

COMPETITIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN BALNEOCLIMATIC TOURISM: PERSPECTIVES FOR BĂILE FELIX

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REVIEW CASE STUDY

Abstract

Wellness and balneary tourism is now one of the most developing sectors of tourism industry worldwide. This process can be explained with the general tendency among consumers to prioritize prevention and good health rather than treatment and remedies. The wellness sector globally continues to expand due to increasing stressful nature of modern life, global trend of an aging population, the increased priority of health and mental well-being in daily routine. Health and wellness tourism holds particular importance because it integrates the three largest sectors within the world economy - tourism, healthcare and lifestyle industries. Key growth factors influencing this include increased disposable incomes, greater awareness in public health and the global adoption of preventative rather than remedial health systems.

Keywords: (max. 5) wellness, balneoclimatic tourism, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing sectors of the global tourism industry, reflecting profound changes in consumer behavior, lifestyle preferences, and health-related priorities. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2023), wellness tourism encompasses travel activities associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing personal well-being through experiences that support physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Unlike conventional tourism, which is often centered on recreation, entertainment, and sightseeing, wellness tourism places the individual's overall well-being at the core of the travel experience. As a result, tourists increasingly seek destinations that offer opportunities for relaxation, self-care, prevention, and personal development.

The concept of wellness tourism has evolved considerably over the last two decades. Initially associated primarily with luxury spa resorts and exclusive health retreats, it has gradually expanded into a broader and more inclusive tourism segment. Modern wellness tourism incorporates a wide variety of activities, including thermal and mineral water treatments, spa therapies, yoga and meditation programs, fitness and rehabilitation services, nutritional counseling, alternative therapies, and nature-based experiences (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). This evolution reflects a growing understanding of health as a multidimensional

concept that extends beyond the absence of disease and includes physical vitality, psychological balance, social well-being, and environmental harmony.

The remarkable growth of wellness tourism can be attributed to several interconnected global trends. One of the most important factors is the increasing awareness of health and preventive care among consumers. Modern societies are experiencing rising levels of stress, anxiety, sedentary lifestyles, and chronic health conditions, which encourage individuals to seek travel experiences that contribute to physical recovery and mental relaxation. At the same time, demographic changes, particularly population aging in developed countries, have increased the demand for health-oriented tourism products and services. Older travelers often possess greater purchasing power and demonstrate a strong interest in wellness activities aimed at maintaining quality of life and healthy aging.

Technological development and digitalization have also influenced the expansion of wellness tourism. While technology has facilitated access to information and travel planning, it has simultaneously contributed to the phenomenon of digital fatigue. Consequently, many tourists are increasingly attracted to wellness destinations that promote digital detox, mindfulness, and reconnection with nature. Social media platforms have further accelerated this trend by popularizing wellness lifestyles and showcasing wellness destinations as desirable travel experiences. The growing influence of online

communities and wellness influencers has significantly shaped consumer preferences and expectations regarding tourism products and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented another important catalyst for the development of wellness tourism. The global health crisis increased awareness regarding immunity, preventive healthcare, mental health, and overall well-being. Following the pandemic, travelers have become more interested in destinations that offer safe environments, health-enhancing experiences, outdoor activities, and opportunities for psychological recovery. As a result, wellness tourism has become not only a leisure activity but also an essential component of post-pandemic lifestyle adaptation and health maintenance.

Within the broader wellness tourism sector, balneoclimatic tourism occupies a distinctive position due to its combination of natural therapeutic resources and specialized health services. Balneoclimatic tourism relies on the utilization of mineral and thermal waters, therapeutic muds, favorable climatic conditions, and professional medical supervision to promote prevention, rehabilitation, and recovery. Numerous studies emphasize that thermal and spa destinations possess significant competitive advantages because they combine medical benefits with recreational and wellness experiences (Hall, 2011). Consequently, many traditional spa destinations have successfully transformed themselves into modern wellness centers capable of attracting diverse tourist segments throughout the year.

