

Spa tourism opportunities as strategic sector in aiding recovery from Covid-19: The Spanish model

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Abstract

Spa tourism has been experiencing over the last decades significant changes in its nature. Supply and demand have changed in recent years, impacting on the function of thermal centers in general, and on the use of their base resource, mineral-medicinal water, in particular. Recently, this productive sector has been forced to resituate itself due to the unexpected outbreak of the Covid pandemic whose impacts on the sector are still to be fully calibrated, although it has already halted a large part of economic activity and global flows of people and goods. The present investigation examines the function and potential that spas have as health agents. In the case of Spain, this research note reflects on the opportunities, for a repositioning of this activity in the tourist dynamics that arise during and after a period of crisis.

Keywords

Health tourism, thermalism, therapeutic function, spatial development, global pandemic, Spain

Introduction

Since World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic, tourism has been one of the most affected sectors. Measures applied in a phased manner due to the coronavirus have already halted much of the economic activity and global flows of people and goods. Its scope is global and the collateral effects of the general outbreak have affected other industries indirectly linked to tourism (transport, fuel, accommodation, etc.) and, above all, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

In a context in which the collapse of the tourism sector is a reality, the great short-term expectations of tourism have hardly been fulfilled. The UNWTO, 2020 estimates a drop of between 20% and 30% of international tourist trips, which can translate into a decline in income of between 300,000 and 450,000 million dollars. This could mean the loss of millions of jobs (UNWTO, 2020). This situation does not benefit Spain particularly since tourism represents 12% of

gross domestic product (GDP) and accounts for 13% of jobs (INE, 2019).

However, and as it has happened on other occasions, a crisis context also carries some possibilities of the appearance of new opportunity scenarios. The current pandemic may generate a situation that allows other tourism development models closer to sustainability to be adopted. In this way, the great challenges facing the sector so far, such as massification, tourismification or tourism phobia associated with overtourism (Butler, 1999; Hall, 2009), could be addressed. It may also provide an opportunity to promote those tourist destinations that are in decline or that are not sufficiently currently valued.

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In this context, spa tourism constitutes a tourist product away from mass tourism or overtourism (Fletcher et al., 2019). Simultaneously, it has a health dimension that may complement the mitigation of the effects of the pandemic at least in the recovery stage. The specific needs of the application of its treatments and the high environmental demands to preserve the health properties of its base resource imply that, around the spas, other related tourism products of quality, wellbeing and health in environmental, social and spatial terms could be developed.

The objective of this research note is to highlight the health role of spa tourism in the case of Spain within the current context of a global pandemic. To achieve this objective, the paper is divided into: a general scientific introduction; discussion on the concept of thermalism and its recent changes; the current situation of the Spanish thermal centers and their potential role in managing the Covid-19 crisis; along with some final conclusions and future lines of research.

Thermalism in the last decades: Changes in demand and supply

The definition of a spa itself makes special mention of its basic and intrinsic natural resource: medicinal mineral waters. Thus, a spa in the Spanish context is considered to be “that establishment that has mineral-medicinal waters declared of public utility, a medical service that prescribes the appropriate treatments and facilities to apply the prescribed treatments” (ANBAL, 2020a: 1).

These waters have been -classified into multiple typologies based on their composition and temperature- that have been used over time by different civilizations (Molina Villar, 1997; Oró Fernández, 1993) and have a recognized therapeutic functions (Maraver, 2010; San José Arango, 2002). The side effects of thermal cure are minimal and are reduced to cases of patients with very exceptional characteristics (Freire Magariños, 2020). However, this spa dimension as a healing center does not have to be understood in a simplistic or erroneous way. Within the Spanish context, spas should not be conceived only as a center for the sick or related only to the Institute for the Elderly and Social Services (IMSERSO). This social spa service is just one of the social thermalism programs that has been operating in Spain since 1989. It allows those people (usually over 65 years of age), who need a thermal cure, to go to the spas that are attached to the program with a subsidized price (Alén González, 2003). Nevertheless, its functions - within the sanitary aspect - extend to other sections that go beyond the

thermal cure such as personal relationships, contact with nature or relaxation.

