

THE OPPORTUNITY OF HEALTH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MONTENEGRO

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INTRODUCTION

The paper studies the possibilities of health tourism development in Montenegro. Montenegro has possesses important natural and infrastructure potentials for the development of this type of tourism and it has managed to recognize its importance. International experts and/or scientists on the field confirm the high potential of the water influences mixed with Wellness food in support of the human health prevention (Dimitrova, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Trendafilov, 2013; Nesheva, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2016a, Polimenov, 2011, 2014; Staneva, 2016).

In that respect, necessary activities have been undertaken with the aim to achieve concrete results in this field in the forthcoming period. Health tourism is being recognized in the Strategy of Tourism Development 2020 as a primary product in Montenegro. It is necessary to work on the branding, introducing quality standards, legislation to form the strategic alliances, as well as to create the institutional and operative support in order to successfully implement a strategy for the development of health tourism in Montenegro. Having in mind that there is not enough research related to the development of health tourism in Montenegro, the research in this paper was carried out by the Medical Spa Association and the Cluster of health tourism of Montenegro.

METHODS

Health tourism products today are one of the fastest growing segments of world tourist offers. The assumption in this paper is that health tourism is a new, yet insufficiently valorized form of tourism, which has a significant perspective in many tourist countries, especially in Montenegro. We are taking initial steps aimed at contributing to the more intensive development and mapping of a new - selective form of tourism. The mentioned initiative will be implemented in order to establish a better and more complete diversification of the national tourist product, with adequate positioning in the tourist market under the regionally promoted slogan: "Montenegro - the destination of health".

1. The retrospective of the development of health tourism in Montenegro

Health tourism, as one of the forms of special interest tourism, has undergone a great expansion, and health tourism products represent today one of the fastest growing segments of the international tourist offer¹. Health tourism is a new, yet insufficiently valorised form of tourism, which has important prospects in many of the tourist countries, including Montenegro.

In order to become more competitive, we should focus on increasing the capacities in the health and wellness sector, as well as on special programmes of professional qualification and certification in the health care and hospitality sectors for hospitals and hotels, aimed at improving skills of the professional staff and at creating a sustainable model of health tourism, thus helping build trust among consumers and buyers. In order to become competitive in the health tourism sector, whilst acting according to its established economic orientations, Montenegro should put many efforts to reach the same level of some of the East and Middle European countries, which are the biggest "competitors" in terms of attracting this type of customers in the tourism industry. Slowly but surely, Montenegro started taking an

¹ WTO, Tourism 2020 Vision, Global Forecasts, Volume 7, 2001

increasingly important position on the European health tourism map, although it is still far from taking full benefits of the possibilities offered by its natural potentials. In order to find the key answer to the question how to turn a “sun and sea destination” into a year-round destination, the health tourism development is of the utmost importance. It is also necessary to underline that, beside the extension of the tourism season, health tourism generates exceptional financial results. To illustrate this statement, suffice it to take a look at the official data on the annual growth of health tourism of 20% at the global level, and at the fact that 15% of all trips are motivated by health reasons. Taking in consideration the above stated, Montenegro, where the tourism sector participates with the greatest share in the GNP (20%) and represents the most promising branch of economy, must find the right way, using a clear strategy and choosing adequate techniques, to valorise and promote the health tourism segment on the competitive tourism market.

Montenegro is already well-known as a beautiful and attractive tourist destination; however its potentials have not yet been fully exploited and the desired international image has not yet been fully attained. The place of Montenegro should be among the top tourist destinations at the global level. Its landscape and natural values, its cultural and historical heritage combined with hospitality of its people represent an exceptional advantage.

