas and baths started to become widespread phenomenon

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adapted to the needs of modern times (Smith & Kelly, 2006). The term “spa” comes from Latin acronym “SanusPerAquam” which means “health through water” (Puczkó & Bachvarov, 2006). The origin of Spa is connected with Belgium, where several hot mineral springs with healing power for skin problems were discovered (Miller, 1996). Thus, Europe has long tradition of spas and consequently spa tourism. European spas have traditionally been engaged in providing medical care or treatment to people suffering from certain types of illness (Lee & King, 2008). Cockerell (1996) has observed that in Europe spa sector is composed of two market segments: those visiting spas and health resorts primarily for medical reasons and those visiting for purposes more closely aligned to traditional tourism motivations. European spa tourists generally have perception that spa experience is mainly for curative or therapeutic purposes (Douglas, 2001), focusing on healing by hydrotherapy, rather than promoting just massage and facials.

According to Henderson (2003), spa service is referred to as one of healthcare tourism services. Spa could be classified in seven major categories, according to the facilities and treatments proposed: cruise ship Spa; day Spa; destination Spa; medical Spa; mineral spring Spa; club Spa; Spa hotel and resort Spa. The various services of spas are categorized according to the available regional resources, including natural resources such as therapeutic water, climate, mud, and caves for meditation (Chen et al., 2013).

Nowadays, spa tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in tourism industry (McNeil & Ragins, 2005). The spa industry is under continuous evolution with the growing emphasis of wellness and sustainability (Cohen, 2008). The term spa tourism is often interchangeable with wellness tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2009), as almost all wellness tourism services include some health services referred to as spa treatment (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Spa industry as global phenomenon is considered a natural response to the human desire for wellness in the context of various individual and global crises (Cohen, 2008). Spas combine aesthetic treatments with various relaxation techniques and products, in order to achieve physical and spiritual harmony (Loureiro et al., 2013). It also combines ancient traditions, modern technology, and scientific advancement (Lo et al., 2013). As interest in physical well-being increases, spa therapy has become popular among consumers and has been recommended by many medical specialists (Kohet et al., 2009).

Consumers are gradually turning to seek more medical and professional programs from general spa treatments (Snoj&Mumel, 2002).

Spa, wellness and wellbeing

Spas growing demand is due to daily lives imbalances, with ultimate aim to promote the general well-being of people, that is, mind and body spirit (Loureiro et al., 2013). Today, concerns about body and mind health are related to disease prevention, daily stresses and the importance of achieving mental and psychological balance (Maket et al., 2009). The term spa is mainly associated with a healthy lifestyle, but during the time it has broadened, so today it is perceived as a place for multiple purposes (relaxation, healing, pleasure, rehabilitation, and socialization). It is a journey that aims at rejuvenation of the customer's overall wellbeing, which includes body, mind, and soul (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). Spas could be also seen as cultural driver, influencing intense social gathering between tourists (Dimitrovski&Todorovic, 2015).

Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) stated that increased awareness encompasses preventive therapies based on travel to health resorts and spas. Spa consumers are looking for a nurturing and healing place where they can enjoy and share experience and time with friends, relatives and spouses (McNeil & Ragins, 2005). Development of wellness concept has influenced much-needed revival of natural hot and mineral spring destinations. Therefore, nowadays we have change in paradigm from spas representing indulgence to spas representing wellness and well-being, resulting in that emphasis is being placed from physical appearance to inner balance and well-being. Wellness tourism as a phenomenon is by no means confined to spas (Pesonen et al., 2011).

The concept of wellness was first proposed by Dunn (1959), who defined it as a special state of health comprising an overall sense of wellbeing. Wellness is a multi-dimensional concept, which may include physical, mental, spiritual, educational, occupational, economic, political, social, cultural, ethical, environmental and existential attributes (Chen et al., 2013). Wellness tourism is a holistic traveling style that aims at developing, maintaining and improving the body-mind spirit (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Wellness tourism comprises efforts by individuals to preserve an already healthy state through activities provided by healthcare facilities (Mair, 2005).

