



SPA AND WELLNESS - INNOVATIONS AND GOOD ANTI- STRESS PRACTICES IN BULGARIA AS ADDITION TO SEA AND CULTURAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Bulgaria is a country rich in natural resources with curative and prophylactic effects- balneological, mud and climatic. The country offers opportunities for combining SPA and Wellness tourism with marine and cultural tourism, especially valuable for foreign tourists seeking combined experiences for anti-stress and relaxation therapy. A study, analysis and systematization of the offered SPA and Wellness - innovations and good anti-stress practices presented in the digital applications of 107 - SPA and 30 - Wellness centres included in the National Tourism Register. The results show a tendency for the development and application of both stand-alone and combined rituals and concepts based on the application of Bulgarian products - honey, wine, milk, rose oil, herbs, mineral waters and healing mud. Combined with properly equipped hotel facilities and trained specialists, the certified Spa and Wellness centers in Bulgaria can successfully offer wellness programs, making our country an attractive destination for this type of tourism.

Keywords: digital presentation, certified Spa and Wellness Centres, Anti-Stress practices

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most significant global industries, providing one tenth of the world's gross domestic product and employment. (1). The contemporary international tourism industry is evolving within a complex political, economic, and increasingly competitive environment. According to data from the World Tourism Organization, despite certain crisis events (wars, terrorism, natural disasters), international tourist travel and tourism revenues continue to register positive annual growth. Alongside the dynamic transformation of global tourism, consumer psychology is also evolving, with tourists seeking new experiences, unconventional destinations, and the fulfillment of personal interests and emotions.

As a country rich in natural resources with healing and prophylactic effects (mineral

waters, climate, peloids), Bulgaria offers unique opportunities for combining balneotherapy and wellness tourism with sea and cultural tourism, especially valuable for foreign tourists seeking combined experiences for anti-stress and relaxation therapy.

In order to more rationally use the natural, cultural, historical and geographical resources that our country has at its disposal to combine various types of tourism, the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria "Horizon 2030" was approved.

Sociological studies reveal the following characteristics of foreign tourists vacationing in our country: a roughly even distribution between men and women; the largest share belongs to individuals of working age (25-46 years old); mainly foreigners with higher education (52- 57%); They are active and combine the four specialized types of tourism: cultural tourism – with culinary, mountain, and seaside tourism; SPA/balneotherapy tourism – with seaside, therapeutic, and culinary tourism; eco-tourism – with mountain, culinary, and cultural tourism; and rural tourism – with

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culinary, mountain, and wine tourism. The largest share of those who engage in SPA/balneotherapy tourism in our country come from the Balkans (38%), from West (22%) and East (22%) Europe; 2/3 of them have already visited our country before. As Bulgaria's main advantages over other destinations, SPA/balneotherapy tourists

highlight: the climate, as well as the healing springs and treatments. (22%), the low prices (20%), the service (19,7%), the SPA centers (19%), "...the beautiful nature and the clean air (13 %) (**Figure 1**). 84 % of SPA/balneotherapy tourists believe that Bulgaria is an attractive destination for this type of tourism (2).

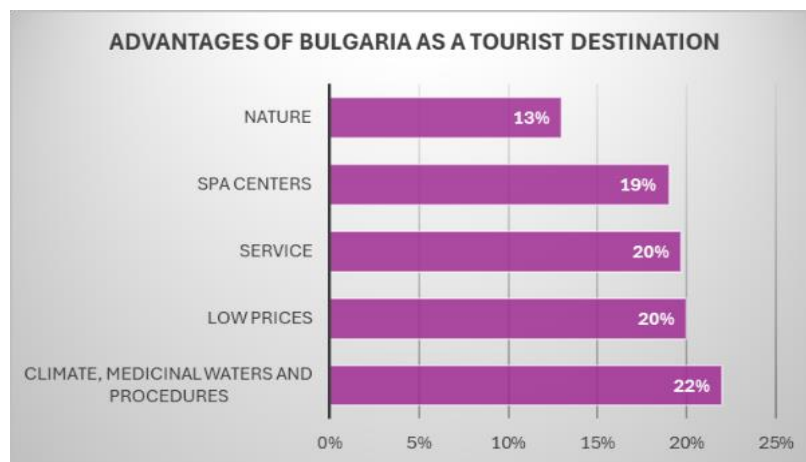


Figure 1. Advantages of Bulgaria as a tourist destination

According to Bulgarian tourists, SPA and balneotherapy tourism are as recognizable, popular, and attractive as seaside, cultural, and rural tourism. Foreign tourists show the highest level of satisfaction with the quality and variety of SPA services offered, with 58% of respondents being fully satisfied and 33% rather satisfied (according to a study by the Ministry of Economy and Industry). Weekend SPA and Wellness programs for relaxation, health, and beauty—as well as longer-term ones during paid leave—are a great alternative for recovering from the effects of everyday stress and offer an opportunity to build a healthy lifestyle (3-7).