In recent decades both in Spain and elsewhere, thermalism studies have promoted a reconceptualization in light of the recent changes in the concern for wellbeing and health that are taking place in the societies of developed countries (Fontanari and Kern, 2003; Pforr and Locher, 2012). These changes in lifestyle habits aimed at a search for a healthier lifestyle (in relation to body-mind balance), have translated into new demands in the thermal sector (Dryglas and Rózycki, 2017; García-Altés, 2005; Gil de Arriba, 2000; Smith and Puczkó, 2015). As a consequence, more spas have had to incorporate treatments and services related to beauty and relaxation (Dimitrovski and Todorović, 2015; Henn et al., 2008; Mueller and Lanz Kaufmann, 2001), that is, tending towards well-being or wellness models (Erfurt-Cooper, 2009; Kasagrandá and Gurnák, 2017; Smith and Kelly, 2006). However, such possibilities are closely dependent on levels of their economic capacity (Derco and Pavlisinova, 2017; Pinos Navarrete and Maroto Martos, 2019). In many cases, these new products have a much higher demand than traditional treatments (Alén González, 2003; Gonçalves Gândara et al., 2013; Lo et al., 2015). In this context, supply management tends increasingly to expand new treatments that have a strong and rising consumer demand (Chen et al., 2013; Sziva et al., 2017), since they are ones that allow the thermal establishment to exist, in economic terms. Therefore, traditional patients become clients due to the fact that they not only use mineral-medicinal waters. However, they also demand other treatments that do not depend on exclusively this type of spa waters.

The relationship of the new types of clients with spa staff (with a less close treatment due to the characteristics of the new treatments and their application techniques), and with the waters and the environment has changed entirely. These new features have brought traditional spas with miner medicinal water closer to emerging spas using non-mineral water (Smith and Puczkó, 2010; Tabacchi, 2010), witnessing a process known as “spaization” of the sector in Spain. This concept is understood as the progressive disappearance of the traditional medical function of spas in parallel with an increased role of the recreational-preventive dimension of thermalism in Europe. The progressive distancing of the thermal cure has meant a reduction in the time spent in the spa. In contrast, traditional treatments required a number of sessions, usually a minimum of 11 continuous days for the patient (Rodríguez Miguez, 2010). In contrast, most of the preventive, aesthetic or recreational treatments that have emerged in recent years can be applied,

without the need for daily continuity, in just a few minutes or, at most, several hours. This new trend implies a change in tourist spending.

In summary, around the water resources, these thermal establishments are erected in many instances and inside it different treatments are developed. However, spas are not limited to developing a medical, preventive, aesthetic or recreational function. The thermal centers are the focus of a tourist industry, services and economic drivers of regions and urban centres (Jónás-Berki et al., 2015). Therefore, the spatial and economic implications of the spas cover both a local and regional scale.

Spas and Covid-19 in Spain: A context of opportunity?

The number of spas in operation in Spain is over 113 according to the National Observatory of Thermalism and Rural Development (2020). These establishments are distributed throughout the country and have an important tourist function that helps the development of the spaces in which they are located (Pinos Navarrete et al., 2018). In the current context of the pandemic, it is essential, as stated by the National Association of Spas on 16th April 2020, “to design formulas that allow –incorporating new protocols through which the service can be safely provided from a health perspective- to restart the activity in establishments and the development of the Thermalism 2020 Program” (ANBAL, 2020c: 1). Freire Magariños (2020) pointed out in his presentation to Termatalia on 15th April that water - the main resource of thermal tourism - is not a carrier medium for the spread of the coronavirus. The virus that produces Covid-19 does not live or reproduce in water and neither in the mineral-medicinal ones that characterize the spas, it does not have the capacity to do so, because it is an RNA type virus and can apparently live and reproduce within human cells.

Consequently, the possibilities of transmission to other users (if a spa is infected) or staff would be the same as in any other center open to the public. Therefore, if the spas take the security measures set out by the State health authorities in relation to the maximum number allowed of people, as well as the required clothing and hygienic-sanitary protocols (EFE, 2020), development of the thermal cure will not be disabled. In this way, the spas have been able to overcome the economic and tourist crisis that arose from the problems caused by the lock down.

Covid-19 was seen by the thermalism sector as an opportunity to vindicate its sanitary character within society, “it is important to bear in mind that, as

sanitary centers, many Spas have offered their facilities to the authorities so that they make the use that they determine and is necessary to face the pandemic, and that they have their own medical equipment and consultation services” (ANBAL, 2020c: 1). Many Spanish spas developed solidarity initiatives during the coronavirus crisis. For example, the Cofrentes Spa (Valencia) organized online sessions every day –guided by the specialized physiotherapist- so that clients could keep fit at home (ANBAL, 2020d: 1). In addition, the Ariño Spa (Teruel) and the Relais Termal chain of spas activated a telephone support service - “online with you” - for their clients during confinement, through which they served 2,500 people in 10 days (ANBAL, 2020b, 2020e). The Fitero spa (Navarra) welcomed coronavirus-positive patients who lived in nursing homes and did not require hospitalization to alleviate the situation in the senior centers (ANBAL, 2020f). In addition, the Relais chain made available to the Government one of its spas (Termas de Pallarés) to serve carriers and tourists in transit back to their countries, on the Aragonese section of the Madrid-Zaragoza axis (ANBAL, 2020e). The Archena spa (Murcia) offered free reopening services to healthcare personnel and patients who had been infected by the virus to help accelerate their respiratory cure. The campaign has been called “recharging” (ANBAL, 2020g: 1). The Government of Province of Orense also developed the “Solidarity Thermalism” program, which subsidized the stay in spas for essential services personnel in order for them to recover physically and psychologically (Government of Province of Orense, 2020).