1.1. Prospects for the development of health tourism in Montenegro

The most important prerequisites for the development of health tourism in Montenegro are already met. These are primarily favourable climatic conditions and the well-preserved nature with a multitude of various and rare natural healing factors, natural resources, thermal and mineral waters which, along with the construction of adequate transport and accommodation infrastructures, would guarantee a better positioning of this type of tourism on the market. In that respect, it is necessary to ensure a continuous preservation of the environment and the protection of resources – natural healing factors as well as their identification, definition and systematization. Montenegro has already recognized the importance of this process, and has already taken corresponding steps to achieve concrete results in this area in the forthcoming period. Over the past four years, the Medical Spa Association of Montenegro has been working with dedication on education, through organization of professional conferences on health tourism, with participation of prominent experts from the region, within the framework of preparations for the implementation of the project of the Health Tourism Cluster, which represents an expert organization whose aim is to increase the competitiveness of its members and improve the health, wellness and spa tourism of Montenegro. This is the first cluster in the sector of health, wellness and spa tourism in Montenegro, and its objective is to promote Montenegro as a health destination and to establish cooperation with leading experts in the area of health care, tourism and related auxiliary sectors, in order to promote the overall health tourism offer of Montenegro acting in concert on the regional and international markets. The role of the Cluster is to contribute to the achievement of this goal through an organized access to emissive markets, positioning and branding of members of the Association on the regional and international markets, through joint marketing efforts and PR activities and cooperation with similar organizations and institutions, as well as the professional training of members of the Association.

Moreover, the task of the Cluster is to promote the protection of human health and the quality of life, to organize conferences, seminars, workshops and other professional gatherings, and its role in optimization of the work of members of the Association through the unified procurement process and joint research and development, as well as in accreditation and standardization of services through the formation of the Cluster Resource Centre is particularly important. Another task of the Cluster is also to

encourage better networking and cooperation between the members of the public, private and scientific and research sectors, the strengthening of sectors, encouraging the use of EU funds as well as the targeted attraction of domestic and foreign investments in particular branches of economy. Members of the Cluster are companies, educational, scientific and research institutions, travel agencies, local self-governments involved in the health care, wellness and tourism sectors. Members of the Cluster are leaders in the area of health care, wellness and spa tourism in Montenegro with references on the domestic and international markets.

Considering the complexity of health tourism sector, the members of the Cluster, already 40 of them, are divided into sectors. This is how the following sectors have been formed: the Medical Tourism Sector, headed by the European brand "Dr. Simo Milošević Institute" from Igalo, the institution with the years-long practice, tradition and the well-deserved place on the European market, excellent results, well-equipped accommodation and therapeutic capacities, experienced staff and facilities for new capacity building, fully capable of satisfying any market demand. With existing capacities and potentials and pursuing a carefully planned development path, the Institute would be capable of assuming, in a relatively short period of time, an important, even leading position in the area of health tourism of the South Europe.



1. Institute for physical medicine, rehabilitation and rheumatology „Dr Simo Milosevic“ – Igalo

The following structures are also worth mentioning: the Special Hospital for Lung Diseases in Brezovik, General Hospital in Meljine, Public Institution Kakaricka gora, Optimal Day Hospital, IVF Clinic Life, as well as a large number of private health care institutions throughout Montenegro. It was not by case that we have established the Dental Tourism Sector, dedicated to dental studios which can compete on equal grounds, by their equipment and qualified staff, with those in developed European countries.



Center for Dental Implantology and Cosmetic Dentistry – Dental Montenegro

<http://www.dentalmontenegro.com/>

Their advantage is the price of services which, according to our estimates, are 8-10 times lower than in Europe, and if, in addition to dental service packages, we offer to our potential clients some of our attractive destinations, it does not surprise why we give special priority to this segment of medical tourism and why we put our efforts in its strengthening and affirmation. The wellness and spa tourism

has become an increasingly important segment, where, contrary to the medical tourism where tourists visit a certain destination seeking medical or rehabilitation services, wellness and spa services by rule are sought by tourists who wish to improve their health condition. Montenegro has so much to offer, just to mention spa and wellness services provided by of the Cluster Members, Splendid Conference & Spa Resort Hotel, Maestral Resort & Casino Hotel, Monte Casa Spa&Wellness Hotel in Petrovac, The Queen of Montenegro Hotel etc.



Hotel Splendid Conference & Spa Resort

<http://www.montenegrostars.com/index.php/pools-beach>

Another important segment of the health tourism, to which another sector within the Cluster has been dedicated, is the sport and recreational tourism. Suffice it to mention the potentials of the Ulcinj Riviera or the Indoor Sports Hall Topolica in Bar, which could be the perfect place for the preparation of athletes throughout the year, or indoor sports halls in Žabljak and Kolašin, which have facilities for high altitude training of athletes. If we add to this other numerous potentials and other existing mountaineering and cycling programmes already put in place, which could be complemented with other programmes, such as the development of forest medicine, the conclusion is that this segment has sufficient development potentials too. The Cluster also organized the work of its different segments, which should follow the development of the health tourism, through the work of travel agencies, transportation sector, equipment, marketing, education and local self-governments. It is through good cooperation with local self-governments that we can sublimize the overall offer of the health tourism, but also establish what would be interesting for potential investors in the field of health tourism. That way, devastated buildings of the old hospital in Žabljak and Šavnik municipalities or the boarding school building in Kolašin municipality could be turned into some modern dental or rehabilitation centre. Considering that the economic growth of Montenegro is founded, among other things, on the increase of foreign investments, the state should focus on simplifying the existing administrative barriers in order to facilitate the access to the foreign capital and consequently encourage the building of new health tourism capacities. It is also very important to give a full support to domestic and foreign investors in capital increase and construction of new capacities in the existing health tourism destinations.