Konuet al. (2011) stated that wellness also includes concepts of well-being, happiness, quality of life, holistic practice, and spiritual beliefs. Well-being is defined more widely than wellness and includes factors that are connected to the basic things in life (Konuet al., 2011). The concept of wellbeing tourism refers to emotional motivations, such as connection with community or nature, inner and outer beauty therapy, relaxation and energy balancing (Sheldon & Bushell, 2009). Well-being tourism might be considered as a form of wellness tourism that refers to emotional motivations instead of emphasizing luxury spas and wellness centers (Pesonen et al., 2011), including small-scale recreational spas.

The recent growth in the demand for wellness services and treatments has led to the proliferation of health and wellness destinations, spas, thalassotherapy centers and other components of the wellness and well-being offer (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Sheldon and Bushell (2009) concluded that the holistic structure of wellness tourism encompasses a range of tourism experiences with wellness products, infrastructure, facilities, and natural and wellness resources.

The role of spa, wellness and wellbeing in economic development

Spa tourism is attractive tool in promotion and development of any destination, region or country. Spa experience depends on uniqueness of cultural, social, and natural environments (Chen et al., 2013). Spa service industry has the possibility of increasing competitive abilities of hotel industry (Madanoglu & Brezina, 2008), with a special focus on intangible elements of hotel service quality (Maricet et al., 2016). Therefore, leisure and business travelers are more and more interested in spa experience as a complement to their traditional or standard tourism activities (Maket et al., 2009). Spa and wellness has become a label that allows the customer to expect added value (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Spa tourism development has many beneficial consequences, economical and comparative benefit for providers, for the entire region, and country's economy (Sekliuckiene & Langviniene, 2009). Spa tourism makes a significant contribution to the economy of many countries, as spa services and facilities are offered to foreign customers. Together with spa tourism, developing wellness tourism in a region can encourage entrepreneurship, enhance the sense of place of a destination, and health of the local residents, provide economic benefits, and create environmental preservation and quality products (Sheldon & Park, 2008). A region that is able to provide a distinctive spa and wellness tourism services could

become to be very competitive comparing with other regions. Growing competition on global market forces spas to struggle in order to get a good position as customers' choice (Alénet al., 2006). Moreover, the rapid expansion of the wellness tourism sector has led to more intense competition among business suppliers and destinations aiming at attracting visitors for wellness tourism (Maket al., 2009).

Spain offers a wide range of tourist experiences (CrespiVallbona & Dimitrovski, 2016), among them wellness and spa are becoming more and more popular. The aim of this research is to analyze specific rural area in Spain, Lleida, related to two different aspects:

- Growing demand of society in its search of well-being and body care (concept of “health-express”), and
- Contribution to economic and social developments of these areas.

Historical introduction of the spa tourism in Spain

As it is known, spas, both public and private, have been present in many civilizations throughout history. Since ancient times numerous religious and social activities have been using bathing as the main event associated with the cleaning and purification of both, body and soul.

The eighteenth century could be perceived as the beginning of the spas development in Spain. However, not until after the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution influenced its subsequent growth. Between 1764-65, the volumes of *Historia Universal de las Fuentes Minerales de España Universal history of hot springs in Spain* were published, written by Pedro Gómez de Bedoya, who brought together the analysis of the hot springs of the country. Consequently, establishments were prepared to offer medicinal baths. At the end of the nineteenth century, Spanish areas dominated by the bourgeoisie (Catalonia, Cantabria and the Basque Country), built great hotels associated with already known and crowded spas. Thus, the growing interest of the bourgeoisie in hot springs is explained along with the gradual introduction and improvement of transport (in 1848 the railway Barcelona-Mataro was inaugurated) and medical and therapeutic expertise as well. Moreover, social changes related to summer holidays also increased the customers' demand, who went to spas just to relax, without having any illness. Thus, in order to spend fun moments, leisure venues were promoted: dance halls, casinos, theatres, etc. Leisure and hot springs became an inseparable tandem.

