

## **Towards sustainable spa tourism activities in Greece**

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### **Abstract**

Thermal (Spa) tourism in Greece has been developed since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to numerous significant thermal springs spread all over the country. After having reached its time of prosperity during '50s, 60s and 70s Spa tourism entered a period of recession and decline. For the last 20 years Greek spa towns and especially their infrastructure (thermal installations) have been suffering from abandonment and degradation. Parallel to these developments, some new categories of visitors / clients of thermal springs have also appeared as a consequence of the broader socio-economic and cultural changes.

This paper presents and comments on some results of a research conducted by the authors in the most important spa towns of Greece (Edipsos, Kamena Vourla, Loutra Ypatis) which represent 47% of the spa tourists. The principal objective was to survey the basic characteristics of the users of thermal springs (by questioning them) as well as the opinion of local authorities and managers of companies/enterprises operating in the area. Particularly, the results concerning the profile of spa tourists have a special scientific interest since they prove that commonly held opinions and ideas in relation to spa tourism are often fully mistaken. Besides the research shows the emerging structural planning problems derived from the different needs of 'classic' and 'modern'(contemporary) spa-users opposing each other and thus preventing local economies and societies to get full profit from a special/alternative form of tourism, traditionally considered as a comparative advantage of the country.

*Keywords: spa tourism, spa towns, classic and modern spa tourists, thermal springs, regional planning and development.*



## 1 Introduction

Thermalism – and the subsequent thermal springs tourism – constitute a rather popular activity since the antiquity due to its indissoluble relation with the health sector. In Greece, thermalism dates since the classic era; by that time, the Asklepieia constituted the first edifices-temples that were built next to the thermal springs. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, spa tourism has been developed again in Greece [1] thanks to the important natural resources in thermal springs [2–4].

After a period of rapid growth and development (during the '50s, the '60s and the '70s), spa tourism in Greece faced (in the '80s) a period of recession and decline [5] that was owed to the flourishing of the littoral tourism, as well as to the different perception regarding the use of the thermal waters.

Certainly, during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century, thermal tourism in Greece –as well as in many other European countries– was thought to be the best way to achieve healthiness and served almost exclusively therapeutic purposes. However, since the standards of the tourist market changed and new alternative forms of tourism appeared, the thermal waters lost their therapeutic character and were identified with general pleasure and wellness (therapy vs wellness).

Just in 2000, the first (private) modern spa centers in Greece contributed to a change in the rendering of thermal tourist services. However, this modernization was not applied in all cases/facilities. Consequently, nowadays Greece presents two diametrically opposed –as far as their characteristics are concerned– categories of spa tourists: the “classic” and the “modern” spa tourists (By the term of “classic spa tourists” we mean the people who visit classic spa facilities and are only interested in therapeutic purposes, while by the term “modern spa tourists” we mean the people who visit modern facilities offering various services aiming mainly at their refreshment and wellness.).

The present paper aims at looking into the basic characteristics of these two categories of spa tourists and is based on a survey that the authors conducted on this purpose in the three most important Greek spa towns. In particular, the paper aspires to draw the most appropriate conclusions regarding the profile and the demands of the spa tourists in Greece; these conclusions could help trace more targeted spatial and planning policies as far as the spa towns and destinations are concerned.

## 2 Methodology

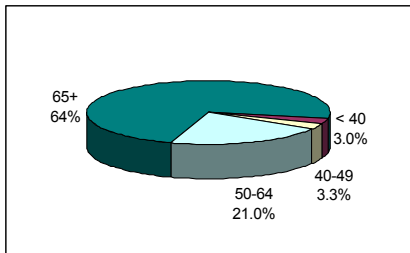
The survey regarding the profile of the spa tourists was conducted in the following three spa towns: “Loutra Aedipsou”, “Kamena Vourla” and “Loutra Hipatis”. These three regions were selected because: a) they constitute the three most important spa towns in Greece, b) they gather 47% of the total spa tourist movement in the country [5, 6] and c) their spa facilities cover 31% of the total spa facilities in Greece [7].

