

THE FUTURE OF SPA TOURISM IN BULGARIA AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction

SPA tourism has piqued the interest of both professionals and scholars for numerous reasons. The growing global customer demand for this sort of service is significant. The primary objective of this research is to examine the present condition of SPA tourism in Bulgaria within a worldwide framework. The SPA has been a fundamental aspect of civilization for millennia, as people have always pursued improved health and enhanced quality of life. In the twenty-first century, consumers are more proactive, knowledgeable, and aware of health and nutrition, with the aspiration for an enhanced quality of life emerging as a worldwide trend. The increased interest in health has positively impacted the SPA business and attracted the attention of enterprises exploring possible health services for their clientele. This indicates many trends, notably the growing focus of individuals on their health. Moreover, the manifestations of global health issues associated with the accelerated pace of life contribute to the alteration of lifestyle for a significant portion of the population. An increasing number of individuals are seeking methods to alleviate physical stress and enhance their psychological well-being. The primary prerequisite for the establishment and development of SPA tourism is the availability of valuable natural resources, like mineral springs, therapeutic mud, volcanic rocks, or thalassotherapy elements. People are increasingly realizing the benefits of SPA treatments, which is resulting in increased accessibility to these services. These reasons position SPA services as one of the fastest-growing sectors in the world economy (Aluculesei et al., 2021; Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Anaya-Aguilar et al., 2021).

The object of the study is SPA tourism in Bulgaria.

The subject of the study is the development of SPA tourism in Bulgaria after the Covid-19 crisis in global and Bulgarian tourism.

The purpose of the study is to outline the prospects for the development of SPA tourism in Bulgaria after the Covid-19 crisis.

In order to fulfill the objectives, we have set the following **research tasks**:

1. Based on contemporary literary sources, to review the development of Bulgarian SPA tourism after the Covid 19 crisis
2. To examine the challenges, opportunities, technological innovations and sustainable practices for SPA tourism in Bulgaria
3. To outline the opportunities for growth of SPA tourism in Bulgaria through appropriate marketing strategies in the context of international competition in the sector

Our study is based on the information in the scientific literature and the open source data we have about the world and Bulgarian SPA tourism. A descriptive-analytical method was used to prepare the study.

I. Overview of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

1.1. Conceptual framework of SPA tourism

SPA tourism is a form of tourism aimed at restoring, relaxing and improving physical and mental health through specialized procedures and services. The term *SPA* comes from the Latin phrase “*Sanitas Per Aquam*” (Health through water), which emphasizes the use of mineral, thermal and sea waters in various healing and relaxing procedures.

Back in 1973 The International Union of Tourism Organizations (IUWTO), the predecessor of the UN World Tourism Organization, defined the term “health tourism” as:

“...the provision of health facilities that utilize the natural resources of the country, in particular mineral water and climate.”

Much later, in 2016, a working paper by the UNWTO provided a more expanded definition of the concept, stating:

“Health tourism encompasses those types of tourism whose primary motivation is to contribute to physical, mental and/or spiritual health through medical and wellness activities that enhance the capacity of individuals to meet their own needs and to function better as individuals in their environment and society.”

A conceptual model of SPA tourism in Bulgaria can be viewed as an extended ecosystem in which the following main elements interact:

- Key resources: Mineral springs, climate, landscape.

- Services and experiences: SPA treatments, wellness programs, health and longevity programs, and cultural integration.
- Stakeholders: Government, private sector, local communities and residents, tourists.
- The result: economic growth, improved health and well-being, and environmental sustainability

