

Tourism, health and the changing role of thermal springs- should South Africa reposition its thermal spring tourism product?

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Abstract

Visiting thermal springs for medicinal purposes is one of the oldest forms of tourism in many parts of the world, including South Africa. An overview is provided of the concepts of health tourism, including medical and wellness tourism, as well as spa and thermal spring health tourism. Water-based, treatment-based and recreation-based facilities and services offered at selected international thermal spring resorts are assessed and compared to the thermal spring health tourism product in South Africa, where only three out of more than 20 thermal spring resorts offer sophisticated health treatments. It appears that, internationally, the focus of thermal spring tourism is shifting towards wellness activities, although in South Africa it has shifted further, in the direction of recreation. While the product offerings of thermal spring resorts generally contain elements of water-based, treatment-based as well as recreation-based activities, it is suggested that the main focus should be guided by the activity preferences of current markets, which in the case of South Africa are almost exclusively domestic, and South African domestic visitors have far less interest in health facilities and treatments than their counterparts in Europe, although there is a significant minority that would welcome such services. The question therefore arises as to whether thermal spring resorts in South Africa, especially those that do have health-related services, have shifted their product offerings too far in the direction of recreation, and if so, whether South Africa's thermal spring tourism product should not be repositioned so as to capture a greater portion of the international, and domestic, health tourism markets.

Keywords: South Africa, thermal springs, health, tourism, spa

Introduction to health tourism

Travelling for one's health is one of the oldest motivations in tourism (Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999). Some of the earliest forms of tourism were directly aimed at increased levels of health and wellbeing, such as visiting spas in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The emergence of 'hill stations' in countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia further emphasized the apparent curative properties of tourism and recreation in appropriate, often distant, therapeutic places (Connell, 2006). Sports, such as golf,

cycling, walking and mountaineering have become part of the tourism experience, and are seen as pleasurable ways of combining tourism and wellbeing. One of the major drivers of modern tourism is that of escape from an everyday personal or physical environment, to one perceived to be likely to give the traveller all the elements of the life he or she feels is missing (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). This growing desire for the combination of escape with the satisfaction of the need to maintain or recapture personal wellbeing has been recognized by the tourism industry through the promotion

of health tourism. "Travel can contribute to all aspects of health if we consider the physical and mental benefits of rest and relaxation, the social aspects of mixing with other tourists and local people, and the intellectual stimulation that can come from learning about new places" (Smith & Puczko, 2009: 40). The emphasis now lies in the prevention of disease and maintenance of good health, instead of cures, with high expectations regarding health improvements, even if there are no specific health problems (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009).

Lowenthal (1962: 124) asks the question, "What better purpose is there for travel than to restore one's health, physical or mental?" The links between health and tourism are numerous and varied, and include trips taken to other countries for cosmetic or other surgery, trips taken to other countries for medical treatment to cure illness and disease, trips to mountain or seaside health resorts to improve the health of patients suffering from illness, trips designed to tackle stress and thus improve the mental and psychological health of the traveller, and general health and beauty trips (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2005). The concept of health includes mental as well as physical health, and in the increasingly stressful world of work it seems likely that in future health tourism will continue to grow.

Visiting thermal springs for medicinal purposes is one of the oldest forms of health-related travel in most parts of the world, including South Africa. The association of thermal springs with local beliefs and myths about their healing powers goes back far in history (Gilbert & Van De Weert, 1991), and in most cases these springs have not lost their reputation and appeal through the ages. In an almost culture-independent way, many thermal springs have become known for their miraculous healing powers, and often have at least one story or legend covering the original 'healing event', which is sometimes used as 'cultural-historical' back-up for

promotional material in tourism (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009).