This trend and interest in hot mineral waters drove urban development linked to spas, as for instance La Toja, Lézor or Caldes de Malavella. In other countries, it led to the Spa towns, but in Spain, it was never consolidated mainly due to the economic crisis at this time.

However, the first decades of the twentieth century began the first period of decline of these establishments, due to political reasons (the disaster of the colonies), the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, social (the concerns of the working masses, anarchism), economic (loss of purchasing power, strikes) and, above all, medical motives, with the emergence and rapid dissemination of drugs that precipitated the rapid recession of spa activity.

During the Civil War (1936-39), these establishments were used as hospitals and clinics, shelters for religious communities as well as barracks and prisons. This period was determinant for the closing of most of them. After the war the Franco's dictatorship started (1939-75), and its government transformed some of the bathing establishments to sanatoriums or health centers for the treatment of tuberculosis. Other establishments initiated a phase of rehabilitation of their buildings and a timid recovery of health therapies, involving wealthy classes. The large number of events that were held there includes family celebrations, festivals, rallies, football teams, and conferences. However, the use of the baths was scarce. Furthermore, private car, sun and beach summer holidays, second homes, moved away people from spas and just few spa establishments succeed thanks to the stable interior tourism. In 1973, from the total amount of 300 spas around the Spanish country (during the splendorous period), there were just 80 establishments. Most of them, had (and have) continuity due to IMSERSO (Institute of Elderly People and Social Services) of Spanish Government (since 1978), since its Social Thermalism Programm facilitates the acces to spas and medical therapies for elderly and retired people.

Nowadays, few trends are ongoing - the increase of spa demand, diversification and reduction of the age of customers, the improving and modernization of hotel facilities and services, etc. So, traditional nineteenth century spas have led to the recreational and preventive twentieth century thermal centres. It is considered an emerging sector that brings together old and new customers, both motivated by health and personal care (Valls Casas, 2006). This latter type of clients interested in tourist packages/health services, are called **health-express visitors**. Services include care for beauty and fitness; healthy diet and nutrition;

and spaces for relaxation and/or meditation (mindfulness), in a time of reduced hours in the morning or afternoon or a single day.

Mindfulness is associated with well being and happiness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Lagardera, 2009). Thermal centres use to work mindfulness through meditation, due to benefits of their practice (Lavilla et al., 2008), as, for instance, it reduces distraction and increasing mental concentration; strengthening our selfconsciousness; reducing sufferings and offering a possibility to learn to relax our body and mind; benefiting immune system and increasing the physical and psychological wellbeing.

Methodology

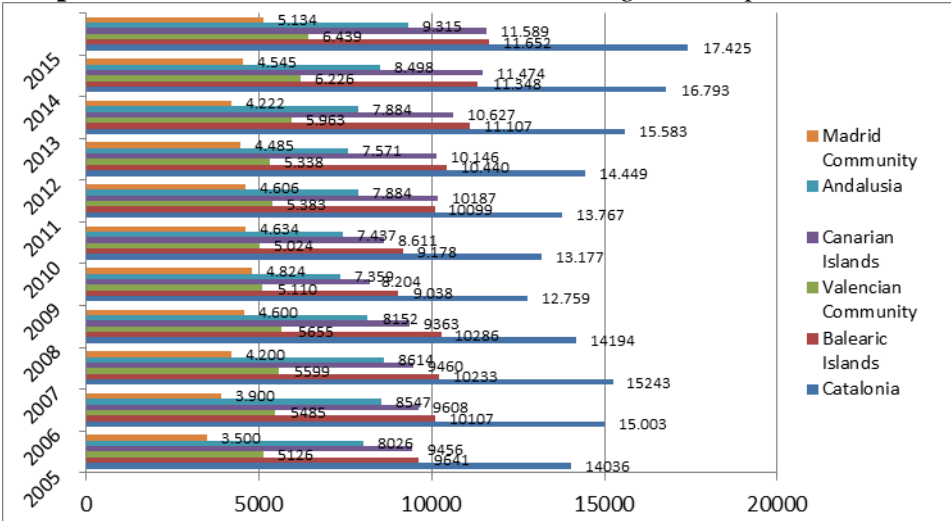
Methodologically, we have analyzed secondary sources, especially data from the Institute of Tourism Studies of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism (IET), data from National Institute of Statistics of Spain (INE), and from Institute of Statistics of Catalonia (IDESCAT). Using quantitative analysis, it becomes evident that, on one hand, the development of tourism in Catalonia, especially trademarks of Barcelona, Costa Brava and Costa Daurada, and also the brand evolution of Terres de Lleida (Lands of Lleida) is more focused on snow tourism and second homes. Therefore, we have also interviewed the owner of the spas located in Les and Caldes de Boi, respectively (in Lleida province).