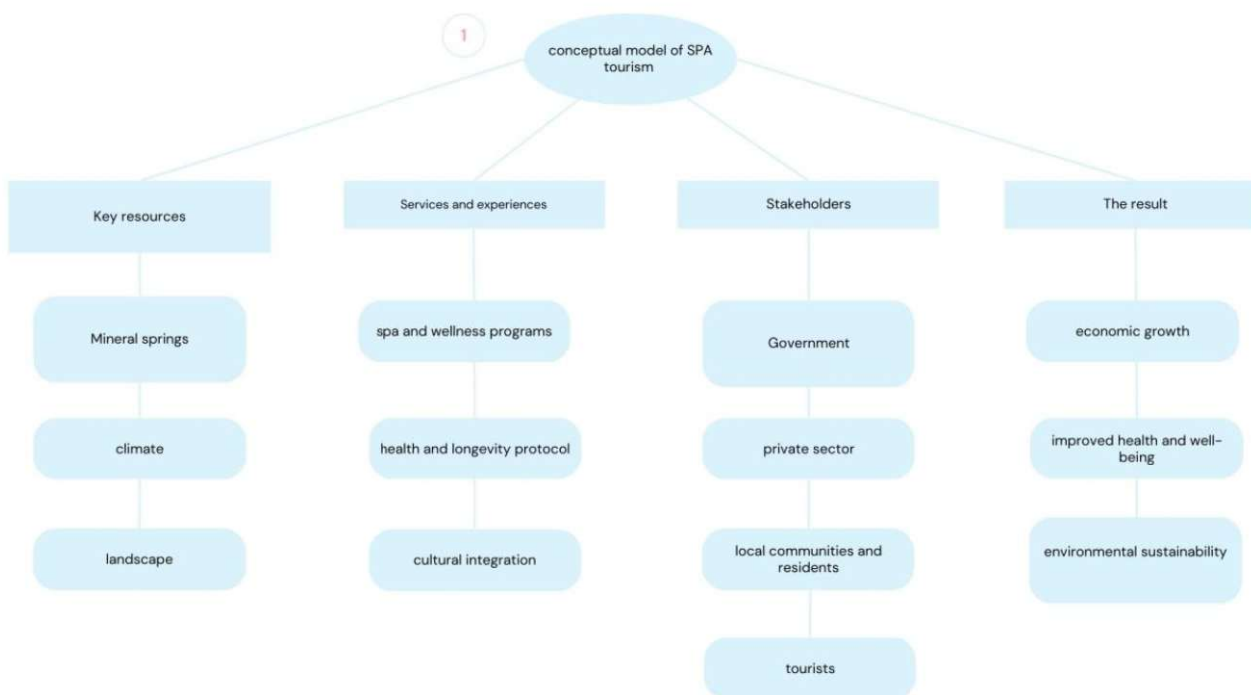


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of SPA tourism

Source: Figure created by the Author.

1.2. Situation of SPA tourism in Bulgaria

Thermal water has consistently been advantageous, and individuals since antiquity have esteemed its extraordinary therapeutic qualities. The chance for various cosmetic operations has existed for ages across all civilizations, complemented by profound creativity and precious beauty formulations. People, who can afford costly ointments and procedures for beauty restoration, view it as a luxury. In recent years, a growing number of individuals have become devoted consumers of global beauty items derived from Mediterranean and Asian sources. Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, and Italy, possessing extensive historical heritage, have attracted new visitors to their coasts. European myths about white wine baths have their roots in the leg-

endary history of ancient Greece. Italians are savoring wines appropriate for leisure activities at the renowned Maria Bath. The SPA routes of contemporary Greece integrate indications of current usage with the superior infrastructure of historical tradition (Dubey et al. 2022; Barhoumi et al. 2021; Cornu 2022; Mormile et al. 2023).

In Bulgaria, the ancient Thracians and Romans expressed their aspirations during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. Since the seventeenth century, the therapeutic use of mineral water has gained popularity, and the SPA industry has been associated with commerce for almost two centuries. Throughout our nation's extensive and stormy history, natural resources have been the paramount element in capitalizing on economic prospects. Antiquity recognized the therapeutic attributes of mineral water springs, primarily because Romans used the warm water sources along the banks of the Bulgarian River as suitable respite locations (Voudouris et al. 2023; Gomes, Rautureau 2021; Diekmann et al. 2020).

Current State of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria shows us mix of Bulgarians and foreigners that enjoy visiting SPAs. This tendency has increased by 5 percentage points compared to the prior year. Half of the population prioritizes connecting with nature and exploring Bulgaria, leading them to choose a combination of SPA and nature tourism. They seek respite, therapeutic interventions, and leisurely experiences while simultaneously exploring cultural and natural sites. Pandemic-related apprehensions and stringent limitations on SPA and cosmetic treatments influence customers, according to the study (Stoyanova, 2020; Kotsakov et al., 2024).

Interest, expectations, and trends in SPA tourism have surged. A majority of customers anticipate visiting the SPA in the near future— more than a half of Bulgarians want to schedule their next visit within six months. Fifty percent of respondents expressed a preference for an average stay of two days, while international visitors indicated an average interest in four nights. The menu offers over 100 unique SPA treatments from 40 establishments nationwide, including Bulgarian bio rituals and cosmetics, wine therapies, chocolate, honey, hot stone massages, cryosystems, algae treatments, hammam, Turkish and Roman bath experiences, medical and phyto-oxygen therapy, and salt rooms, among others. There are baths containing thermal, mineral, and saltwater, each with a distinctive composition and therapeutic attributes. The establishments received accreditation for the quality of their SPA services and goods. The countryside and SPA entry embody distinct concepts—epicureans choose wine and savor five- and seven-course gourmet meals. The landscape boasts a multitude of locations, golf courses, and natural parks that

offer walking trails and therapeutic experiences (Dimitrov, Dimitrova 2021; Stoyanova 2020; Genchev, Gartsyanova 2024).

