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Health Tourism: a new challenge in tourism

Health tourism is a relatively new concept in Greece, which is being promoted by the National Greek Tourism Organisation (NGTO), within the context of differentiation of the tourism product and the prolongation of the tourist season. The concept of health tourism is known, but in reality, barely existent in Greece.

In our country health tourism is associated with mineral springs tourism and visits of elderly people to various mineral springs for curative purposes annually. However, the situation is much different abroad and is just beginning to change in Greece.

A health tourist can be someone who travels to a spa destination with the aim to relax and unwind or someone who travels in search of alternative therapies, plastic surgery or diagnosis.

The good news for the tourism industry is that a new market is emerging, a market of wealthy people who wish to combine their holidays with maintaining a good health, staying in shape and keeping a low stress level.

Not far from our country, in Serbia and Croatia, health tourism is consistently promoted to Europeans who want to combine health and holidays. Five and four star hotels along the Dalmatian coast and elsewhere offer holiday packages for diabetics, people suffering from chronic respiratory diseases, chronic rheumatism, degenerative diseases,

conditions of the locomotor system, post-traumatic and post-operative conditions, kidney problems, allergies and other health problems. This area has established a medical reputation in certain areas and is trying to use its natural characteristics in order to attract a considerable number of health tourists.

Europe and the USA

In Europe and the US there is a strong shift in the standard tourist product, which stems from a shift in tourism consumer habits.

- The generation of baby boomers, the generation of the 50's, the people who have the most considerable buying power and the most free time today (due to the fact that they are reaching or have reached a retirement age), are seeking more holiday opportunities. At the same time, they are very conscious of their age, the consequences of aging and the need to stay young, beautiful and, most importantly, healthy
- Contemporary consumer habits promote fitness, beauty and well-being issues. Alternative forms of therapy (homeopathetics, acupuncture, reflexology, reiki, ayurveda etc) are booming, as the increasing presence of stress in the everyday life and working environment lead towards new ways of managing stress and its consequences
- Mass tourism is declining, as people are gradually moving away from mass tourism products. Today's consumer is well traveled and is looking for something new and different for his holidays
- The medical care system in many countries favors the search for therapy in other countries abroad. For example, in Canada and in Great Britain, medical waiting lists are so long, that drive patients to traveling to another country in search of therapy. Another important factor is cost. In the UK a cataract operation can cost \$4.500 compared with \$2.250 in France or \$345 in India. It is estimated that 10% of European patients seek therapy outside the boundaries of their country.

As a result of these trends, a significant number of luxurious spa/thalassotherapy centres and health resorts has emerged abroad. These establishments combine artfully mild medical services with recreation, thus offering a full "package" of health services – relaxation – holidays.

Some examples of services available in health resorts

- Radiology
- Cardiology
- Dietetics - nutrition
- Urology
- Dermatology
- Allergy testing
- Osteopathy – osteoporosis treatments
- Homeopathetics
- Spa / Thalassotherapy
- Physiotherapy – Kinesitherapy
- Stress management seminars

Greece

In Greece some hotels have turned towards thalassotherapy, following the trends described above. Within the last 6 years five thalassotherapy centres have been created in Greece (the majority of which in Crete), while new investments are being planned in Kos, Rhodes, Corfu and Crete. Some of the existing centres are of a high standard and can compete with European thalassotherapy centres, while they are also very competitive in terms of pricing as well in certain cases. Except for thalassotherapy, 2 independent dialysis centres have been created in Crete, one of which has a clear tourism scope.

However, except for these cases, no other investments in health tourism have been undertaken in Greece to date. In 1998 Maris Hotels in collaboration with the Medical School of the University of Crete had investigated the possibility of creating a health centre/resort in Crete. The complex would comprise 3 units, an ophthalmology unit, a spinal column unit and a plastic surgery unit. However, these plans fell through.

Promotion of health tourism

In order to support and promote health tourism, the Greek State is subsidising investments in thalassotherapy and other forms of health tourism, through Development Law 2601/98. The subsidy amount covers 35% of the investment, but the specs for health tourism investments are still not available.

What remains to be seen in the future is whether investors will seize the opportunity and take on the extra risk related with such an investment and whether Greece will manage to bring out a new year-round tourist product.