The objective is to analyse the real impact of spas in these areas, not only related to tourism demand, but also as new (recuperated) economic engine in this interior area of Catalonia. In addition, we analyze the data provided by these spas relating to overnight stays and treatment services provided.

Thus, the territorial framework of analysis is concentrated in the Lleidatan Pyrenees and the existing spas. The reason to choose these spas is due the peculiarity of this environment with specific characteristics (few population, lots of second homes, lack of professional options). We aim to study the supply and the evolution of offered services and obviously demanded by customers looking for health tourism and a way of deepening self-awareness of one's body as a source of wellbeing. Therefore, we highlight the importance of tourism activity based on data from IET and IDESCAT. We have interviewed the managers of spas in Lleida area and also have analyzed data from 2008-2015 of applied health therapies provided by these centres.

Focusing the analysis, tourism activity in Spain has six emblematic autonomous regions (CCAA) ordered according to the volume of tourists received in the last 10 years: Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Canarian islands, Andalucia, Valencia and Madrid. The data of Graph 1 show perfectly the weight of the tourism relevance of Catalonia towards the rest of Spain.

Graph 1: Most attractive tourist autonomous regions in Spain



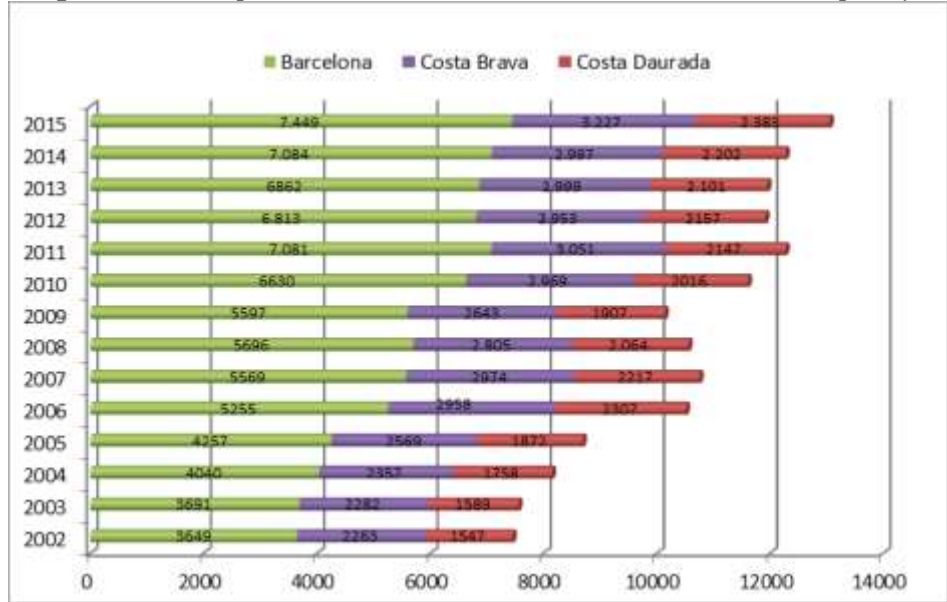
Source: Own elaboration from IET and IDESCAT data, from 2005 to 2015.

