

## BALNEAL TOURISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *In this article we analyze the particularities of the balneal tourism in Romania. Since antiquity, balneal treatments have occupied a place in the therapeutic arsenal of both "scientific" and traditional medicine. Time span and technological progress in the medical sciences did fail to diminish the significance of balneotherapy. Even this treatment has improved, tainted with very precise indications and contraindications, which did enriched using new procedures, and gained a scientific foundation. Over the time, Romania has an important economic development due to tourism, thus being able to rank among the most valuable tourist areas in our country. Parallel to this, the number of spa resorts and mineral water springs has increased and the spa facilities have improved. Significant is the fact that around them a real hotel industry was structured and that unknown rural settlements turned into balneotherapy resorts, elegant, in which all the tourist props have found a great potential for development.*

**Keywords:** *tourism; spa; balneal; health; therapy; rehabilitation.*

**JEL Classification:** *L83.*

### 1. Introduction

In the last decades, through its important social and economic effects, balneal tourism has become a major segment of the international tourism market, to which important material and human resources are concentrated, with a deepening involvement of science and technology, tourist services and of a complex and high quality invoice, called to meet the vital needs of modern man, determined by the evolution of living conditions and the health of the population. Today, balneotherapy or balneoclimatology has become more comprehensive a medical specialty involved in the process of public health improvement, with prophylactic and rehabilitation possibilities, but also a branch of tourism with an important role in the national economy. Also, balneary tourism is a specific form of tourism for recreation and rest, which aimed at preventing certain diseases, avoiding the increase of overflow and certain diseases determined by the rhythm of modern life, being one of the most constant forms of touristic circulation, thus helping to increase utilization coefficient of accommodations and achieving increased average revenue per day / tourist with a relatively stable customer base (Ioniță and Pîndiche, 2011).

Balneal tourism is a major sector in the Romanian tourism industry, due to its specific peculiarities. It is known that almost a third of the thermal and mineral waters that benefit Europe is concentrated in Romania, and their health effects have been attested over the centuries (Snak at all, 2001).

The Romanian wealth of factors resides in *two determinants*: the complexity of the natural factors, respectively the reunion in the same resort of the main environmental factors together with a wide range of mineral cure substances with beneficial

polifactor effects; the existence in Romania of all types of balneal minerals that can be used for the entire range of balneary treatment profiles. Balneal tourism requires complex treatments to achieve some recovery in resorts, as well as conducting tours and trips in the surroundings and rest (Antonovici, 2012).

### **1.1. Role and Importance of Balneal Tourism**

Romania can develop a quality balneal tourism, with approximately 8,500 mineral and thermal sources that hold them. The Balneary Tourism Employers claim that Romania is the richest country in Europe in terms of balneal resources, accounting for about one third of Europe's mineral and thermal sources, but only 10% of the springs are exploited due to under-financing, lack of investors but also because of the scientific research gap. Romania has a very high chance of development because it has rich and varied natural and anthropogenic resources. Their efficient and in the interest of the national economy represents a chance for Romania's development. The potential of this sector is huge, but little exploited. It is the economic branch with the highest international competitive advantage, and its economic performance is modest. Economically, balneary tourism is a factor of economic progress, with broad and positive implications for the development of the whole society, acting in the direction of introducing tourism resources, the historical cultural heritage, the great attraction and some of contemporary achievements in the fields of construction and art. (Neacșu et al., 2009).

Balneal tourism contributes to ensuring a balanced money flow, both on the domestic tourism and on international tourism. Balneal tourism by its specificity, generate new jobs, playing a major role in attracting surplus labor from other sectors and thus alleviate unemployment. Through tourism elements are effectively exploited such as the beauty of the landscape, the healing qualities of the mineral or thermal water, lakes treatment, sludge treatment, gas treatment, mines, medicinal plants, climatic factors cleaning, ionization, as well as cultural artistic events, art monuments, historical vestiges, folk tradition. Spa tourism acts as a stimulating factor for the global economic system. By developing tourism, there is a significant increase in production, its contribution to GDP being proportional to the level of development of each country (Țigu, 2003).