II. Challenges and Opportunities for the Future of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

2.1. Development of the Global SPA Tourism Industry

Global SPA Tourism Industry is a specialized sector anticipated to grow from a customer base mostly consisting of baby boomers to a broader and more varied demography. The sector is experiencing several transformations as customer preferences shift, indicating the need to adjust services and operations to meet the target market's expectations. Overall, trends indicate an increasing interest in natural remedies, mental health, and environmental ethics among wellness enthusiasts. Global trends significantly influence customer expectations for service delivery in the broader context of the global wellness tourism sector, which has significant implications for Bulgarian SPA culture. Industry stakeholders indicate that the SPA and wellness sector has prospered in the global market, unencumbered by traditional notions that define SPAs primarily as venues for hydrotherapy and physical exercise (Patterson, Balderas-Cejudo 2022; Anaya-Aguilar et al. 2021; Andreu et al. 2021; Torres-Pruñonosa et al. 2022).

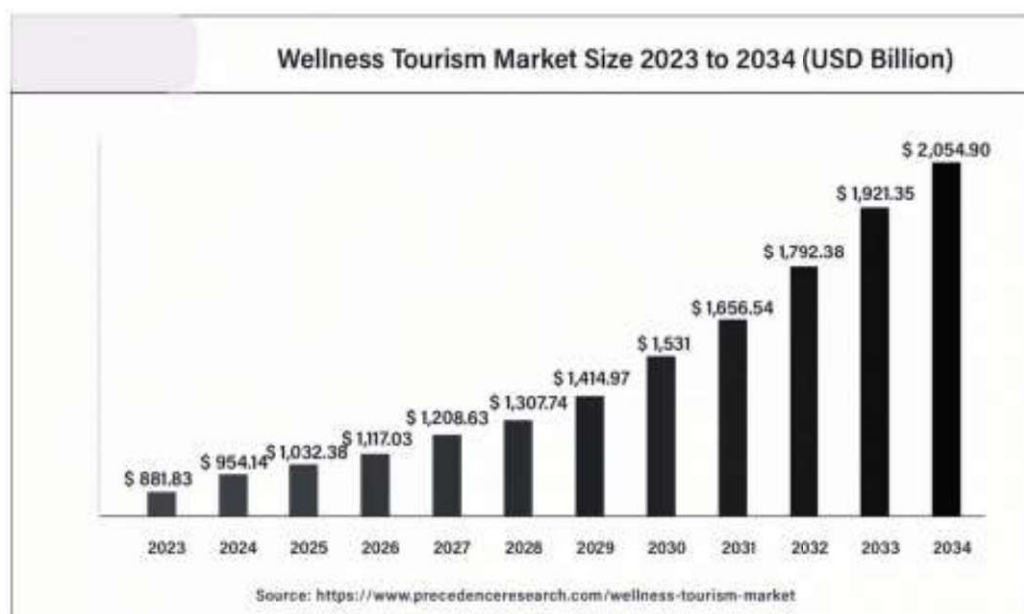


Fig. 2. Wellness Tourism Market Size 2023 to 2034 prediction

Source: www.precedenceresearch.com/wellness-tourism-market

Researchers have identified numerous worldwide trends that have the potential to generate demand for items in both newly created centers and their respective parent catchment or SPA markets. Professional discourse in SPA management and consumer advocacy indicates that contemporary SPA and wellness tourists want not only a location, but activities that correspond with their own health and wellbeing requirements. Guests are progressively pursuing distinctive, bespoke, personalized, or intimate group experiences that harmonize with nature and endorse the tenets of hedonism. Visitors want genuine experiences. Physical and mental fitness have transitioned from a duty to a priority. Preferences are evident in the growing sector (Andreu et al. 2021; Badulescu et al. 2024; Chen et al. 2023; Dilletta et al. 2021).

2.2. Technological Innovations in SPA Tourism

The innovations in SPA tourism have led to a proliferation of specialized SPA platforms for online booking in prominent tourist destinations and appealing regions within this industry. These may streamline vacation logistics by allowing prospective guests to pre-select their desired experience via a virtual tour and choose a SPA or wellness facility for relaxation. Globally, inbound tourism services and international travel amounted to 1.5 trillion in 2020, representing a 50% recovery from 3 trillion in 2019. The decline of 50% to 70% in worldwide visitor numbers for both international and national tourism has been contingent upon the closure of state borders (Dramićanin et al. 2022; Könnnyid et al. 2022).