It is noted that Spain is essentially a tourist destination of sun and beach, as the Autonomus Regions (CCAA) of Catalonia, Valencian Community, Andalusia, Balearic Islands and Canarian Islands receive a greater number of tourists, as it is shown in Graph 1.

If we focus on Catalonia, the concentration of tourism takes place in the summer. Although it should be stressed out that, despite the considerable number of tourists visiting the Catalan coast, there are also other tourist areas located in inland areas and mountains. Specifically, 9 tourism brands have been defined in Catalonia: Barcelona, Costa Brava (Brava Coast), Costa Daurada (Daurada Coast), Costa Barcelona (Barcelona Coast), Barcelona, Terres de Lleida (Lands of Lleida), Val d'Aran, Pyrenees and Terres de l'Ebre (Lands of Ebre).

Given this wide demand for sun and beach tourism (Costa Brava and Costa Daurada), as well as urban tourism (Barcelona brand), we have to analyze the product offering by brands as Val d’Aran, Terres de Lleida and Pyrenees. Its type of tourism focuses mainly on snow tourism and second homes. What about spa tourism?

Graph 2: *Most important tourist brands in Catalonia (hotel occupancy)*



Source: *Own elaboration from IDESCAT data, from 2002 to 2015*

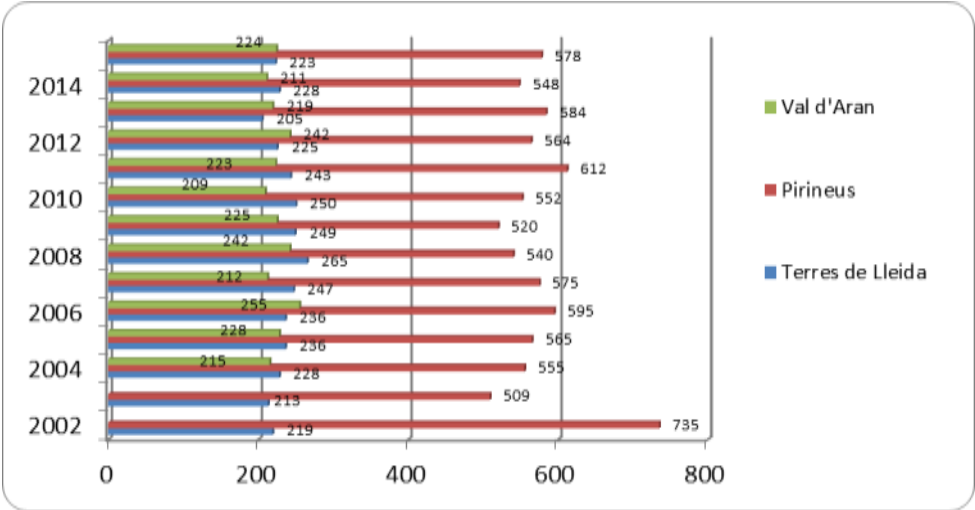
In Terres de Lleida, there are three spas located. These wellness centers are included in the Pyrenees and Val d’ Aran brand; they are situated in Caldes de Boi, in the Pyrenees brand, and in Tredòs and Lès, in the Val d’Aran brand. We have also gained data from 2 centers, those of Caldes de Boi and Lès.

Our approach considers spa tourism as a potential engine of regional, economic and social development, as a tool for generating wealth and attracting both, those who want to enjoy their holidays in a health environment, and those professionals who try to provide health services and therapies.

It should be noted that these two brands focus its offer on sports, and not only winter sports, and nature. However, we have to mention the existing cultural resources, the Romanesque Boi Valley as the most famous

example, but not the only. All of these resources help to complete and diversify tourism.