The survey used a sample of 700 people who filled in special questionnaires. In particular, 300 questionnaires were filled in “Loutra Aedipsou”, 250 in “Kamena Vourla” and 150 in “Loutra Hipatis” (A different number of



questionnaires was filled in each spa town because we wanted to have a representative sample according to the number of spa tourists visiting each spa town.). At the same time, it is worth mentioning that especially in “Kamena Vourla” the sample of 250 persons was divided in two parts: 160 questionnaires were filled in by “classic” spa tourists and 90 by the “modern” ones. On the contrary, in the other two spa towns, the total sample was composed only of “classic” spa tourists.

The biggest part of the survey was conducted during the summer of 2007, except for the 90 questionnaires that were filled in by the “modern” spa tourists from June 2007 until May 2008 (due to the annual operation of the facilities where the sampling was realised) (In Greece, the average time of operation for the classic spa facilities is of nearly 6 months per year; during July, August and September we observe the highest number of visitors [8].).



Source: results from survey conducted by the authors

Figure 1: “Classic” spa tourists’ distribution per age.

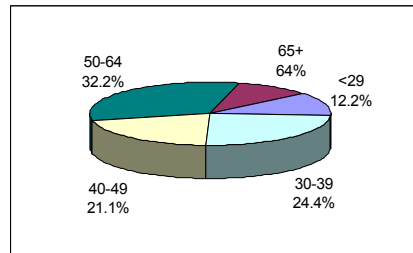
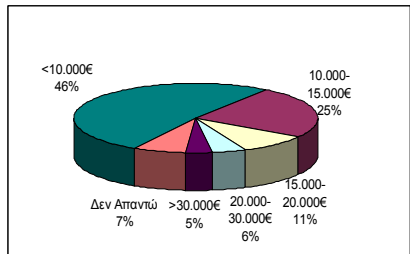


Figure 2: “Modern” spa tourists’ distribution per age.



Source: results from survey conducted by the authors

Figure 3: “Classic” spa tourists’ distribution per annual income in €.

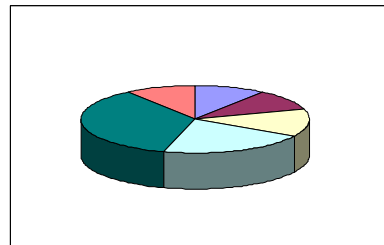


Figure 4: “Modern” spa tourists’ distribution per annual income in €.

### 3 Results

Further down, the paper presents on the one hand the results of the survey concerning the 610 “classic” spa tourists of the three spa towns and on the other hand the results regarding the 90 “modern” spa tourists (only in “Kamena Vourla”). Thus, we tried not only to separately outline the profile of each

category, but we mainly looked into comparing them. Likewise, we confirmed the transitional change in the qualitative characteristics of spa tourism during the last decades, as well as the necessity to look after the urban planning, in order to meet the needs and the demands of this particular kind of tourists (spa tourists).

Starting by the composition of the selected sample, we found out that either the therapeutic spa tourism or the modern spa tourism (for wellness purposes) constitute a “woman’s affair”. In particular, 60,5% of the total 610 “classic” spa tourists were women; likewise, 66,7% of the total 90 “modern” spa tourists were women.

Even though the composition of these two categories seems homogeneous, the rest of their characteristics are completely different. So, as for their age, the “classic” spa tourists are mainly seniors (72,8%) (Figure 1), while on the contrary the “modern” spa tourists belong to almost all the ages and in particular 90% of them are less than 65 years old (Figure 2).

As for the economical status of both types of spa tourists, 75,8% of the “classic” spa tourists do not earn more than 15.000€ per year, while the annual income of 56,7% of the “modern” spa tourists is more than 20.000€ (Figures 3 and 4). Consequently, the survey lead us to the conclusion that almost 70% of the “classic” spa tourists frequent spa towns thanks to the subsidy they earn from their Social Insurance Fund or the State (social programs), while 91,1% of the “modern” spa tourists pay themselves the visit to a spa town.