UNWTO stated in International tourism highlights that the worst year of tourism was 2020 and international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) plunged from 1.5 billion in 2019 to 400 million in 2020(UNWTO 2023). This was a significant decline in total number of overnight tourist and this data and pandemic event makes year 2020 the worst recorded year in history of world tourism.

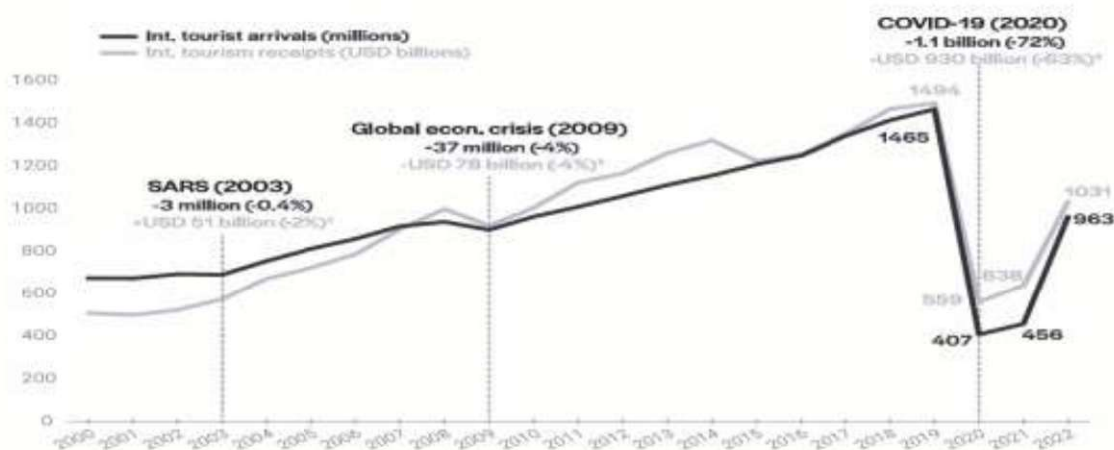


Fig. 3. International tourist arrivals and tourism receipts 2000 – 2022

Source: UNWTO (2023). International tourism highlights, 2023 edition, p. 5-6.

Bulgaria has initiated the integration of technological advancements in SPA tourism, enabling the direct or alternative marketing platforms to commercialize the SPA services offered by each institution. These innovations manifest through applications that facilitate planning, organization, and personalized support, as well as offering diverse wellness experience packages. They include mobile guides that encompass the entire spectrum of wellness, virtual tours of each SPA and wellness establishment, and the presentation of various environments available through technologically advanced smart SPA facilities designed to fulfill numerous customer preferences. Globally, investments range from 3.38 to 57.31 million euros. Considering that innovation constitutes approximately 3% of the total revenues of a SPA-wellness center, it is projected to yield a positive return within 3 to 9 months, predicated on the enhanced patronage and the average rise in service offerings (Dimitrov, Dimitrova 2021; Dimitrova 2020; Georgieva, Basmadzhieva; Stoyanova, Velikova, Dimitrova 2021).

2.3. Sustainable Practices in SPA Tourism

Sustainable Practices in SPA Tourism are essential for the future advancement of SPA tourism in Bulgaria, guaranteeing environmental preservation and enduring prosperity in the sector. An example of a sustainable approach in SPA tourism in Bulgaria is the use of natural and locally derived substances in SPA therapies. Another sustainable practice in Bulgarian SPA tourism is the adoption of eco-friendly measures aimed at minimizing carbon

emissions and fostering environmental conservation. An example of sustainable practices in the SPA tourism in Bulgaria is the implementation of energy-efficient lighting and heating systems. Another sustainable approach in Bulgarian SPA tourism is the use of water conservation techniques to save resources. An example of water conservation strategies in Bulgarian SPA tourism is the use of water-efficient fixtures and fittings. Installing water-efficient fixtures and fittings conserves water resources and lowers operational expenses for SPA enterprises. Sustainable SPA practices include the use of energy-efficient lighting and heating systems to mitigate environmental effects and operational expenses (Szromek 2021; Szromek 2020; Islam et al. 2020; Ahmed et al. 2021).

SPA tourism emphasizes relaxation and recuperation as vital components in the prevention of future ailments. It is increasingly gaining popularity nowadays. Numerous studies endorse the advantages of wellness and SPA programs for both physical and mental health. There is a correlation between water therapy, mineral waters, and SPA treatments and a decreased risk of chronic illnesses. Therapeutic mineral waters enhance the biological efficacy of water. The use of hydrotherapy and the therapeutic environment of SPA towns are crucial. The holistic approach to people, specifically SPA-based therapies, forms the foundation of therapeutic treatment concepts, facilitating a balance between mind and body. SPAs provide diverse health and fitness programs aimed at enhancing mental and physical performance. Medical wellness programs for weight reduction, detoxification, bodily cleansing, anti-aging, and medical SPA treatments enhance general well-being (Mondok 2020; Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo 2022; Aluculesei et al. 2021; Diekmann et al. 2020).