Balneo, SPA, and Wellness tourism ranks second after cultural tourism among specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria, accounting for 6.6% of all tourism products and services in the country. The products offered in this type of tourism activity are neither mass-produced nor standardized. There are opportunities to customize them according to the needs of each individual tourist (2).

The main regulatory document for certifying the following categories of balneological centers: “Balneological (Medical SPA) Center,” “SPA Center,” “Wellness Center,” and “Thalassotherapy Center”—is Joint Ordinance No. 2 of January 29, 2016, adopted by the

Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Health of Bulgaria (8). It outlines the minimum mandatory conditions under which they must be built, furnished and equipped, specifies exactly what services must be offered and the functions of their management, as well as the level of qualification of service staff. The Tourism Act (9) defines which services are grouped under the name "Spa" or "Spa/Wellness. These are "services requiring the use of water (mineral, spring, and other as permitted by law), as well as healing mud and/or sea water, and/or other natural factors for classical and non-traditional therapeutic methods of influence aimed at restoring psycho-emotional and physical health, as well as focusing on the beauty of the human body".

At present, there are 47 certified balneological (medical SPA), 107 SPA centers, and 30 Wellness centers. No thalassotherapy centers have been registered in Bulgaria yet.

METHODS

A study, analysis and systematization of the offered SPA and Wellness - innovations and good anti-stress practices presented in the digital applications of 107 - SPA and 30 - Wellness centres included in the National Tourism Register.

Purpose: To study and analyze and systematize the SPA and Wellness innovations and good

anti-stress practices presented in the digital applications of the SPA and Wellness centers listed in the National Tourism Register.

Object: The digital applications of 103 SPAs and 30 Wellness centres listed in the National Tourism Register.

Research methods: To achieve the stated objective, we applied documentary and mathematical-statistical methods.

RESULTS

From the information presented in the digital platforms of certified and currently operating (as of 2024) Wellness and SPA centers in the country regarding the offering of anti-stress and relaxation procedures, it becomes clear that:

1. In 45% of the digitally represented SPAs and in 53% of the digitally represented Wellness centres different types of anti-stress and relaxation treatments are offered.
2. 22% of SPAs and 10% of Wellness centres do not offer anti-stress and relaxation treatments.
3. 33% of SPAs and 37% of Wellness centres do not have enough information in their digital applications.

The analysis of the survey results allows us to classify the offered anti-stress and relaxation treatments into the following main groups:

- Water healing procedures - self-applied or included in a ritual.
- Massage treatments - alone or included in various rituals.
- Treatments with chocolate, honey, wine products and herbs.
- SPA rituals.
- Procedures with healing mud and lye.

The leading offer in Wellness centres is hydrotherapy treatments (41%), in contrast to Spa centres where they are the second largest offer (18%). The preference for these treatments as a restorative health remedy is supported by a number of studies proving that the use of mineral spring water contributes significantly to restoring the stress-impaired metabolism and to regulate the level of insulin in the human body (10-12). Antonelli & Donelli (2018) suggest that balneotherapy may have the potential to influence cortisol levels in healthy individuals and therefore to improve their resilience to stress (13).

Massage treatments occupy the first place in the offer as a means of anti-stress and relaxation in Spa centres (65%), probably due to their popularity and time-proven effects for stress relaxation and recovery (14-15), anxiety (16), depression (17), pain (18) and improve the quality of life (19).