Romania possesses considerable potential for the development of wellness and balneoclimatic tourism due to the abundance and diversity of its natural therapeutic resources. The country benefits from numerous mineral springs, geothermal waters, therapeutic mud deposits, and favorable climatic conditions distributed across various regions. These resources have supported the development of spa tourism for centuries and continue to represent valuable assets for tourism development. However, despite this significant potential, the Romanian wellness tourism sector faces several challenges, including infrastructure modernization, international promotion, service diversification, and adaptation to contemporary wellness trends.

Among Romanian wellness destinations, Băile Felix occupies a leading position due to its exceptional geothermal resources, modern

tourism infrastructure, and strategic location near the city of Oradea. The resort has become one of the most representative examples of the transformation of traditional balneary tourism into a comprehensive wellness tourism destination. Continuous investments in accommodation facilities, wellness centers, medical rehabilitation services, and leisure infrastructure have contributed to increasing its attractiveness and competitiveness. Furthermore, the ability to operate throughout the entire year provides a significant advantage compared to destinations affected by pronounced seasonality.

Given these developments, understanding the factors that influence competitiveness and sustainability in wellness tourism has become increasingly important. Sustainable destination management requires balancing economic growth with environmental protection, resource conservation, and social well-being. In the context of increasing competition among European spa destinations, the long-term success of Băile Felix depends on its capacity to integrate sustainability principles, innovate tourism products, improve service quality, and capitalize on its unique natural resources.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze the competitiveness and sustainability of wellness and balneoclimatic tourism in Băile Felix, highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges associated with its future development. The research contributes to a better understanding of the strategic directions necessary for maintaining the resort's position as one of Romania's leading wellness tourism destinations while ensuring sustainable growth in accordance with contemporary tourism trends.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research was based on a qualitative and exploratory approach aimed at evaluating the competitiveness and sustainability of wellness and balneoclimatic tourism in Băile Felix Resort, Romania. The study combined literature review, secondary statistical data analysis, and SWOT analysis in order to identify the main factors influencing the development of the destination.

The documentary research included scientific articles, books, national tourism development strategies, reports issued by the Ministry of Economy and Tourism, publications of the Global Wellness Institute, and previous

studies focused on health and wellness tourism. Particular attention was given to the literature addressing sustainable tourism development, wellness tourism trends, and the competitiveness of spa destinations.

Secondary data were collected from official reports, tourism development strategies, and academic publications related to Romanian spa tourism. The information was analyzed using descriptive and comparative methods, allowing the identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the development of Băile Felix.

The SWOT analysis was employed as the main analytical instrument because it enables the assessment of both internal and external factors affecting destination competitiveness. Furthermore, a comparative review of European wellness destinations was conducted in order to position Băile Felix within the broader context of international wellness tourism development.

The results were interpreted from the perspective of sustainable tourism development, considering economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This methodological framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the current situation of Băile Felix and highlights potential directions for enhancing its long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The welfare and balneary tourism segment in Romania is still a very under-explored aspect of the national tourism market. Romania is provided with remarkable natural resources in terms of mineral/thermal water, muds, various climacteric settings etc., that were the source of development of spa resorts in many parts of the country. The balneary tradition is very old, spanning since the time of Romans and then of the Austro-hungarians who first established some of the actual balneary locations as centers for treatment and recuperation. Despite this strong tradition, the state of structure development is considerably less advanced in comparison with western European countries because of under-developed infrastructure and deficient international promotion, as well as imbalanced investment distribution (Arma, 2014; Snak et al., 2011).

In Romania, spa tourism is considered one of the oldest and most important forms of

tourism, playing an important role in economic development, in the diversification of tourist services and in the valorization of natural curative resources. Many authors emphasize that Romania benefits from one of the highest spa potentials in Europe, as a result of the variety of waters, sapropel muds and the favourable climate (Ciangă, 2010; Armaş, 2014). Under these conditions, spa resorts, including Băile Felix, are in a continuous process of transformation and adaptation to the current requirements of health, wellness and prevention tourism. Specialized literature claims that current spa tourism is no longer oriented only towards classical medical treatment, but also towards types of integrated services such as wellness, spa, recovery, alternative therapies, recreational activities (Hall, 2011; Voineagu, 2015). This diversification involves a complex development strategy, based on investments in infrastructure, professionalization of personnel, digitalization of services and integrated promotion of the destination.