Practitioners possess substantial professional competence and provide informed evaluations on the health advantages of visiting wellness resorts. A multitude of SPA patrons are individuals seeking to engage in diverse therapies that facilitate physical and mental relaxation. Hypnotherapy, aromatherapy, and other healing modalities like Reiki may facilitate stress reduction and enhance mental well-being and mood. The results of this research have significant implications for the development of SPA tourism as a wellness retreat. The suggested strategies encompass a marketing approach that provides services customized for medical tourists, as well as physical activities integrated into specialized packages through innovative programs, including healthy recipes, nutritious food and beverages, stress management initiatives, yoga sessions,

and breathing exercises that facilitate relaxation. Promoting local and seasonal goods, including mineral water benefits for illness prevention and treatment, is essential to a healthy lifestyle. The research demonstrates that SPA services provide beneficial effects on the well-being of discerning inhabitants who maintain a superior lifestyle and engage in regular physical activity (Araújo Vila et al. 2021; Pelegrín-Borondo et al. 2020).

2.4. Challenges for the Future of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

This research identifies excessive competition and market saturation as impediments to the growth of SPA tourism in Bulgaria. Additional limitations include the ineffective use and insufficient upkeep of existing infrastructure, the pronounced seasonality of SPA services, consequent workforce challenges, and restricted access to funding for SPA company requirements. Additional obstacles include a shortage of competent personnel, the supply's incapacity to adjust to evolving and diversified customer demands, the need for repositioning and rebranding to develop new integrated goods and services, and the absence of a contemporary marketing foundation for promotion and sales. However, we can identify sustainable growth potential by diversifying novel SPA services, integrating with other tourist sectors, and developing specialized goods. Repositioning and developing integrated novel goods require substantial expenditures. Entrepreneurs assert that consistent infrastructure expenditures are essential, alongside improvements in service quality and the elevation of worker qualifications. Recent years have seen the swift advancement of the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development, inter-ministerial coordination, and a shift towards digital marketing, indicating the emergence of substantial funding-reliant investment opportunities to enhance the aesthetic appeal of tourist sites and promote the traditions of diverse regions. Furthermore, the SPA business will seek contemporary facilities to provide a diverse array of treatments year-round and enhance their appeal via online package sales. Health, specialized wellness, senior tourism, and sports-related growth provides a good base for integrating and improving extra efforts and possible investments (Dimitrova 2023; Arsova 2023; Tsonev, Basmadzhieva 2023; Ianeva et al. 2022; Bozhinova, Georgieva 2023).

III. Marketing Strategies for Promoting SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

3.1. Market positions of Bulgarian SPA Tourism and strategies for development

The unique characteristics of the Bulgarian SPA tourist sector should emphasize several unique selling propositions: the distinctiveness of Bulgarian destinations, Bulgaria's medical expertise, the integration of medical knowledge with SPA services, the convergence of medicine and wellness, and the accessibility of natural resources, among others. We can amalgamate diverse specialized marketing strategies for distinct niches to develop a robust marketing plan for SPA tourism in Bulgaria. When formulating marketing plans targeting various groups, it is essential to distinguish between the local market, adjacent markets, the European market, and the worldwide market. We can analyze the worldwide market by considering synergistic markets and remote regions like Eastern Asia, Russia, and Australia. In Bulgaria, local markets and nearby markets are applicable; in Europe, the plan should target the SPA enthusiasts sector, mostly including residents of Western European nations. In the first seven months of 2021, Bulgaria welcomed more than 2 000 000 international visitors. The Ministry of Tourism, SPA Confederation, and others should prominently feature tangible representation in their marketing efforts, positioning the nation alongside neighboring nations through travel agencies and tour operators. The rivalry among the 20 Bulgarian SPAs is intense; nevertheless, together we can enhance awareness and establish our presence in the relevant areas. We advise Bulgaria to launch an advertising campaign in German golf clubs. In light of the epidemic, this demographic is the optimal target for this summer, since they possess more disposable cash and the opportunity to engage in travel and participate in this top sport. (Wolff, Atallah 2021; Taskinsoy 2022).