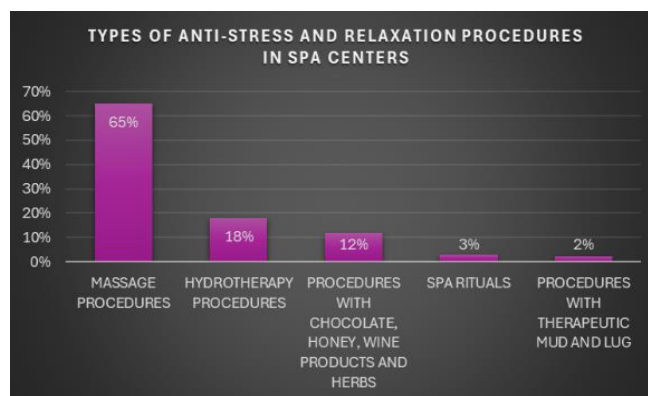


Figure 2. Types of anti-stress and relaxation treatments in SPA centers

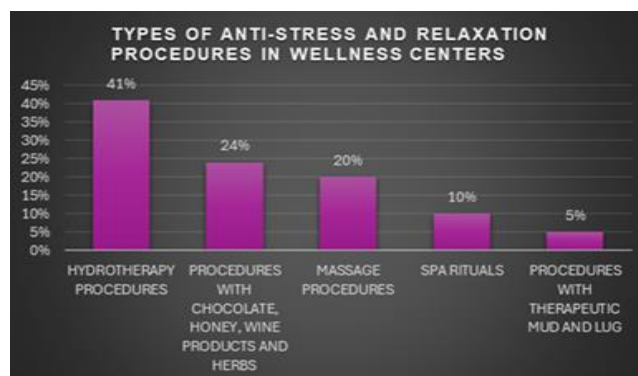


Figure 3. Types of anti-stress and relaxation treatments in Wellness centers

Growing interest and offering in Wellness Centres is being registered in treatments with chocolate, honey, wine products and herbs (24%), followed by massage treatments (20%). Aromatherapy treatments account for 22% of anti-stress massage treatments. The use of essential oils, in particular Damascena Rose oil, gives us a field for new research regarding their effects aimed at improving physical and mental well-being, enhancing the quality of life in consumers of such services. In both SPA and Wellness centers the offer of treatments with healing mud and lye is the lowest (2% in SPA and 5% in Wellness centers), probably for the reason of their leading offer in medical SPA centers as a healing and not so much prophylactic and anti-stress procedure. Offering Rituals is probably a more preferred complex anti-stress and relaxation treatment, which determines its leading place in terms of prevalence, compared to mud and lye treatments, offered in Spa and Wellness centers respectively - 3% for Spa and 10% for Wellness (Figure 2, Figure 3).

Some of the offered anti-stress massage treatments are classical, but more and more treatments taken from Eastern practices (Ayurvedic massage, Himalayan salt massage, Thai massage) are offered, combined with the application of Bulgarian products of wine, honey and milk, essential oil of Bulgarian Rose. Bulgarian products are skillfully included in the combined therapies – “Wine Temptation” Therapy, “Bulgarian Rose” Therapy, “Orange and Cinnamon” Therapy, “Divine Elixir” Therapy, etc. Of special interest are the offered combined procedures such as – “Special Cleopatra” bath, “Flotation bath” with magnesium sulphate, SPA package Relax (silk peeling and body mask, relaxing anti-stress massage, “Vichy shower”) and “Jala – Royal” therapy - hydro massage bath with mineral water, Royal massage, Mini facial therapy (exfoliation, massage, hydration). In contrast to SPAs, Rituals in Wellness Centers show a higher supply (10%). There is a lack of variety in type, but half of the rituals include the use of Bulgarian rose oil, followed by Coconut Ritual and SPA Ritual with gemstones.

CONCLUSION

The results show a tendency for the development and application of both stand-alone and combined rituals and concepts based on the application of Bulgarian products - honey, wine, milk, Rose oil, herbs, mineral

waters and healing mud. Combined with properly equipped hotel facilities and trained specialists, the certified Spa and Wellness centers in Bulgaria can successfully offer wellness programs, making our country an attractive destination for this type of tourism.

In order to carry out the treatments properly and effectively, the SPA and Wellness therapists must be professionally qualified (20). New scientific studies are needed on the effects on clients' health and well-being of healing practices with honey, essential oils, wine therapy, chocolate therapy, hydrotherapy and mud healing treatments. The individual approach, as well as the development of standards regarding the optimal amount of natural products used, would make SPA and Wellness therapies a safe and preferred alternative in the prevention of socially significant diseases.

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