Graph 3: *Tourist brands in Lleida province (hotel occupancy)*



Source: *Own elaboration from IDESCAT data, from 2002 to 2015*

To introduce more information related to the environment in which these two spa centers are located, it is even worth to highlight the low density of inhabitants in those areas and the significant unemployment of its territory, mainly in the service sector. This low density becomes an added value for health tourism segment of demand: the possibility of maintaining an environment crowded and full of calm and relax environment. The registered unemployment by the specific service sector has increased from 2008 and has kept this trend until nowadays (Source: IDESCAT, Catalan Government).

Table 1: *LÈS and BOÍ data related to population density and unemployment rate, in 2015*

	Density	Population	Working population	Unemployment	Unemployment in services sector	Total unemployment
LÈS	40.6%	953	590	125	31 %	39.8 %
BOÍ	4.6%	1004	701	124	12.5 %	14.3 %

Source: *Own elaboration from IDESCAT data*

In this context, we analyze the possibility of spa tourism as an element of social and economic development in these rural areas. Related to the

information provided by interviews held with the owners of these centers and with the staff management team, we highlight the following aspects:

A) Proliferation of concepts and services offers that generically are related to health treatments, but without a clear identification of what health means. A lot of therapies mainly related to body care.

B) Absence in the local (Catalan and Spanish) market of spa culture, related to the habit of taking medicinal waters baths, unlike other European areas such as North Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Russia.

C) An excess of institutional legal requirements and licenses, and in return an asymmetry linked to the support of other health centres without mineral waters.

D) Imsero programs, for spring and autumn, help keep these traditional spas with activity during almost all the year. Therefore, the public-private sector collaboration is a positive aspect in favor of the existence of these centers. Therefore, Imsero programs are vital for the survival of these types of centers; however they seem to be specialized in elderly people segment and due to this required segmentation, these spas chase away other interested groups, as young people or families.

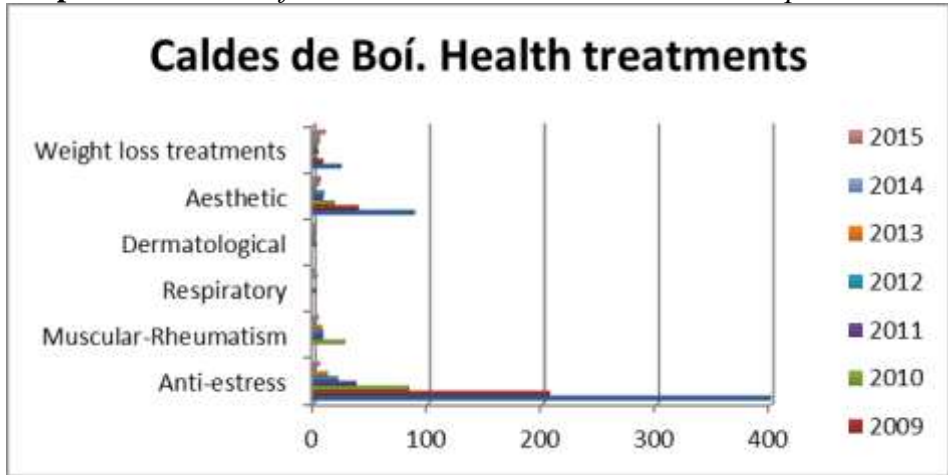
E) The location of these centers is a strength of the offered supply, for the calm, nature environment, and relax that clients can find there. However, it can also become a limitation when people are interested in just one day or just two hours of health services. The distance factor of those who are seeking the health-express packages can shoo away this active and occupied collective of people.

F) The technical knowledge and high medical level of therapies of staff who are working in these centers, give and added value to the product and create a comfortable ambiance between customer and health professional. Traditional spas offer an excellent product, linked to medical mineral and regular water. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that there is a the need of accredited professionals with the appropriate characteristics of services provided. This implies a demand for doctors, physiotherapists and people related to environmental health.