In European healthcare systems balneal resorts are important tourist destinations, especially for consumers looking for health and leisure. If in Romania, at first, the tourism product had only basic elements, traditional, based strictly on aspects of balneology (equivalent to medical spas in the United States of America), concerning treatments or treatments in the presence of a doctor, today the product is complemented by other balneal services, becoming a combination of traditional services (specific procedures and treatments) and rejuvenation services (Kapczynski, Szromek, 2008)

### **1.2. Trends in Balneal Tourism**

In Romania, the notion of "health" and social tourism are generally assimilated to the balneal tourism as a form of tourism with a long tradition. Over 160 localities benefit from therapeutic mineral resources, of which more than 27% have been declared tourist resorts of national or local importance, according to the Romanian legislation, recognized resorts on the European tourist market. The most important are: Băile Felix, Băile Herculane, Sovata, Tușnad, Vatra Dornei, Techirghiol, Mangalia, Călimănești - Căciulata, Olănești, Băile Govora etc.

The tourist product offered by balneal resorts is based in particular on treatment services such as healthcare, convalescence, elements that address especially elderly people, but there are also resorts offering wellness packages. Alternative maintenance medicine has great potential for development by addressing, through appropriate offers, both domestic and foreign tourists. Foreign tourists come mainly from Hungary, the Republic of Moldova, Germany, Israel, Italy, Austria, France and Poland, having as their main motivation for travel relaxation and rest. As far as the type of Romanian tourists is concerned, they are mainly people of the third age (Tourism development strategy in Romania, National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism INCDT).

The emergence of a legislative act that gives the title of "balneal resort", which has been accredited by many resorts, has created a favourable trend for this area and gives investors more confidence to develop their business in balneal tourism. However, comparing with resorts in other countries, we think the basic difference is the way the resort looks, the possibilities of leisure and the ways of access to the resorts, but they are more dependent on other structures of the state or the local administration (Cândea et al., 2012).

There are suppliers of internationally renowned equipment, as well as Romanian companies, for all types of equipment and products specific to the balneary industry. The acquisition of state-of-the-art equipments and products is one of the major concerns of health care and wellness owners who want to maintain and increase their number of customers. We do not think we can talk about gaps, but rather a rich and diversified offer, which sometimes creates difficulties for investor's selection (Ioniță and Pîndiche, 2011).

The Employer Organization of Balneal Tourism in Romania, as the only association in the field, advocates the rights and interests of investors in spa tourism. There is a permanent dialogue with the authorities and a good collaboration with other tourism associations for the correlation of activities; at the same time, it promotes the potential and specific programs offered by the spa tourism companies for increasing the number of local tourists, but also for attracting foreign tourists.

Diversification of the services offered to the clients, from the point of view of the nature of the product, the duration of the cures (medical care, antistress remedies and remittances), entertainment programs, attendant programs and the practice of differentiated tariffs. All these require a sustained structural policy to meet the major objective of attracting a wider clientele through the balanced distribution of the investment fund in all the components that make up the balneal product.

The future of balneal tourism depends on the choices to be made in this area, under the combined pressure of socio-political factors and the medium-term growth rate (Ianc, 2006).

In our country, the Romanian Balneology Association annually evaluates the balneal resorts in Romania, which this year presented the classification in the National Balneology Congress, taking into account the level of investments in treatment bases, infrastructure and their promotion, respectively the quality of tourist services and medical services, including the balneal resorts of Techirghiol, Băile Tușnad, Băile Govora, Călimănești-Căciulata, Covasna, Băile Felix, Sovata, Turda, Sîngeorz Băi and Borsec that have reached a level of excellence (Surdu et al., 2012).

The demand for holiday balneal resorts, rising from year to year, increased sales by 20% in the season of 2017, and even more in the more developed areas, followed by those for mountain resorts and the Danube Delta over time which was below sales

expectations for the seaside. And the value of stays was sold on holiday vouchers which were below expectations, and by the end of July they did exceeded a value of 10.3 million euros. Investments made in accommodation facilities in the balneal resorts, relaxation and treatment centers have changed the perception that balneal area is only for people with various diseases and included product offer several travel agencies. From the data of the National Association of Tourism Agencies, families with children who preferred their holiday hotels with aqua park, thermal pools, balneal centers were the main clients of the year 2017. The most requested resorts were Băile Felix, Băile Herculane, Sovata, Covasna, Vatra Dornei, Călimănești-Căciulata, Băile Olănești, for an average stay of 7.5 nights. The capricious weather, the offers for foreign destinations, the direct sale made by some seaside hotels, the higher prices on average by 10% compared to 2016 led to the decrease of the number of tourists in the seaside resorts in the season 2017, the sales recorded by the agencies tourism was generally at the level of last year. Mamaia was still in the top of the Romanian preferences, followed by Eforie, Venus, Jupiter and Neptune, especially chosen by families with children, the average seaside stay was 5.5 days (<http://www.economica.net>).