Also, as for the origin (place of residence) of the spa tourists, the Figures 5, 6 and 7 show that on the one hand the majority of the “classic” spa tourists come from the Greek district, while on the contrary the “modern” spa tourists originate from the big urban areas (mainly Athens and Thessalonica) and from abroad (Map 4).

Moreover, as for the reasons and the objectives of the spa tourists, 75,2% of the “classic” spa tourists visit a spa town due to therapeutic reasons, while 85,6% of the “modern” spa tourists are interested in wellness and relax. Consequently, 65% of the “classic” spa tourists prefer an organized spa resort where they usually stay for 2 or 3 weeks because of their long balneotherapy, while 53% of the “modern” spa tourists stay from 3 to 5 days.

On the basis of the abovementioned data, we asked from the spa tourists to tell us whether they would opt for other additional activities, except for spa tourism, during their sojourn at a spa town. According to the results, 44% of the “classic” spa tourists are only interested in their baths although they stay for a long period of time; likewise, 44% of the “modern” spa tourists are only interested in spa services. (The “classic” spa tourists are not interested in other activities except for spa tourism because they combine a low income and an old age. On the other side, the “modern” spa tourists are not interested in other activities because their stay is short and their visit is mainly focused on their refreshment and relaxation.) However, 344 “classic” and 51 “modern” spa tourists answered affirmatively and thus opt for other activities additionally to their baths (see Table 1).

## Origin (place of residence) of spa tourists



Figure 5: Loutra Aedipsou  
("classic" spa tourists).



Figure 6: Kamena Vourla  
("classic" spa tourists).



Figure 7: Loutra Hipatis ("classic"  
spa tourists).



Figure 8: Kamena Vourla  
("modern" spa tourists).

In addition to the abovementioned data, an important part of the survey refers to the spa tourists' contentment as far as the rendered services and the environment of the spa towns are concerned. According to the results – as presented in Tables 2 and 3 – the main conclusions could be resumed as follows:

- The "classic" spa tourists are "quite" to "much" satisfied by the quality of the thermal tourism infrastructures and the rendered services, the quality of the natural environment and the buildings in the spa towns and the quality of the accommodation infrastructure and services (hotels, restaurants, etc). We should clarify that these results are not absolutely reliable, because generally elderly people – the most frequent "classic" spa tourists – avoid expressing their real opinion (maybe by reason of suspiciousness). So, we must take into account that a "quite" satisfied old person denotes a rather negative judgment

Table 1: Activities pursued by spa tourists during their sojourn in spa resorts.

Kind of activity	“classic” spa tourists	“modern” spa tourists
Touring (visiting the inland)	64.8%	74.5%
Littoral tourism	33.7%	33.3%
Pilgrimage tourism	54.0%	11.8%
Cultural tourism	5.5%	15.7%
Food tourism	4.7%	5.9%
Walks / Marching	3.5%	2.0%
Ecotourism	1.5%	-

Table 2: Contentment of “classic” spa tourists (%).

	Not at all	Little	Quite	Much	No answer
Thermal tourism infrastructure and services	2.3	15.1	41.0	39.5	2.1
Spa town environment (nature and buildings)	3.0	11.8	43.6	41.3	0.3
Accommodation infrastructure and services	2.1	19.8	52.3	21.3	4.4
Entertainment services	3.9	15.4	22.8	12.5	45.4

Table 3: Contentment of “modern” spa tourists (%).

	Not at all	Little	Quite	Much	No answer
Thermal tourism infrastructure and services	1.1	2.2	31.1	61.1	4.4
Spa town environment (nature and buildings)	3.3	21.1	53.3	22.2	0.0
Accommodation infrastructure and services	2.2	10.0	36.7	43.3	7.8
Entertainment services	2.2	13.3	28.9	10.0	45.6

than a positive one; thus, the “classic” spa tourists’ contentment is much lower than what it is shown on the statistical results.