This professional demand has had an effect on the labour environment of these two towns, Les and Caldes de Boí. The recruitment of needed staff has been provided by local young candidates, with recent degrees, as well as people coming from other regions. Needless to say, therefore, that the pull that offer these types of centers, it is not exclusively to customers, as it is connected professional labor field as well. Therefore, thermal centers become a point of promoting local employability and point of professional attraction to places traditionally represented by a significant migration of human capital in the not too distant past.

Also, if we analyze the data of health treatments and services sold (Graphs 4 and 5), we can see the development of treatments that have been made in these two centers, taking into account the specific conditions of each of them.

Graph 4: *Evolution of thermal treatments at Caldes de Boí Spa*

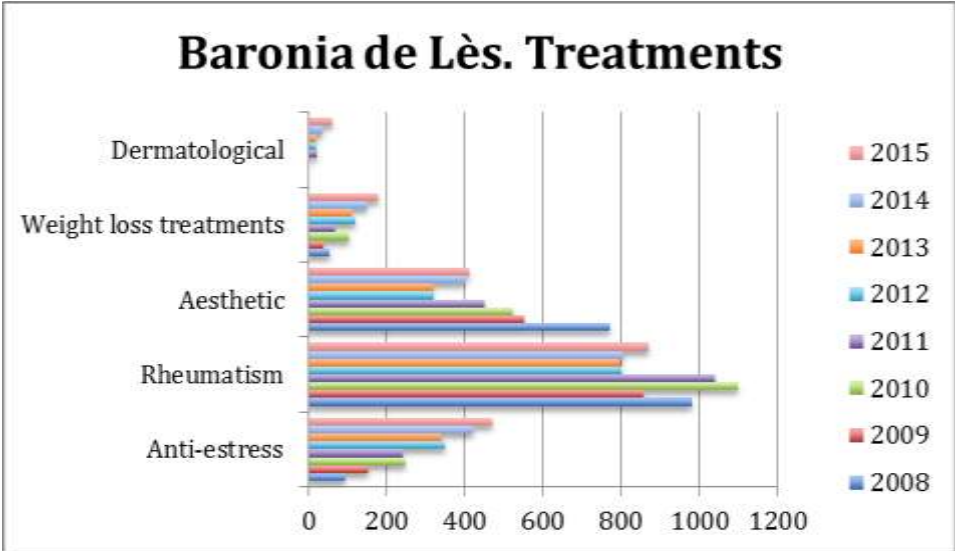


Source: *Own elaboration from spa data*

In the case of Caldes de Boi, it is interesting to comment figures obtained in 2008, especially as anti-stress treatments are the most demanded treatments by customers, without neglecting the relevance of aesthetic and weight loss treatments. The downward trend of these types of treatment in 2009, 2010 and 2011 gives us a very clear vision of the impact of the crisis scenario related to the demand of these offered products. Since 2012, the center is recuperating the demand step by step.

It is important to note a timid increase, though minimal, of respiratory, dermatological and muscle-rheumatology treatments, becoming such as a line of complementary supply of spas.