Health travel has become a global phenomenon, to the extent that a trend has emerged which gives new meaning to the idea of going on holiday and returning a 'new person' (Yeoman, 2008). More and more people are choosing alternative medicine as a means of augmenting conventional medicine, or even as an alternative to mainstream healthcare, and for today's consumers the concept of 'wellbeing' has become a key factor contributing to their satisfaction with life (Yeoman, 2008). There appears to be some confusion surrounding the definition of health tourism and its sub-categories (Global Spa Summit, 2011), with no consistent definitions, and some being used synonymously and interchangeably with others. According to Cockerell & Trew (2003), the term 'health tourism' is in many ways paradoxical, with no clear indication of where the medical side ends and where the tourism side begins, which explains in part why it is such a difficult market to evaluate and quantify. Industry analysts and researchers tend to use the term 'health tourism' as a concept that includes both medical tourism and wellness tourism, and from a research/analysis perspective, this term is probably best used as an umbrella phrase to capture both medical tourism and wellness tourism markets (Global Spa Summit, 2011).

Medical tourism and wellness tourism

The attempt to achieve better health while on holiday through relaxation, exercise or visits to spas, including thermal spas, has been taken to a new level with the emergence of a distinct niche in the tourism industry, that of medical tourism (Connell, 2006). Medical tourism is defined as "tourism that involves people who travel to a place to undergo treatment for a disease, ailment or condition, and who are seeking lower cost of care, better access to care, or different care from what they could receive

at home” (Global Spa Summit, 2011: 20). The growing popularity of alternative medicine and natural location-based remedies has considerably narrowed the gap between medical tourism and other forms of health tourism (Global Spa Summit, 2011), and there would seem to be a definite role for thermal spa resorts in the medical tourism market. Medical tourists are usually accompanied by one or more family members, and often need time to recover after surgery in a relaxing environment. Thermal spa resorts, with natural hot mineral water and a reputation for healing, are ideally placed to form constructive and lucrative links with the medical tourism market.

The term ‘wellness’ is derived by combining the first part of ‘wellbeing’ and the last part of ‘fitness’ (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Wellbeing includes feeling satisfied and happy, developing as a person, being fulfilled, and being able to make a contribution to the community (Smith & Puczkó, 2009), while fitness is dominated more by sporting activities. Fitness is seen as one element for physical wellbeing on the way to a higher level of wellness, while other elements such as good nutrition, beauty, relaxation, mental activity, social harmony, and environmental sensitivity must be added (Nahrstedt, 2004). The wellness industry provides products and services to healthy people, and people become wellness tourists to feel healthier, look better and prevent illnesses from developing. After noting the current lack of clarity and consistency among existing definitions for wellness tourism, the Global Spa Summit (2011: 114) suggests the following definition: “Wellness tourism involves people who travel to a different place to proactively pursue activities that maintain or enhance their personal health and wellbeing, and who are seeking unique, authentic, or location-based experiences that are not available at home”.

The term ‘medical wellness’, which implies a combination of healthcare and wellness, is

increasingly being used, particularly in Germany, although the concept is still new, and there is no standard definition of what it should include. Medical wellness is seen as a bridge between conventional medicine and the wellness movement (essentially medical tourism and wellness tourism), something which “could help to bring about a paradigm shift in our understanding of what it means to be healthy..... it could encourage more people to look after their health in a more active, more conscious, more enjoyable way, and to find real pleasure in the process” (German National Tourism Board, 2012). If medical wellness continues to develop it may be able to act as an important link between traditional thermal spa medicine (balneotherapy), and wellness treatments, and has the potential to form the core of thermal spa health tourism.

Spa tourism

Spa tourism has been defined as “tourism which focuses on the relaxation or healing of the body, using mainly water-based treatments, such as mineral or thermal pools, steam rooms and saunas, with an emphasis focused on curing, rehabilitating, or resting the body” (Smith & Puczkó, 2009: 85). However, today almost any service provider with some kind of health-related services can call itself a spa. There are now also numerous sub-sectors within spa tourism, incorporating aspects of medical tourism, wellness tourism and leisure tourism, and it is no longer enough to use the label ‘spa’ and assume tourists will know what to expect. Perceptions differ greatly and spas differ widely in terms of what they offer, although they do have one thing in common, the aspiration to improve health and wellbeing.