- The “modern” spa tourists are “little” to “quite” satisfied by the quality of the natural and built environment in the spa towns, while they are “quite” to

“much” satisfied by the quality of the spa tourism infrastructures and the rendered services, the quality of the accommodation infrastructure and services (hotels, restaurants, etc). In particular, the high contentment results from the fact that, due to their high income, the “modern” spa tourists choose luxurious spa facilities, hotels and restaurants.

- It is worth mentioning that 45,4% of the “classic” and 45,6% of the “modern” spa tourists did not answer to the question regarding their contentment as far as the entertainment services are concerned. Those who answered, they were “little” to “quite” satisfied. Almost half of the spa tourists did not answer this question; as for the “classic” spa tourists, this is justified by the fact that they are old and have a low income. As for the “modern” spa tourists, this is justified by the fact that they stay for a short period of time at a spa town and the purpose of their visit is almost always to relax.

Generally, in Greece, the “modern” spa tourists are relatively few in comparison with the total number of spa tourists in the Greek market of spa tourism. However, their number is about to increase in the future since the number of people opting for thermal waters in order to cure different diseases is about to decrease. On the contrary, the number of people who prefer thermal tourism for their refreshment and wellness is always increasing.

#### **4 Comments on the results**

After a short observation of the abovementioned results, anyone could draw the conclusion that Greece should “invest” in the “modern” spa tourists and adjust its economic and spatial planning to their characteristics; either their age or their economic status is superior to the old age and the low income of the “classic” spa tourists.

However, this obvious ascertainment is not essentially correct. A more careful study of the other results of the survey could help us draw the following conclusions:

- Both the “classic” and the “modern” spa tourists are little satisfied by the quality of the rendered services, the infrastructure and the environment of the Greek spa towns. Nevertheless, they continue visiting them because there are not alternative options.
- The majority of the spa tourists (classic and modern) often face the lack of choices as for the different hobbies that they could practice in the spa town and its surroundings.
- The “modern” spa tourists (those who choose the modern and luxurious spa facilities) do not incorporate into the local society of the spa towns nor bring enough economical or other benefits, because during their short stay they avoid getting in touch with the environment and the services of the spa town.
- Finally, the so desirable “modern” (and well-off) spa tourists offer the same to the Greek market (and consequently to the local economies) as the “classic” spa tourists who are mostly old people and have a low income.



- The today's negative aspect of the spa tourism in Greece is not ought to the attraction of old ages, but mainly to the lack of services that could attract spa tourists of all economic and social classes.

Given the abovementioned ascertainments, it is obvious that the planning of spa tourism in Greece should mainly aim at firstly offering reliable spa services and sustainable spa infrastructure (mainly for the middle economic classes), secondly at planning infrastructures and activities for entertainment and recreation (within the borders of the spa towns) and finally at supporting a rational and more sustainable and comprehensive spatial planning that could contribute to the desirable attractiveness of either the spa town or the surrounding inland.

## 5 Conclusion

It is a certainty that the spa tourism in Greece goes through a period of transition whose main characteristic is the emergence and the continuous increase of a new category of spa tourists: the "modern" spa tourists. As obvious it may be the answer that Greece has to orientate its socio-economic development and planning towards the enlargement of this particular category of spa tourists, this does not necessarily mean that the enlargement is enough or correct. Greece, as well as any other Mediterranean country presenting a similar image of spa tourism, should invest in the most appropriate spatial and economic planning (focusing on the middle income classes), as well as on the offer of all the necessary infrastructures and services for entertainment and recreation (either within the borders of the spa town or the surrounding area ). This means that beside the new kind of organisation of services and management of tourist activities in spa towns, physical planning must be a priority of public policy in order to achieve an appropriate spatial structure and a better quality of urban environment, which could considerably contribute to a sustainable local development in those places.

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