Also, in 2017, in Băile Felix, hoteliers have made more investments to attract tourists eager to spend their holidays in thermal water. They have modernized relaxation and treatment centers, and as evidence that there is demand, the resort has been opened. Oradea and Băile Felix have been promoting Romania's balneal tourism in recent years, while the Hungarian government is making an aggressive campaign to attract tourists from Romania to balneal resorts beyond the border.

The Romanians who work in the Hungarian resort are of great help to the thousands of co-nationals coming annually in Hajdúszoboszló. They are especially attracted the largest spa complex in Hungary, arranged in the area on 30 hectares. The water park is constantly in the hands of the central authorities, who invest large amounts of money in tourism. Only this year the Hungarian government has allocated nearly ten million euros for the modernization of the resort complex 70 kilometres away from Oradea.

Romania is among the European countries with a remarkable balneal fund, with a third of its thermal and mineral waters on its territory. Our country benefits from a network of 34 balneal resorts treating a myriad of diseases, from rheumatic and articular, neurological, cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, hepatobiliary, renal or gynaecological, dermatological, ocular, post-traumatic and post-operative diseases, to endocrine, metabolic and nutritional diseases, paresis and paralysis, varicose veins, blood diseases, anaemia, asthenia, allergies, depressions, neuroses, physical and intellectual impairment or occupational diseases. The balneal services in Romania are also very varied, including physiotherapy, kinetotherapy, electrotherapy, hydrotherapy, aerosols, thermotherapy, aeroheliotherapy, carbonated baths, medical and maintenance gyms, massage, etc. Many balneal facilities are close to tourist attractions, tourists having multiple options to spend their free time in a pleasant and interesting way. (<https://www.agerpres.ro/economie/2017>).

The maximum number of balneal treatments provided for 2018 in the property treatment units of the National House of Public Pensions are 59,527 places, spread over a maximum of 19 sending series, according to a draft by the Government Decision published on the website of the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice. The drafting note specifies that in Law no. 3/2018 - The State Social Insurance Budget

Act 2018 provides amount of 344.237 mil. RON for this purpose. Thus, the number of places for balneal treatment contracted with other interested economic operators, up to the level of the amounts provided for in this purpose in the state social insurance budget for 2018, will be added to the planned number of places, which will be determined after the award of the contracts, depending on the prices offered on the ticket. Taking into account the social character of the activity referring to balneary treatment, the CNPP will set a maximum price / ticket in order to ensure the benefits for as many beneficiaries as possible. For balneal treatment tickets, the contracted seats will be spread over a maximum of 19 series of 16-day presentation sessions. The cost of the spa treatment ticket will include the 12 day treatment fee. The number of balneary treatment tickets to be granted free of charge to the categories of persons benefiting from the provisions of special laws, with a reparatory character, shall be no more than 15% of the total number of tickets. In the course of a calendar year, the entitled person can receive a single treatment ticket and the distribution of the spa treatment tickets will be made by the National House of Public Pensions through the territorial pension houses (<https://www.dcnews.ro/locuri-la-tratament-balnear-in-2018>).

### ***1.3. Quantitative and qualitative aspects of supply and demand for balneal tourism***

The richness and variety of natural cure factors available to Romania, the tradition and experience in the field of balneology acquired over time, Romania have made it, as an important tourist destination (Badulescu, 2014; Mester et al, 2008). As a result, the tourist circulation in balneal resorts has, under the influence of many economic, social and motivational factors, for each of its components: different internal and external evolutions. The important component of the tourist market, respectively the offer includes all the natural and anthropic attractions, general and tourist infrastructure, workforce and services. Designing a competitive tourism product does not imply a simple combination of them, but a harmonization of the different components to create a homogenous product as much as possible. Characterized by the discrepancy between its exceptional potential and the degree of capitalization and non-compliance with the world's requirements, the Romanian balneal tourism offer can constitute an important component of national and even international tourism following a proper restructuring process. Romania has an exceptional balneal resort which makes it one of the first places in Europe (Stăncioiu et al., 2013).

The motivation for the modern resort development is motivated by the evolution of demand, as we have already said under the strong influence of fashion, which is rapidly coming to us as well as by the increasingly strong tendency of the people to develop to care for their health in terms of removing the negative effects of an unhealthy lifestyle. This new approach will have positive consequences both due to the superior capitalization of the existing resources and the increase of the occupancy rate due to the pulling of a much more diversified segment of the tourists as well as to the general state of health due to the inclusion in this approach of the psychic state of the client is often neglected. Concerning the motivation to keep a large number of traditional resorts is determined by the existence of an important segment of clients who require such treatments every year, as well as the global tendency in the health status of the population, characterized by the increase of the incidence of diseases high morbidity covered by health tourism (Hall, 2013).