The word ‘spa’ is traditionally ascribed to thermal spring resorts, although the origin of the word is uncertain (Van Tubergen & Van der Linden, 2002), and its meaning is changing. It may be an acronym of the Latin phrase ‘sanitas per aqua’ (health through water), or it may be derived from the

Walloon word 'espa', meaning 'fountain', associated with the Belgian town of Spa, where in the 14th century a curative thermal spring was discovered. The European Spa Association (ESPA) defines a spa as "a mineral spring or place or resort where such a spring is found" (Smith & Jenner, 2000: 42). This definition has been broadened by the American-based International Spa Association (ISPA), where spas are essentially defined as "places devoted to overall wellbeing through a variety of professional services that encourage renewal of mind, body and spirit" (ISPA, 2013).

The traditional idea of spa tourism changed substantially in the 1980s, with rapid expansion of what Becheri (1989: 17) describes as "thermal spring tourism of wellbeing", to include massage, fitness, marine therapies, diet therapies, physiotherapies, beauty treatments, detoxification treatments, sports and exercise, steam baths, hydrotherapies, health education and relaxation techniques. Many of the successful European thermal spring spas have repositioned themselves by moving their focus from the treatment of diseases to improvement and prolongation of health, but in a leisure environment (Gilbert & Van De Weert, 1991). This was found to be necessary to attract younger visitors who favoured sea, sand and sun holidays. The appearance and development of these new products are referred to as 'health-care' treatments, as opposed to 'curative health' treatments, and according to Gilbert & Van De Weert (1991: 6), "give a new dimension to European spas, entailing a new generation of tourism products having health as the agent of leisure".

Thermal spring health tourism

Thermal spring health tourism is considered to be "a component of health tourism that usually incorporates the provision of thermal waters designed to assist in overcoming various medical conditions, as well as an increasing range of fitness and cosmetic

add-ons, resulting from a significant psychographic shift towards healthy lifestyles" (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009: 222). Thus thermal spring health tourism contains elements of medical tourism, wellness tourism and spa tourism. The thermal, mechanical and chemical beneficial effects of thermal water (Boekstein, 2014), together with natural therapies and remedies, good climate, social interaction and healthy activities such as walking, hiking and swimming, may combine to create an environment that can only be conducive to healing. Altman (2000) remarks that so many benefits available in one setting make thermal springs a powerful form of preventive medicine that definitely merits further study.

Internationally the offerings of thermal spring resorts have become increasingly varied, and together with thermal swimming pools and baths, usually include a range of treatments, such as balneotherapy (therapeutic use of thermal or mineral waters) and hydrotherapy (therapeutic use of ordinary tap water, at any temperature), beauty treatments, massage, and a range of alternative therapies for relaxation and healing. There may also be sporting, fitness and recreational facilities. Thermal water-based leisure parks, like fun waters or aqua parks, are also increasingly forming an important part of the supply side of thermal spa tourism, and consequently health tourism, in that they provide attractions and services for the whole family, with water slides and other fun elements that target children, and separate silent rest areas and pools, as well as treatment areas, that target parents (Smith & Puczkó, 2009).

Thermal spring resort product offerings

In a comparison between water-based, treatment-based and recreation-based product offerings of a selection of well-known thermal spring resorts around the world (Table 1), a recurring pattern is apparent, in that practically all of the recreation activities are water-based, and

while some are aimed at family entertainment (e.g. water slides), most have a wellness focus (e.g. thermal pools, saunas, steam rooms, massage pools),

together with an exercise or fitness focus (e.g. hiking, walking, mountain-biking). In addition all of

Table 1: Facilities and services at selected international thermal spring resorts

