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TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE CONCEPT OF SPA TOURISM IN EUROPE

*Snežana Milićević*¹; *Nataša Đorđević*²; *Ivanka Nestoroska*³

Abstract

Spa tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism, with a long history of using mineral waters for healing since ancient times. Originally, spa resorts developed as places where people came to bathe and drink mineral water to improve their health. Over the years, however, spa tourism has expanded beyond medical treatment to include a wide range of wellness services, relaxation opportunities, and lifestyle programs. This paper explores the evolution of spa tourism in Europe, highlighting how traditional practices have been integrated with modern tourism offerings. The study focuses on Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic and Montecatini Terme in Italy, two destinations that successfully combine historic spa traditions with contemporary wellness and leisure services. The findings aim to provide insights for policymakers, spa managers, and researchers interested in enhancing the appeal and competitiveness of spa tourism today.

Key Words: *spa tourism, spa destinations, Europe*

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Introduction

People have used healing mineral waters for therapeutic purposes since ancient times. In those periods, “special rituals and religious ceremonies

¹ Snežana Milićević, Ph.D., Full professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvodanska 5A, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, 036/5150024, snezana.milicevic@kg.ac.rs

² Nataša Đorđević, Ph.D., Assistant professor, University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Vojvodanska 5A, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, 036/5150024, natasa.djordjevic@kg.ac.rs

³ Ivanka Nestoroska, PhD., Full professor, University St.Kliment Ohridski – Bitola, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, Kej Makedonija, 95, 6000 Ohrid, North Macedonia, 389/71260703, ivanka.nestoroska@uklo.edu.mk

were performed, during which people sought to improve their health by drinking medicinal water, bathing in it, and applying compresses made from healing mud” (Milićević, 2015, p. 16). The ancient Romans played a particularly important role in spreading the popularity of balneotherapy across Europe. Roman legions built baths at thermo-mineral springs in their colonies in France, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria (Stamenković et al., 2017, p. 113). These facilities offered visitors various health services, including baths, massages, and saunas (Milićević, 2015), with the aim of improving overall well-being (Aluculesei et al., 2021). Travel for health purposes became popular in the 18th century, when European elites visited renowned spa destinations such as Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic), Baden-Baden (Germany), Baden (Switzerland), and Vichy (France) to improve their health (Turski et al., 2021).

Today, the European spa sector includes around 10,000 facilities. It provides direct and indirect employment for approximately 850,000 people and generates an annual turnover of about 50 billion euros. As a result, this sector has become one of the major employers within both the health and tourism industries, particularly in less developed industrial regions. Many spa destinations have also moved toward sustainable development and are increasingly recognized as green destinations (European Spas Association [ESPA], 2023, p. 5). Some authors point out that the offer of European spas is still largely based on traditional therapeutic treatments, but at the same time it increasingly attracts visitors who wish to enjoy natural landscapes, cultural attractions, and various experiential activities (Čeperković & Čerović, 2023). Contemporary European spas combine cultural, recreational, and entertainment facilities while preserving authentic architecture in well-protected natural surroundings. Their natural healing resources, such as thermo-mineral springs and peloids, are still used for treatment and rehabilitation (Milićević, 2015). Today, spa tourism goes beyond medical care to include prevention, health promotion, and overall well-being, combining traditional therapies with modern wellness and holistic approaches (Hall, 2011; Okech, 2014).

This paper examines the development of spa tourism in Europe, with particular attention given to the differences between the concept of traditional spa resorts and contemporary spa destinations. The analysis focuses on examples of good practice in Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic and Montecatini Terme in Italy. These well-known European

spa destinations illustrate the successful integration of traditional spa treatments with modern tourism and wellness services, enabling them to achieve a competitive advantage in the international tourism market.

The concept of traditional spa tourism

The term “spa” likely comes from the town of Spa in Belgium, known since Roman times for its thermal springs and healing facilities. It may also originate from the Latin phrase *Sanitas per aqua*, meaning “health through water.” Today, a spa refers to a destination with thermo-mineral springs where people bathe or drink the water to improve their health. (Milićević, 2015; Yurcu, 2017).

Traditional spa services include balneotherapy, climatotherapy, and thalassotherapy, often combined with modern health procedures for recovery, treatment, and prevention. Balneotherapy uses mineral waters, mud, and natural gases for therapies such as baths, drinking mineral water, inhalations, and mud applications (Munteanu & Munteanu, 2019, Protano et al., 2024, Milićević, 2015). Climatotherapy involves using the climate to support health, prevent illness, or aid recovery (Amatya & Khan, 2023, p. 47). Thalassotherapy draws on the sea, marine mud, sand, algae, and coastal climate for healing, with France being a pioneer and having the largest number of thalassotherapy spas today (Munteanu & Munteanu, 2019; Traasgpu, n.d.).