Another equally important objective of the Cluster is the establishment of a resource centre, a kind of know-how centre, whose primary task would be the **capacity building** of human resources, i.e. education in the field of basic knowledge and training in the development of particular skills of the staff employed in health tourism, aimed at meeting expectations and needs of guests, which represents the key factor of success. This Centre would monitor modern quality standards in the provision of health tourism services and gather cases of good practice in the industry. Finally, the Centre would also collect information about modern trends in health tourism and carry out their analysis, organize

seminars/conferences, in order to offer to decision-makers in the public and private sectors a solid decision-making platform.

Beside investments in the development of health tourism centres, it is necessary to improve conditions, reconstruct and increase accommodation capacities, modernize and upgrade services in accordance with European and international standards and requirements of tourists in the area of health tourism, whilst working on harmonization of legal regulations and creating favourable climate for the development and investments in this important segment of the tourism industry. Beside the support of the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism of Montenegro, which provided the space and funds for the beginning of its work, the Cluster has also achieved full cooperation with the National Tourism Organization of Montenegro, with which it has signed the Agreement on Business and Technical Cooperation, as well as with the Chamber of Commerce of Montenegro, within which the Health Tourism Committee has been established, allowing Montenegro to achieve its interests in this segment, through a synergetic action of health care, state, tourism and other institutions.

CONCLUSION

Health tourism can help Montenegro become the year-round tourist destination, which is why it would be necessary to reduce the value added tax rate and to develop new services in this area. What is particularly necessary to do in the area of health tourism development in our country is to intensify the cooperation between the private and public sectors, to develop new services and interconnect various types of tourism. In that respect Montenegro has several particular advantages, one of which is the low price of health care services, which is a great comparative advantage of Montenegro compared to the western countries. Although there is a strong interdependence between the tourism and health care sectors, potentials for cooperation have not yet been fully exploited in Montenegro. Considering that the health tourism market itself is very complex, it is necessary to apply the approach of a unified offer. Interests in this segment would be the best achieved by a joint, synergetic action of health care, state, tourism and other institutions. What Montenegro will need to do in the shortest possible delay is the much needed certification, considering that certificates represent an extremely important reference for attracting tourists in the area of health tourism².

Benefits generated by health tourism in Montenegro are the development of medical and health care, extension of the tourism season – more job positions, overall growth of tourism and more particularly growth of hospitality, air transport and other types of transport, travel agencies, insurance companies and promotion of touristically less developed areas in the country. Also, a successful promotion of health tourism will require the promotion of the destination using modern internet and mobile technologies, considering that Montenegro lacks a clearly developed marketing strategy and promotion of health tourism on the national and international markets. In that respect, it is essential to promote health tourism amenities, products and services (wellness, thalassotherapy and medical services) as an added value to coastal destinations and as an important trump card of the development of the continental tourism (especially health resorts, spas, wellness and medical services).

The existing wellness tourism offer in hotels and tourist resorts is focused on beauty treatments, massage, sauna, pool amenities and fitness, and its development potentials are debilitated by a lack of regulations related to professional qualifications of staff, as well as by legal regulations that limit the introduction of medical components in hospitality industry.

It is necessary to ensure preconditions for a successful growth in Montenegro, primarily through legal regulations to be adopted at the level of both ministries (Tourism and Health Care), which should work

² <http://www.mrt.gov.me/rubrike/publikacije/151644/Turisticki-bilten-avgust-2015.html>

in a synergy to ensure the overall development, and to encourage activities of domestic and international tour operators and agencies in promotion of the Montenegrin health tourism, and to harmonize, in the shortest possible delay, legal regulations in the area of the health tourism sector. A clear division of competences in this sector will create preconditions for a stronger and faster development of health tourism and thus the creation of new job positions and self-employment.

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