NON-TRADITIONAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM UNITS IN PORTUGAL UNVEILED

Veronika Joukes
Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, School of Humanities and Social Science and Centre for Transdisciplinary Development Studies, Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro
veronika@utad.pt

ABSTRACT

Health and wellness tourism includes much more than water treatments, regardless of whether natural mineral, sea or tap water is used. This paper wants to lift the veil on current tendencies in the Portuguese health and wellness sector, more particularly on the presence and/or appearance of not only holistic tourism, spiritual tourism, yoga and meditation tourism, but also medical tourism, complementing the more classic thermal/thalasso/spa tourism segments (classifications based on Smith and Laszlo, 2008).

KEYWORDS

Health and Wellness Tourism, Portugal, Niche Tourism, Yoga Tourism, Medical Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Health and wellness tourism" has to be defined in two steps. First of all, in Portugal "health tourism" is interpreted as a synonym of "medical tourism", that is defined by Voigt (2010: 8) as «the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey by people whose primary motive is to treat or cure a medical condition by taking advantage of medical intervention services away from their usual place of residence, while typically combining this journey with a vacation or touristic elements in the conventional sense». Similarly, the same author defines "wellness tourism" as «the sum of all the relationships resulting from a journey by people whose primary motive is to maintain or promote their health and well-being and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to enable and enhance people's physical, psychological, spiritual and/or social well-being».

In 2006 the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (PENT) (MEI, 2006) was launched in Portugal. It is a government initiative, developed under the aegis of the Ministry of the Economy and Innovation, that serves as the basis for implementation of a series of initiatives aimed at fostering sustained growth of national tourism, and guiding the activities of Portugal's National Tourism Authority (*Turismo de Portugal*), as the key public body for the sector, until 2015.

This plan defined, amongst other elements, 10 strategic tourism products, selected on the basis of Portugal's resources and distinctive factors, and also their future growth potential. They are here listed according to this year's revised PENT: sun and beach, touring – cultural and religious tourism, city break, meetings and congresses, nature tourism, nautical and cruise tourism, golf, residential tourism and integrated resorts, gastronomy and wines and health and wellness (MEID, 2011: 39-40).

The latter product was diagnosed to have progressively increased in Europe, to represent 3 million trips in 2004 and to guarantee an annual growth of 5% to 10%, equivalent to 6,2 million trips, up to 2015. These findings made Portugal foster the ambition to become a wellness destination (MEI, 2006: 71).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

So far, the nontraditional health and wellness tourism sector in Portugal has received little (scientific) attention (Fernandes, 2006; Fernandes and Fernandes, 2008; Medeiros and Cavaco, 2008). An extensive international literature review, however, revealed that this niche market has various strengths, such as a diverse product offering (Voigt and Laing, 2010), possible links with existing tourism products and services - within the same sector, as well as with complementary tourist products - (Konu et al., 2010) and an enormous growth potential (Nahrstedt, 2004). Moreover, it integrates seamlessly into a natural environment (Smith and Kelly, 2006) and serves to promote and brand elite images of tourism sites, even though the weight of wellness in the tourist product may be relatively small (Gelbman, 2008).

3. METHODOLOGY

Our research clarifies whether the health and wellness tourism sector in Portugal follows the above mentioned international tendencies.

In order to complement recent findings of authors like Sarmento and Portela (2010) and Fernandes and Fernandes (2011), a concise market and industry analysis based on the screening of a self composed database of companies that offer both lodging and none traditional wellness or medical treatments through the internet, follows. Some in-depth interviews will clarify why and how managers invest in this branch. Suggestions for future research lines, in a Portuguese or more international context, close the article.

4. MAIN RESULTS

Over the past lustrum different efforts have been undertaken to reinforce the "classic" health and wellness segments: more than half of the thermal springs (considering the around 40 members of the Portuguese Spa Association – ATP) renovated their antiquated installations, almost 10 thalassotherapeutic units were functioning in 2010 and in the same year the Portuguese Hotel Association (AHP) was informed that approximately 130 hotels have spa facilities to (Joukes and Gerry, 2010).

This explains why units with hydrotherapeutic facilities are well represented in the Portuguese health and wellness tourism sector. The same doesn't apply to meditative/spiritual/holistic retreats and medically linked units. These types of supply are still in the introductory stage of their life cycle and consequently it is impossible to accurately quantify their current share of the market – either because they are not yet the object of intensive online promotion efforts and/or because these subsectors' companies haven't joined forces yet. The results of this research confirm that, although it would be in the interest of Portugal to invest in this niche market, the country continues to lag behind when it comes down to bet on local variants of worldwide health and wellness trends.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this pilot study offer researchers and entrepreneurs the opportunity to get acquainted with these smooth market changes. The first might want to fix parameters to monitor none traditional health and wellness tourism units in Portugal from now on in a more rigorous way, while the latter might feel more confident to invest in them.

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