## 2. Tourism forecasts in 2018

Tourism is a highly dynamic field that depends both on global economic fluctuations, which are reflected in the tourist's purchasing power as well as in political events that can influence the movement from one state to another. On this less international stable background, Romania appears to be increasingly interested in those who are eager to spend a holiday in our country (Badulescu, 2014). The year of 2018 will also be preferred for the balneal and spa tourism, a growing area globally, one of the destinations being Hungary, with Hajduszóboszló balneal resort. In Romania, a lot of investments were made in the private area, which led to an increase in the quality of services, so that the Romanian balneal resorts will have a higher occupancy rate than in 2017. The "luxury travel" sector will also develop, as there is already a preference for such trips, because tourists are willing to spend more to accommodate luxury locations at the expense of "low budget" vacations, with an emphasis on exotic destinations.

Employers' representatives in balneal tourism are requesting tax incentives for this sector to continue investing in treatment bases. In Romania, some balneal resorts compete with the brand-name resorts in Europe as a result of the modernization.

In recent years and in the balneal sector, major investments have been made, so some resorts have come to compete with brand-name resorts in Europe, but to continue the upward trend and attract as many investors as possible, employers' representatives argue that there is a need of stronger state support by granting tax incentives such as VAT reduction.

Year 2018 is also declared the Europe-China Travel Yearbook, which represents an opportunity to increase Europe's visibility as a holiday destination for the Chinese. In general, the tourism sector continues to increase visible beyond economic results worldwide. Tourism experiences are more important than the accumulation of material goods and the increase in the frequency of domestic and foreign flights, as well as the possibility of purchasing online accommodation on reservation platforms or price comparisons, will help to achieve this. Here's how to increase DIY (do it yourself) vacations (<http://povestidecalatorie.ro/previziunile-anului-2018-in-turism/>). The implementation of a development program is based on strategies, the quality of which depends on the success of this action, which can be materialized both in increasing the demand for Romanian balneal tourism and the integration of the spa resorts in our country in the top of the ones with a good share market in Europe, as well as in determining the largest number of Romanian tourists to choose as a holiday resort a balneal resort. It is said that in Romania there is almost one third of the thermal springs in the whole of Europe, and in recent years the balneal resorts have begun to reinvent themselves and to return to the limelight (Surdu et al., 2012).

## 3. Conclusions

This work is aimed for tourists, interested people who want to invest in tourism, thus posing a challenge for all those who love tourism. For a while now, tourism has made a more immeasurable activity, as it has been developed in other forms of social economy (industry, agriculture, commerce).

It is important to know that, apart from the balneal profile of the Romanian resorts (with specific treatments for digestive, rheumatic, degenerative, dermatological

diseases) given by our mineral wealth, Romania is among the countries where health services are much cheaper than in the rest of Europe, (60% cheaper than in other European countries), fertility treatments (Sovata), services of a high standard of care, geriatrics.

Year 2017 was declared by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) "The International Year of Sustainable Tourism".

Considering that there are global campaigns to promote sustainable tourism and encourage those forms of travel that support this type of tourism, more and more travellers will become aware of the importance of environmental and nature responsibility. They will be more and more interested in the impact on the environment, the social and economic impact of the destinations they visit and will particularly support those companies that actively involve and support these values. Demand for holiday in balneal resorts has been increasing from one year to another, and in 2017 sales were about 20% higher in more developed areas, according to market data. Investments in accommodation facilities in balneal resorts, relaxation and treatment centers have changed the perception that the balneal area which is only for people with different conditions and included the product in the offer of several travel agencies. Experts are of the opinion that 2018 will be the best in the last 20-30 years for balneal tourism.

The national tourism development strategies in Romania must harmonize the strategies developed at the regional, local and every resort level, taking into account the European strategies, in order to highlight the richness of the Romanian offer of this kind and to attract the interest of the foreign tourists attracted to the balneary resorts in the developed countries of the European Union not only of the quality of the offer but also of its sustained promotion. Authorities want to develop a green balneo-tourism cluster at national level to ensure the development and promotion of spa and ecotourism products on the international market.

That is why the special advantages offered to Romania by its great balneal potential have to turn into a competitive advantage, which in the conditions of an adequate strategy becomes one of the key elements of Romanian tourism.

Starting from these prerequisites, the paper aims to highlight the main directions of development of the balneal tourism in the urban areas with tradition in the field and, on the basis of these, to outline possible development strategies, which would allow the Romanian balneal tourism to become competitive.

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