The procedures used in traditional spa therapies can be divided into two main groups (Czech Spa Association, n.d.):

- Unique procedures, which make use of the local natural healing mineral resources of a specific spa, such as drinking mineral water, baths, compresses, and inhalations.
- Additional procedures, which are offered in most spa facilities, including electrotherapy, magnetotherapy, kinesitherapy, and other treatments.

According to Ghasemi et al. (2021), people usually visit spas for physical therapy or rehabilitation following surgical or other medical interventions, often due to specific health issues such as skin, respiratory, or rheumatic conditions. Turski et al. (2021) note that spa therapies are also used to restore lost body functions after trauma, stroke, paralysis, and other pathological conditions. As Puška et al. (2017) point out, the purpose of

spa treatment is to make use of natural healing factors and physical therapy to improve a person's overall health.

The concept of modern spa destinations

Spa tourism faces significant challenges, prompting spas to adapt and develop new concepts. Visitor profiles have shifted, with many coming for relaxation, recreation, sports, and the overall spa experience rather than just medical treatment (Arsić et al., 2024). In response, spas have expanded traditional services to include wellness, cultural, recreational, and entertainment options. Traditional spa resorts have thus evolved into modern destinations that attract healthy visitors seeking relaxation, exercise, and cultural or gastronomic experiences (Milićević, 2015). Today, spas are valued as places of well-being and self-care, with spa therapy playing an important role in promoting health (Nestoroska et al., 2024). Modern spa tourism integrates physical and mental health through programs combining hydrotherapy, healthy nutrition, and recreational activities (Dini & Pencarelli, 2021).

In order for spas to remain competitive, it was necessary to change the concept of spa tourism. To make a stay in a modern spa as fulfilling as possible, certain key elements should be present (Milićević, 2015): (a) natural healing resources, (b) medical facilities offering traditional spa therapies, (c) modern wellness centres based on natural healing factors, (d) skilled and educated staff, (e) indoor and outdoor thermal mineral water pools, (f) well-maintained natural surroundings with parks, in a peaceful environment free from traffic, noise, and pollution, (g) harmonious and authentic spa architecture, (h) modern and diverse accommodation, (i) varied gastronomic offerings, and (j) a wide range of sports, recreational, cultural, and entertainment activities.

Marinoski and Nestoroska (2016) identified that spas' offer should include wider range of services adapted to the customers with diverse component of health treatments (medical examinations, vitamin treatments, special diets, and acupuncture or hydrotherapy treatments), treatments for relaxation, health-care and self-care (exercise programs, treatments for exfoliation, various baths, saunas, cellulite treatments, etc.).

The most renowned European spas, which initially focused solely on traditional spa tourism, have now greatly expanded their offerings and

positioned themselves as modern spa destinations in the market. Today, spas cater not only to people seeking medical treatment or rehabilitation but also to healthy visitors who come for relaxation, leisure, and the prevention or improvement of their overall health.

Spa tourism in Europe and examples of good practice

Today, spa tourism is developing rapidly across many European countries. For this reason, a number of associations have been established to represent spas and advocate for their interests, such as the *European Spas Association*, the *European Historic Thermal Towns Association*, and the *Great Spa Towns of Europe*. Since 24 July 2021, the *Great Spa Towns of Europe* have been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This group brings together eleven spa towns from seven European countries (UNESCO, 2021): Spa in Belgium; Vichy in France; Baden bei Wien in Austria; Montecatini Terme in Italy; City of Bath in the United Kingdom; Baden-Baden, Bad Ems and Bad Kissingen in Germany; and Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně and Františkovy Lázně in Czech Republic.

These spa towns reflect the development of the European spa phenomenon, whose roots can be traced back to antiquity and which later evolved under broader global influences. They reached their greatest prominence between 1700 and 1930 (UNESCO, 2021). Built around mineral springs, these towns are characterized by a distinctive combination of architecture, natural surroundings, and long-standing traditions. As integrated and carefully designed environments, they became places that inspired important intellectual, artistic, social, and political activities, contributing in many ways to the transformation of European society. Their enduring role as places associated with healing and relaxation for the body, mind, and spirit continues to shape European culture, health practices, and social customs. Today, these spa destinations also feature modern clinics, balneological and wellness centres, as well as a variety of cultural and sports facilities (Dimitrovski et al., 2021).

The following section presents two representative European spa towns, Karlovy Vary and Montecatini Terme. Thanks to the integration of traditional therapeutic services with modern health and wellness offerings, combined with a wide range of accommodation options, these spas have secured a strong position in the international tourism market.

Foreign tourists account for the majority of tourism in these modern spa destinations, making up 70-80% of all guests.

Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic is one of the most famous and beautiful spa towns in Europe. The construction of spa buildings in the Art Nouveau style during the last decade of the 19th century gave the town a distinctive and attractive architectural appearance. At that time, it became a fashionable destination visited by wealthy elites, nobility, and renowned personalities from around the world, including Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, and Freud. Even today, celebrities frequently visit the spa. Karlovy Vary is characterized by well-preserved natural surroundings, a pleasant atmosphere, authentic architecture, and numerous cultural landmarks, such as colonnades, religious buildings, museums, opera houses, and theaters. The town's spa tradition is based on its natural healing resource, mineral water. The symbol of the spa is the Vřídlo geyser (Hot Springs), the largest and hottest spring, with a temperature of 72°C and a jet reaching up to 12 meters in height. Most spa facilities use the mineral water for drinking, heating, and balneological and wellness treatments. The spa offers around 50 traditional treatments, along with extensive wellness and medical services, including clinics for gastroenterology, dentistry, in vitro fertilization, and cosmetic surgery, one of which is the largest in the Czech Republic. To provide visitors with a rich and engaging experience, Karlovy Vary organizes year-round entertainment programs. Every May, a ceremonial parade officially opens the spa season. Throughout the year, the town hosts numerous concerts, auctions, carnivals, horse races at the hippodrome, and festivals. The most notable event is the International Film Festival, one of the oldest in the world, established in 1946. The sports and recreational offer is also extensive. Karlovy Vary has the highest concentration of golf courses in the Czech Republic, with ten courses (the first built in 1904), twenty tennis courts (first in 1905), walking trails, swimming pools, horseback riding, cycling, bocce, adventure sports, hockey, and ice skating. The town has 172 accommodation facilities, including 101 hotels, classified into spa and wellness categories. To preserve the authentic spa atmosphere, visitors must follow specific traffic and parking rules. Guests are allowed one entry by car into the spa zone to transport luggage to their accommodation, after which vehicles must be parked in one of the fifteen parking areas located around the perimeter of the spa zone (Karlovy Vary, n.d.; Karlovy-Vary, n.d.; Milićević, 2015).

Montecatini Terme is the largest and most renowned spa in Italy. Its popularity comes from its healing mineral waters, elegant spa architecture, green and floral oases, artistic beauty, and rich natural and cultural heritage. The town is known not only for its health and wellness offerings but also for its sports, recreational, cultural, and entertainment activities. Throughout history, members of royal families (such as Prince Rainier), statesmen (including Benito Mussolini), and famous figures from the arts, film (Clark Gable, Katharine Hepburn), and music (Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Strauss) have chosen Montecatini Terme as a destination for relaxation and leisure. The mineral waters are classified into three types based on their salt content. The spa offers a wide range of traditional treatments as well as extensive wellness programs. For example, the Excelsior Thermal Complex hosts one of Europe's most renowned thermal wellness centers. Another highlight is the "Grotta Giusti" cave, featuring a thermal lake with water at 36°C and air temperatures ranging from 31°C to 34°C, making it one of the most attractive thermal sites in Italy. Montecatini Terme has also developed medical tourism, with facilities offering general, plastic, and reconstructive surgery, orthopedics, and traumatology. The spa features multiple thermal buildings with impressive architecture, artistic fountains, parks, statues, and sculptures. Many venues, with their elegant Art Nouveau halls, serve as spaces for exhibitions and concerts. Cultural landmarks are found throughout the town, including historic hotels, a grand city hall, churches, theaters, opera houses, museums, galleries, a ballroom, and the Academy of Arts, which preserves Giuseppe Verdi's piano. Verdi lived in Montecatini Terme for 19 years. The town maintains a strong connection to classical music, hosting concerts and festivals with internationally renowned musicians and conductors. A classical music orchestra performs daily in the spa pavilion, and piano concerts take place in the evenings. Notable events include the Classical Music Festival and the Montecatini Opera Festival. The sports and recreational offer is extensive, including a golf course, hippodrome, tennis courts, bocce courts, fencing facilities, and a shooting range, one of the best in Europe, hosting national and international competitions, as well as walking trails, cycling routes, and horseback riding. The spa has around 190 accommodation facilities, including approximately 160 hotels (Terme di Montecatini, n.d.; Montecatini Terme, n.d.; Milićević, 2015).

Conclusion

For a spa resort to remain competitive in the tourism market, it must evolve into a modern spa destination. Traditional spa offerings need to be innovated and enriched with wellness, cultural events and entertainment, as well as sports and recreational activities. Modern European spas are destinations rich in natural healing resources, providing visitors with opportunities to improve their health and overall physical and mental well-being. Special attention is given to environmental protection and minimizing air, noise, and traffic pollution. Spas strive to offer guests peace and quiet, often restricting traffic in the central spa area. Accommodation, medical, and other spa facilities typically make use of mineral water for daily needs, while also relying on renewable energy sources, controlled heating and cooling, all aimed at increasing energy efficiency. A modern spa destination also emphasizes aesthetic landscaping, spa architecture, well-equipped parks, promenades, cycling paths, outdoor recreational equipment, and public spaces where visitors can spend their leisure time. This integrated approach, which supports tourists' physical, mental, and social well-being, is practiced by most European spas. Traditional spa resorts that have embraced this modern trend, expanding and enriching their offerings, have successfully positioned themselves in the international tourism market. This is especially true for some of the most attractive spa towns in Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary, France, and Slovenia.

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