As an EU member, a primary responsibility of Bulgarian governmental institutions is to foster comprehensive economic growth, including tourism. The Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Bulgarian Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Promotion Agency were principal governmental entities that played a major role for the formulation of the National Strategy for the Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria from 2014 to 2020. The paper addressed potential methods for funding SPA facilities. The Ministry of Tourism intends to execute the national strategy, oversee its execution, deliberate on the industry's overall and regional growth, enhance the operating environment for sector

players, and provide recommendations to all ministries and specialized agencies. A primary function of the Ministry was to find a way to establish a system of incentives via financial aid instruments, encompassing initiatives to promote the advancement of SPA water treatments (Ianeva et al. 2022; Dimitrov, Dimitrov 2021; Dimitrova 2020; Katsarova, Kostadinova 2021; Tsonev, Basmadzhieva 2023).

The Council of SPA issued a resolution concerning health, safety, environmental, and quality standards, in which members from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Environment and Water, and the regional inspectorates voiced their disagreement over the necessity of regulating the proposed specific criteria. The Council recommended that the agency simplify the bureaucratic processes for issuing certificates of fitness to prospective investors by permitting the submission of certificates from sanitary stations or reports from the director of a regional health zone.

The creation of a draft paper for a national strategy for the nation's development and SPA tourism for the period 2008 – 2016 began in 2007. Professionals in the relevant industry will conduct optimal quality control during the initial phase of product creation and satisfaction evaluation, using comparative analysis of sample resorts from other nations. Countries with similar levels of experience will show us how to deal with and avoid systematic quality control errors by looking at how guests rate our services, using statistical analysis, and improving the way we teach guest rating, as shown in the first set of data (Anaya-Aguilar et al. 2021; Ianeva et al. 2022; Casado-Montilla, Pulido-Fernández; Mota et al. 2023).

Bulgaria boasts commendable instances of thriving and competitive enterprises in the global SPA tourism sector. Establishing a competitive position in the dynamic global landscape is essential to transform SPA tourism in Bulgaria into a SPA and wellness business. We aim to draw in tourist markets where potential customers are looking for our specific resources.

This study examines case studies of SPA resorts in Bulgaria, focusing on local and regional characteristics. The case studies include between 10 and 12 SPA resorts. Each SPA resort was examined for the following aspects: prerequisites for SPA development; the configuration of therapeutic facilities, services, and target demographics; dining and ancillary services; opportunities for sports, cultural, historical, and natural attractions; integration with the local community; pricing, duration of stay, and facility usage fees; potential package offerings; advantages for employers and local residents in selecting the resort; strategies to attract visitors;

measures to mitigate threats; marketing strategies and policies for joining SPA and wellness associations; communication strategies; promotional tools; aspirations of the surveyed SPA resorts to collaborate with other local resorts; and the desires of the surveyed resorts regarding the established network. According to the SWOT analysis of SPA resorts, the prevailing conditions in Bulgaria and Europe indicate that the examined resorts exemplify the optimal methodology for formulating a cohesive strategy for a region and/or inter-regional collaboration. The following case studies are presented: Bankya; Banya; Devin; Hissarya; Kyustendil; Ognyanovo; Pavel Banya; Pomorie; Sandanski; Stara Zagora; Velingrad; Varvara (Dimitrova 2020; Velikova, Dimitrova 2021; Bozhinova, Georgieva 2023; Ianeva, Basmadzhieva 2022; Stoyanova-Bozhkova 2022; Mirchova, Durova 2021; Mitova et al. 2021).

The examined statistics for this segment of the SPA tourism industry, along with the qualitative assessment of market positioning and the identified trade-offs between quality and price standards of the locations frequented by tourists and vacationers, facilitate a comparative analysis of SPA and wellness destinations. The majority of SPA visitors in Bulgarian SPA facilities are middle-class individuals from the United Kingdom, Germany, and former Soviet Union nations. None of the three nations has relinquished governmental assistance for the industry. Bulgaria's underpromoted attributes, including nature tourism and rural tourism, have the potential to distinguish the nation from major competitors like Hungary and the Czech Republic (Tomka 2020; Holleran 2021).

Due to Bulgaria's unfavorable market placement, the introduction of a competing product is more significant than that of Hungary. Bulgaria's diverse markets could offer a unique advantage for premium budget tourism services through an application idea that is optimally designed. We must strike a balance between the pricing of paid offerings and the consumer's willingness to pay, considering their social, income, and psychological expectations. The genuine prospects for identifying items and SPAs stem from the aging European population, which will unveil the clientele of future SPA visits. The reports provide a detailed account of their circumstances, scrutinize any industry developments, and outline the framework that Bulgaria needs to establish. An effective method for assessing SPA and wellness tourism in Bulgaria is the examination of both direct and indirect competitors. The establishment of an assessment framework between Bulgaria and prominent European nations in the industry stems from the successful methods used by the industry

leader, thereby providing a subject for study (Cicirelli et al. 2021; Heponiemi et al. 2022; Brugger et al. 2021; Fang et al. 2020; Wafa et al. 2020).