Graph 5: *Evolutions of thermal treatments at Les Spa*



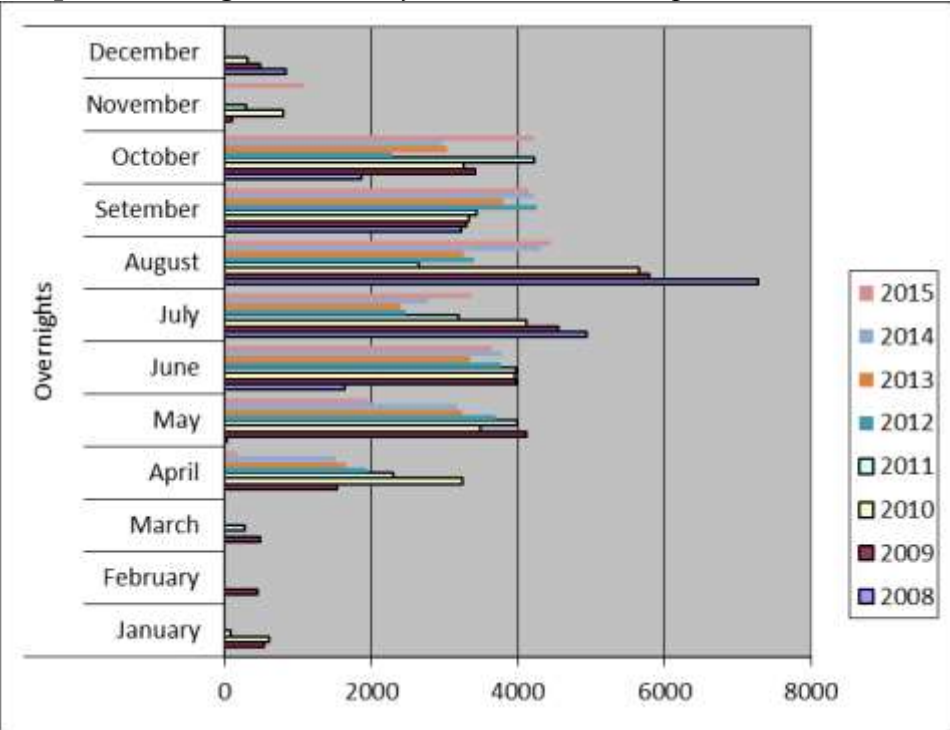
Source: *Own elaboration from spa data*

Regarding the evolution of thermal treatments at Les Spa, it is noted that the impact of the crisis has had an effect less relevant compared with the sold treatments at Caldes de Boi Spa. The demand of anti-stress treatments have been similar during 2010 and 2011, as well as rheumatology, weight loss and dermatological treatments. The prominent and gradual reduction has been seen in beauty treatments. In winter, skiers use to be important customers.

Taken into account that Les Spa has no accommodation facilities, it leads us to confirm that wellness treatments and health-express packages (getting treatment lasting a few hours or just one day), have not suffered any strong decline as thermal centers that offer a wide range of facilities (accommodation, food handling and special health treatments).

Finally, we analyze the volume of overnight stays (Graph 6) in Caldes de Boi Spa, using treatments and services included in their rooms booking. However, since 2011, during December-March months, the hotel is closed due to the lack of overnights demand.

Graph 6: *Overnight annual stays at Caldes de Boi Spa*



Source: *Own elaboration from spa data*

To sum up, once again it is important to highlight the positive impact of IMSERSO program during the stay periods of spring and autumn.

Conclusions

Since 2008, due to the economic crisis, there has been an obviously negative impact on the booking of thermal or spa services. It is important to distinguish between centers that offer services aimed at the welfare with shorter duration (Spa of Les) and centers that offer a chance to stay a long period (Caldes de Boi). In the first case, it is interesting to show how significant "health-express" is, that is, the increasing demand of wellness products, but in sessions lasting no more than one day.

Due to these social changes in demand, there is an increase of supply of health-express therapies, which have not existed before. This increase in anti-stress products are linked with spaces dedicated to meditation and self-awareness, introducing here the concept of full awareness or mindfulness. These new concepts of spa health centers try to become the

engine of growth of these two socio-economic areas where they are located, Les and Caldes de Boí.

The Government requires a strong commitment to developing a detailed regulation which would clearly differentiate centers with medical mineral waters from the ones that do not have these types of waters. Then, the proliferation of the so-called "urban spas" that come into direct competition and replacement of traditional spas (those with medical mineral waters), could be compatible.

The existence of IMSERSO program has a dual purpose. Firstly, it helps those centers (as Caldes de Boi) to work almost during all the year; and secondly, the use of these treatments imply an element of preventive and health improvement, as has been evident in other parts of Europe.

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