	Water-based	Treatment-based	Recreation-based
Thermae Bath Spa (United Kingdom)	New Royal Bath – two thermal pools (34°C), one with massage jets and whirlpool, an open-air rooftop pool with air seats and bubbling massage jets, and an aroma steam room. Cross Bath - smaller, more intimate open-air pool (34°C).	Over 50 health, spa and beauty treatments, including hot stone therapy, a range of other massage types, body wraps, skin care treatments, facials, manicures, pedicures, reflexology, and various spa packages.	No on-site recreation facilities – emphasis is on the culture, history and architecture of the area – the Spa Visitor Centre has displays which outline the role that the Spa has played in the social and cultural history of Bath.
Hanmer Springs (New Zealand)	Some 12 open-air thermal pools, three 'sulphur' pools, six private indoor thermal pools (28°C-42°C), a sauna and steam room.	Variety of massage and beauty treatments - range of facials, massages, body wraps, body exfoliation, manicures and pedicures.	Water park and aqua-play area with water slides, scenic walks and mountain biking in the area.
Peninsula Hot Springs (Australia)	Bath House - over 20 bathing experiences (37°C-40°C), reflexology walk, steam room, saunas, cave pool, hydrotherapy pool. Spa Dreaming Centre - for guests over 16 – indoor and outdoor thermal pools, cold plunge pool, massaging showers, saunas, breathing workshops.	Range of beauty treatments - massage, facials, foot and hand treatments, mud, salt, hot stone and steam treatments, and reflexology, as well as a range of packaged experiences - bathing packages, treatment packages, pregnancy packages and golf packages.	Restaurant with numerous 'dine and bathe' deals available.
Bad Wildbad (Germany)	Palais Thermal - 12 thermal pools (30°C-34°C), whirlpools, massage pools, spring pools, exercise pools, cold pools, solaria, drinking fountains, hydro-ionised fountains, massage showers, Finnish saunas, Roman steam bath, tepidarium, sun room, Vital Thermal Spa - indoor and outdoor thermal pools.	Vital Thermal Spa -the 'Bad Wildbad therapy', aimed more at musculoskeletal and other medical problems than wellness and beauty, and includes oil, cream baths, mud pack treatments, medical baths, inhalation, underwater massage, hydro-electrical therapy, exercise baths, and a variety of massages.	A number of 1-6 night packages are offered, which include off-site hotel accommodation and a variety of treatments, some in combination with walking, hiking and mountain-biking.
Blue Lagoon (Iceland)	Guests bathe in the Blue Lagoon, a highly mineralized thermal water lake (37°C-39°C), fed by output from a nearby geothermal power plant. Saunas and steam rooms.	A range of facials, manicures, pedicures, and other skin and beauty treatments is available, some of which take place in the lagoon itself, and for which a combination of Blue Lagoon skincare products is used. Psoriasis treatment, based on bathing in mineral-rich Blue Lagoon geothermal water and application of own skincare products.	Restaurant with variety of menus.

Source: www.thermaebathspa.com; www.hanmersprings.co.nz; www.peninsulahotsprings.com; www.bad-wildbad.eu; <http://www.bluelagoon.com> (Accessed 25 August 2014)

Table 2: Facilities and services at three thermal spring resorts in South Africa

	Water-based	Treatment-based	Recreation-based
Warmbaths	Indoor and outdoor thermal and cold pools, super-tube water slide, 'speed' slide, 'river-ride', baby pool, wave pool, and Jacuzzis.	The Warmbaths Hydro has an indoor thermal pool, cold plunge pool, 'rheumatism bath', private mineral tubs and a sauna. A range of beauty and wellness treatments is offered, including body wraps and scrubs, facials, manicures and pedicures. A number of one to three day packages are available.	Sporting facilities include tennis and squash courts, volleyball courts. Go-carts, mini-quads, pedal boats, archery, web climbing, mini-golf, outdoor chess, play park for children, game viewing drives.
Badplaas	Variety of warm and cold outdoor mineral pools, a super-tube water slide, a 'speed' slide, and the <i>rinkhals</i> (tube rapids).	The Badplaas Hydro has three heated indoor pools, a cold pool, and private hydro jets, and a steam room. A range of beauty and wellness treatments is offered, including herbal baths, massage therapy, hand and foot therapy, detoxification wraps, phytomer treatment, Ahava treatments, thalassotherapy.	Sporting facilities include tennis, volleyball and bowls. Quad bikes, mini-golf, paintball, arcade centre, horse trails, game viewing drives.
Caledon Spa	Thermal pool (38°C), range of cascading thermal pools of various temperatures for relaxation, lap pool, frigidarium pool, floatation pool, steam room, sauna, jacuzzi	Caledon Spa offers a range of massage types, body and facial treatments, manicures, pedicures.	Cold swimming pools, gym, horse riding, casino.