In the SPA tourism sector, establishing connections and partnerships is crucial for fostering enduring relationships among the participating parties. Collaborative efforts may enhance the total visitor count, raise service use, and elevate the likelihood of product purchases. Consequently, Bulgaria has established a thriving market for SPA, wellness, and balneology facilities to function well. This association anticipates the convergence of diverse opportunities and SPA organizations that showcase and advocate for SPA, wellness, and massage centers from various destinations, including hotel associations, hotel chains, local authorities, relevant officials, tourism boards, and massage therapists, to foster enduring partnerships. We organize networking events and conferences to bring together a diverse group of individuals for the purpose of exchanging information, experiences, and perspectives, as well as showcasing new products and services relevant to the SPA and wellness industry. The primary impetus for cooperation among SPAs, wellness centers, and medical experts was the organization of successive conferences, which progressively encouraged specialists from diverse nations to collaborate. For an extended period, the SPA industry in Germany has notably consolidated under the SPA Life network, which advocates for exemplary collaboration to exchange ideas, experiences, and case studies related to wellness, health, SPA tourism, Ayurveda, and yoga (Tsonev, Basmadzhieva 2023; Dimitrov, Dimitrova 2021; Ianeva, Basmadzhieva 2022; Arsova 2023).

SPA tourism offers significant potential for growth. A critical prerequisite for its success is highly qualified personnel with exceptional professional credentials. A well-educated workforce signifies superior service quality. Personnel in the wellness and SPA business must possess requisite expertise and experience, since these elements attract visitors to SPA hotels and encourage expenditure on their services. The quality of treatment is a crucial factor in a country's selection, and the professionalism of the personnel is the primary consideration for SPA visitors. The credentials of the staff significantly influence the quality of services provided and the client's experience. Various short courses aimed at retraining and acquiring new skills and knowledge further enhance the professional advancement of staff, which is contingent upon the caliber of foundational education (Berzina, Medne 2022; Assimakopoulos, Leontaridou; Kotsakov et al. 2024; Zandiyeh et al. 2022; Dimitrova 2023).

A primary purpose in the educational domain of SPA and wellness is to provide a comprehensive service that offers genuine advantages to clients. The personnel attending to the visitors must possess extensive knowledge of physiology and medicine, together with a comprehension of hospitality operations. The classification of the SPA business as an integral component of the tourist and hospitality sectors arises from the proliferation of traditional treatments, which has led to the growing prominence of medical and mineral water therapies. This advancement has therefore encouraged investment in SPA facilities, hotels, and resorts. A multitude of universities and other organizations in an increasing number of nations today provide instruction and undertake research in the domain of SPAs. Numerous training courses are available, ranging from a few weeks to months, sometimes taking place on islands. These courses cover all managerial and service sectors within the SPA business. There is significant collaboration and information exchange across many organizations and people. Even though there is less cooperation between schools and industry groups, the results of SPA training and education would be very different without the help, cooperation, and research contributions from educators and industry leaders (Szromek 2020; Pelegrín-Borondo et al. 2020; Patterson and Balderas-Cejudo 2022; Aluculesei et al. 2021).

3.2. Future Prospects and Growth Potential of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria

Since the start of the new century, the tourist industry has rapidly evolved, accounting for 7% of global commerce. The demand for holidays, weekend retreats, and wellness services in a natural and health-oriented setting that aligns with ecological and aesthetic standards is rapidly expanding. As one delves more into a sustainable lifestyle, the demand for SPA treatments tailored for health-conscious connoisseurs of pleasure intensifies. We anticipate an expansion in SPA tourism in Bulgaria due to the growing demand for sustainable wellness services. The beauty of Bulgaria positions it to attract an increasing number of visitors seeking leisure and renewal in the coming years. The future of SPA tourism in Bulgaria is favorable as the nation persists in enhancing infrastructure and marketing initiatives to draw increased visitor numbers (Katsarova, Kostadinova 2021; Ianeva et al. 2022; Karadzhova 2022; Gidikova 2020).