In this scenario, sustainability is perceived as the core principle that has to shape the future of the wellness and balneary tourism development. These practices can help the Romanian resources' utilization in a way that supports ecological balance and guarantees the vitality of spa destination for long term. For Romania sustainability has even more important role, considering that their resources, the mineral waters, are also fragile. Inefficient use of the natural resource and lack of proper plan can compromise the development of balneary tourism, environmental care being an indispensable element of any progress of this sector.

Băile Felix provides an excellent example of the potentials and developmental trends of the wellness tourism in Romania. Băile Felix is the most developed Romanian thermal spa resort, characterized by its offer in terms of medical treatment services, wellness services, and leisure tourism. The availability of geothermal resources, geographical advantages (proximity to Oradea), and quite a well-developed infrastructure determine the resort among the most competitive on the Romanian market. Moreover, the capacity to serve tourists throughout the entire year and continuous development initiatives make Băile Felix an appropriate example to present how spa destinations can shift toward and

comprehensive and competitive wellness tourism model.

The SWOT analysis

STRENGTHS • important balneary tradition • low prices • the existence of natural-mineral resources as elements and an extremely rich and high potential curative framework • the existence of a balneary resorts' network • attractive and varied locations; • competent and professionally dedicated staff, partially inherited from the past; • varied range of curative procedures; • considerable medical probity; • balneary resorts that succeeded in diversifying the customer basis and in eliminating the dependency on treatment vouchers • the existence of representative associations in the sector	WEAKNESSES • difficult access to some balneary resorts • accommodation and treatment units of poor quality • poorly maintained ambience of the resorts • insufficient luxury or high quality services • resorts depending almost entirely on treatment vouchers and cannot succeed in investing for the restoration and reparation of the infrastructure and in creating new balneary products • a low level of services, in general • poor food standards • the corresponding staff for wellness and SPA products requires better training • lacking medical staff in some treatment bases • the increase in the weight of social tourism, respectively in the number of treatment vouchers simultaneously with a general decrease of demand • the extremely imbalanced seasonality of 2-3 months in the summer, and by the end of the season which has extremely low demand • decrease of tourist demand for resorts • limited acknowledgement of the current modernisation and diversification needs
THREATS • the anchoring of balneary tourism at legal and public policy level only in the medical recovery area • the difficulties encountered by local public authorities in accessing European structural funds dedicated to the balneary sector; poor administrative capacity, low resources for co-financing, few authorities having the effective ownership on balneary infrastructures; • the repositioning towards wellness of some tourist operators in a sector dominated by the social component bears risks of too quick and strong decreases of their incomes • the need of transport and utilities infrastructures in many resorts make difficult investments in new accommodation structures and balneary treatment structures	OPPORTUNITIES • the development of some balneary and wellness products that aim at the foreign customer base, and especially foreign insurers in the context of enforcing the Directive 2011/24/EU; • the existence of European structural funds in the period 2014-2020 for developing the balneary infrastructure • ensuring legislative coherence that would encourage the cooperation between responsible central and local institutions and that would allow for coordinated strategic investments

The development of spa tourism in Romania is based on strategies of natural

resource analysis (Nistoreanu, 2006), evaluation of the existing tourist base and engagement of spa destinations in national and