The coronavirus mainly affects the respiratory system of infected patients and hot springs can be used preventively or curatively. Respiratory treatments (based on inhalations or gargles, prescribed and supervised by specialized health personnel) stimulate the immune system and cleanse the respiratory system, preparing it to face a possible episode of Covid-19 (Freire Magariños, 2020). Therefore, the thermal cure is recommended in processes of recovery from the disease, at the stage when there is no longer a possibility of contagion, or as a preventive measure.

In addition, the Bilibis Foundation –created for Research and Innovation in Medical Hydrology- is developing a Research project in collaboration with the Universities of Madrid, Granada and Zaragoza (Spain). The project termed “Inhalational and hydroponic therapies with sulphurous mineral-medicinal waters and respiratory physiotherapeutic intervention against the coronavirus Covid-19” aims to enhance the immune system and organic defenses, as well as the antioxidant-antiviral system in people affected by Covid -19, and also in asymptomatic patients with

mild pathology in the upper respiratory tract and in order to avoid the deeper pathological action of the virus (Foundation BÍlbilis, 2020).

Furthermore, the current situation provides an opportunity to achieve positive synergies between public and private sectors, as stated by Miguel Mirones -president of the National Association of Spas (ANBAL) and the Institute for Spanish Tourist Quality (ICTE) - in An interview with Hosteltur, “we have to (...) develop proposals that are feasible, with public administrations and from the commitment of the business sector” (Porrás, 2020: 2), since “public-private collaboration will cease to be a desire and become almost an obligation for those destinations that want to reposition themselves in the market” (Nexotur, 2020: 2). The demand for joint work is important in a time frame within which, the importance of collective work and linking networks that require flows of capital, which is one of the keys to cope with the economic impacts arising from the pandemic.

Discussion and conclusions

Spa tourism depends fundamentally on its water resources. In recent years, new demands have led to the incorporation of innovative treatments that are, to a certain extent, far from their medical function and the use of medicinal mineral water. However, in the current context of the Covid pandemic, the value and social importance of spas is mainly motivated by their curative aspect relating to a medical role. It is precisely this dimension that gives them their uniqueness and allows them to differentiate themselves from new establishments that use tap water. This difference is important because, at the time of the reopening of tourist establishments, customers are going to look for quality and safety in facilities and services. Those centers and destinations of mass tourism that cannot guarantee these two dimensions may have a difficult time surviving in the post pandemic market.

From the point of view of the tourist management of spas, the current context is an appropriate time to open new horizons. Solidarity initiatives can be a guarantee of rapprochement with the Spanish society, especially the younger population, as this market is one of main challenges facing spas today. It is also possible to reaffirm the need to assess the location of the spas in their original contexts based around mineral springs. The relocation of spas consisting of moving the establishments themselves away from their resources means a loss of their therapeutic effects and a distance from the environment that welcomes and complements the thermal cure. Therefore, this is an appropriate time to reach out to new customers and

highlight the relevance of the thermal centers and their healing properties.

The current situation opens new opportunities for hydrotherapy and research associated with the sector. In addition, it is important to draw new lines linked to its potential role to accelerate the healing and prevention of the coronavirus. This would of course require the return to some degree of normality as we knew it, if this is possible. In this context, it could be recommended that all spas adapt their facilities to a Common Security Protocol against Covid-19. In this way, the tourist activity in them could continue. Furthermore, it seems essential to rethink the benefits for local development of the latest changes in the sector. The trend followed by some spas in Spain and many others in European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Slovakia, Poland or Hungary, is towards a reorientation of their functions more related to aesthetics, recreational use and ultimately towards the concepts of well-being or wellness. Without losing this market, it would be interesting for them to somehow regain their traditional medical functions. Therefore, future research on thermalism has its possible pathways outlined, and the main challenges need to be resolved. Firstly, how far is it possible to apply the Spanish spa model to other European countries in the context of a pandemic? Secondly, what are significant changes coming in global tourism and in spas in particular?

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