While it is difficult to anticipate with absolute precision, some numerical indications may be monitored as evolving viewpoints. Variable global and regional trends; demographics—a confluence of population aging across Europe;

migration; the emergence of novel socio-economic patterns and requirements – diversity, a more educated consumer base; a new consumer profile – safety apprehensions, confidence, hygiene promotions, etc.; advancements in pharmaceuticals and medical treatments; lifestyle alterations due to irregular time availability. People often work for years without taking a vacation but then indulge in short, concentrated vacations to achieve profound psychological relaxation during brief, intense periods. Additional ironic insights regarding the future may be derived from trends in SPA tourism sources and outputs, including: the evolution of SPA visitation and domestic markets; the increase in short relaxation retreats and SPA tourism; the fluctuation in SPA construction; the expansion of health tourism associated with medical care; the diminishing prestige of SPAs and the quest for genuine experiences; the decline of medical SPAs and resorts; the reduction of wrinkles alongside the enhancement of well-being. Exploitable opportunities include brand development, engagement with the wellness market, conference and business tourism, luxury product and numerical perception aligned with up-market trends, establishment of comprehensive SPA and SPA-entertainment facilities, and investment in health services for medical tourism. Critical success factors will encompass investment in infrastructure; robust, collaborative marketing of a limited number of formal SPA resorts and facilities; enduring national dedication to sustainable SPA tourism; strategic innovation and SPA business development in both emerging and established markets, with a focus on niche products; reinvestment and rebranding every three years; and ongoing strategies for SPA excellence. Sustainability necessitates investment, and investment necessitates tourism. We must also focus our investment on services that visitors desire to utilize. Investment in host communities leads to the development of real estate. Real estate and hospitality developments are proliferating worldwide, inundating the global tourist business. If you do not excessively emphasize environmental concerns, you confront a sustainable development society and decline to engage in the market. Excessive environmentalism can lead to a cycle of boom and bust, driven by unsustainable building investments and employment patterns that are no longer relevant in the current market. Government: environment; health; tourism. The public-supported cycle of SPAs and their industrial advancements is the essential long-term investment for the revitalization of the SPA sector.

Conclusion

The study once again showed the growth opportunities for Bulgarian SPA tourism. With the extremely rich natural resources that Bulgaria has and the excellent price-quality ratio, we can boldly say that with a targeted policy aimed at a sustainable, modern and quality product, SPA tourism in Bulgaria would be a very successful product. The recovery after the pandemic strike and the redefinition of the tourism product gives us an excellent opportunity to make the necessary adjustments and implement in our products the necessary elements for sustainable and high-value-added development.

The challenges facing the sector are also not few, with one of the main ones being the lack of well-trained and motivated employees. Then there is the seasonality of the SPA industry, the poor condition of the underground infrastructure and outdated pipelines. We lose a large amount of mineral water due to poor infrastructure, and this brings great damage to the sector.

In the article, we examined a number of factors and tools to promote and improve the sector development, as well as we stated a possible solution to the acute problems. On paper, everything is described in strategies and program documents; the big challenge is to implement it in practice.

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THE FUTURE OF SPA TOURISM IN BULGARIA AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract: The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on many industries, and the SPA tourism industry in Bulgaria is no exception. This is a well-established segment of the tourism market, and with its abundance of natural mineral springs, Bulgaria has long been an attractive destination. However, the pandemic has changed the behavior of tourists, the way they travel, the way they choose a preferred destination, and has increased the focus on health and wellness. This article aims to examine the main challenges facing the sector and observe possible solutions by taking into account historical events, the country's location, demographic problems and opportunities for promoting our product in the target markets.

Keywords: *SPA tourism, pandemic crises, tourism development*

Резюме: Глобалната пандемия от COVID-19 въздейства значително върху множество индустрии, като индустрията на СПА туризма в България не направи изключение. Това е добре утвърден сегмент от туристическия пазар и с изобилието си от естествени минерални извори България отдавна е привлекателна дестинация. Пандемията обаче промени поведението на туристите, начина на пътуване, начина на избор на предпочитана дестинация и засили фокуса върху здравето и уелнеса. Настоящата статия има за цел да разгледа основните предизвикателства пред сектора и да систематизира възможните решения, като отчете историческите събития, локацията на страната, демографските проблеми и възможностите за промотиране на продукта ни на целеви пазари.

Ключови думи: *СПА туризъм, пандемични кризи, туристическо развитие*

Table of contents:
The Future of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria after the Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction.....	70
2. Conceptual framework of SPA tourism	71
3. Situation of SPA tourism in Bulgaria	72
4. Development of the Global SPA Tourism Industry	74
5. Technological Innovations in SPA Tourism.....	75
6. Sustainable Practices in SPA Tourism	76
7. Challenges for the Future of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria	78
8. Marketing Strategies for Promoting SPA Tourism in Bulgaria, future prospects and grow potentials.....	79
9. Future Prospects and Growth Potential of SPA Tourism in Bulgaria	83
10. Conclusion	85
11. References.....	86
12. Abstract in English	92
13. Abstract in Bulgarian.....	92