Source: www.foreverwarmbaths.co.za; www.foreverbadplaas.co.za; www.thcaledoncasino.co.za (Accessed 25 August 2014)

these resorts offer a range of wellness and beauty treatments (e.g. massage, body cleansing, manicures, pedicures, reflexology). Two of the resorts, Bad Wildbad and Blue Lagoon, offer medical treatments in addition to wellness and beauty treatments. Bath Spa, Hanmer Springs and Blue Lagoon have all developed a range of health, beauty and skin-care products which incorporate their mineral water. These products are used in on-site treatments, and are also available for visitors to buy and take home.

Almost all of the thermal springs in South Africa that have development potential have been developed into resorts, and today there are more than 20 thermal spring resorts spread around the country. These resorts vary quite considerably in size, as well as in the range of facilities and services offered. While all these resorts have water with known medicinal properties (Boekstein, 2014), and most were originally established for health, principally medicinal purposes (Booyens, 1981), only three of them, namely Warmbaths (Bela-Bela) in Limpopo Province, Badplaas in Mpumalanga Province, and Caledon Spa in the Western

Cape, have relatively sophisticated health and wellness treatment facilities, while the others function primarily as family leisure resorts (Boekstein, 1998; Boekstein & Spencer, 2013a). In contrast to the international resorts, the two largest thermal spring resorts in South Africa, Warmbaths and Badplaas (Table 2), which also offer water-based and treatment-based facilities and services, as well as exercise and fitness activities, place far more emphasis on family entertainment than on the health aspects of their water-based activities. In addition these resorts offer a wide range of non-water-based recreational activities (such as quad bikes, mini-golf and game drives), which form at least as important a part of their total offerings as water-based products.

It is apparent from the variety of facility, service and activity combinations offered at thermal spring resorts internationally and in South Africa that there is no standard product. While all the resorts have thermal water as their principal attraction, and all offer both health and recreation activities, the core offering may differ from resort to resort, and may have a focus on wellness together with medical treatments (e.g. Bad Wildbad and Blue Lagoon), or just wellness activities (e.g. Thermae Bath Spa, Hanmer Springs and Peninsula Hot Springs), or recreational activities (e.g. Warmbaths and Badplaas).

Conclusions

While medical treatments, once the *raison d'être* of traditional thermal spring resorts, still retain some importance in Europe, it appears that the focus is shifting towards wellness activities, as has already happened in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. In South Africa the focus has shifted even further, in the direction of recreation, and there is no longer any medicinal use of thermal waters, with only three resorts out of more than 20 having sophisticated health-related services, the others functioning as family leisure resorts. For thermal spring resorts to develop and

succeed as sustainable international, and domestic, tourist attractions, product offerings would need to contain elements of all three activity types, that is, water-based, treatment-based and recreation-based activities. However, the main focus would need to be guided by the activity preferences of current markets, which in the case of South Africa appear to be almost exclusively domestic. Research at thermal springs in the Western Cape province of South Africa found that domestic visitors have far less interest in health facilities and treatments than their counterparts in Europe, although there is a significant minority that would welcome such services (Boekstein & Spencer, 2013b). The question therefore arises as to whether thermal spring resorts in South Africa, especially those that do have health-related services, have shifted their product offerings too far in the direction of recreation. If this is the case, have they not, in the process, lost part of their original *raison d'être*, and should South Africa's thermal spring tourism product not be repositioned so as to capture a greater portion of the international, and domestic, health tourism markets?

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