international circuits (Snak et al., 2011). In order to respond to the increasing competition on the European health tourism market, at a time when other countries benefit from a much more efficient system of valorization of spa resources (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia), the strategy becomes a key tool (Hall, 2011). Due to the unique nature of the geothermal resources in this area and the large accommodation capacity, the Băile Felix resort has been more researched compared to other spa resorts in Romania. Recent studies show that the resort has undergone an accelerated process of infrastructure modernization and service diversification, but the current development of the resort requires a coherent strategy to maintain long-term competitiveness (Pop & Moldovan, 2022; Oprea & Horga, 2020). Research dedicated to the Băile Felix resort emphasizes the great natural potential, but also the vulnerability of the public infrastructure, seasonality, the deficit of online promotion, the lack of modern wellness centers and the need for greater investments (ResearchGate, 2022). The national strategic framework determines the development directions of the spa resorts, and documents such as the Action Plan for the Development of Spa Tourism in Romania (Ministry of Economy, 2025) or the National Tourism Development Strategy 2023–2035 mention the need to revive the spa resorts, capitalize on European funds, and modernize the infrastructure of therapeutic banks. Therefore, the specialized literature provides a solid context for the strategic analysis of the development of the Băile Felix resort, revealing both the current developments of spa tourism and the strategic directions necessary to maintain and strengthen the competitiveness of this destination.

Case Study - Băile Felix The choice of Băile Felix resort as a case study stems from its peculiar mix of natural resources, accessibility, infrastructure and its ability to achieve tourist diversification. Geothermal waters, with a year-round temperature of around 70 degrees, ensure continuous year-round operation, which is a considerable competitive advantage compared to the other spa locations in Romania which depend more strongly on seasonal variations. A further important factor is its close proximity to the city of Oradea which offers: good connectivity transport, hotel infrastructure and a wide range of associated tourism products. This city connection gives

the resort easy accessibility from the country and the country, but also from abroad through Oradea International Airport.

Infrastructure-wise, Băile Felix appears to be one of the most developed Romanian spa resorts, offering various up-to-date facilities such as hotels, wellness centers, medical bases or other recreational ones, which in their turn favour the development of a diversified tourism offer. Here one can experience combined rehabilitation, wellness and leisure tourism, all within the same destination. This diversification strategy is crucial to preserving competitiveness, given the accelerating pace of development on the European wellness tourism market (Pop and Moldovan, 2022).

Last but not least, the resort's future perspective is promising, with investments, higher private sector involvement and regional tourism strategy integration, it is clearly a case of success; and the resorts' development mirrors a wider change of the Romanian balneary tourism from the medical treatment focus to a more complex one (the wellness focus). Based on the above arguments, Băile Felix is an excellent subject to analyse a relevant phenomenon in Romania such as development potential of wellness tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

Wellness tourism represents one of the most important tourist activities, with a relatively stable clientele and relatively longer average stays (12-30 days). It also contributes to increased average daily/tourist earnings (Voigt & Pforr, 2014). The Master Plan for the Development of Wellness Tourism was developed by Détente Consultants and was published in November 2009 after about 4 months of research. The consultants visited 15 spa resorts where meetings were held with both public and private actors. The consultants also met with officials of the institutions and organizations involved in health tourism sector, such as the Ministry of Tourism and several stakeholders, trade unions, NGOs, governmental agencies etc (Ministry of Tourism, 2018).

The essential aspects that define the wellness tourism market in other countries are as follows: social wellness tourism is declining everywhere, but the average budget allocated by Europeans for disease prevention and health treatments is on the

increase. This shows that short free treatment sessions develop (between 3-10 days and unsubsidised). It was found that it is necessary to add the wellness component. For competitive wellness tourism, heritage-based medical centers were developed. These thermal cities are mainly developed in Central and Eastern Europe: Russia, Hungary, the Czech Republic. The thermal cities with an important historical heritage and using water as tourist attraction became famous thermal resorts: Amnéville in France, Baden-Baden, Karlovy Vary or Abano Terme (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). Balneary tourism is, as a rule, a national and proximity tourism (for example, thalassotherapy develops in Tunisia and Morocco for a French clientele). Private investments were made in Tunisia,

Hungary and Thailand, which gave them a decisive advance on the spa tourism market.

To sum up, wellness tourism is a development opportunity for Romania in the European and international context of tourism. However, the exploitation of the potential of wellness tourism in Romania should be based on coherent development strategies, investment increase, international positioning enhancement, and focus on sustainability and innovation. The development of the Romanian spa destinations (like Băile Felix) proves that Romania has the capacity to transform itself into a competitive wellness tourism destination if the natural resources are appropriately managed and integrated into contemporary tourism systems according to the European trends and standards.

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