

## ROMANIAN SPA TOURISM: GROWTH, TOURISM PATTERNS, PERSPECTIVES

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### Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to identify the profile of the consumer who chooses as a holiday destination the spa resorts in Romania. This research relates to the opinion of young consumers regarding Romanian spa tourism, travel preferences and habits based on a field survey sustained by questionnaires. The results obtained have important implications, allowing the stakeholders to understand the profile of tourists visiting spa resorts for a better adaptation of spa tourism products.*

*Key words:* Romania, spa tourism, consumers' profile, survey

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered an important growth engine of the economy, with significant impact on other related activities (agriculture and forestry, food industry, chemical industry, textile industry, construction etc.), a factor of development, with contribution to economic growth, bringing benefits to local communities [16], [13]. Over the years, the expansion of tourism activities has stimulated the development of infrastructure and public services [11]. Tourism is facing a shortage of labour force, with an important share of employment in the informal sector, low wages, excessively long working hours, lack of social protection and gender-based discrimination [11].

Rural areas are vulnerable and in need for alternative development solutions, including tourism, especially local resources that may be exploited. Tourism can contribute to the development of rural areas and communities, stimulating the creation of jobs and improving the local economic situation.

Tourism sustains rural development, and it represents a driving force in rural regions, supporting also the local culture, by encouraging restoration of historic sites, and it may contribute to environmental conservation [13], [9], [20], [2].

In various countries, the share of rural tourism is local development is important. Thus, in Serbia and Slovenia, the development of rural areas is stimulated by rural tourism competitiveness [19]. In Albania, rural tourism has a positive impact on the rural areas' development, and contributes to the creation of jobs, and creates new business opportunities [15]. Rural tourism in Cyprus generates strong backward linkages with other sectors related to output generation, with effects on the diversification of economic activities [7]. In Romanian rural areas, tourism created employment and income opportunities [10].

Rural areas are endowed with various natural resources: climate, forestry, fauna, mountains, hills, but also different therapeutic factors such as climate, spring water, mud, etc.

Various countries have reoriented to the development of spa, wellness, and health tourism. In Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, health tourism has a wider contribution to the national and international tourism flows [4], [8], [3], [18]. A similar situation is found in the Czech Republic, and also in Slovakia – countries with diverse spa facilities [17], [12]. Spa tourism sustains the local economic development, underlying the resource richness of those regions [5]. Spa tourism contributes to social development and helps health promotion and both disease prevention and treatment of illnesses. Spas destinations are focused on offers targeted to improve the well-being of people, using natural factors [6], [14]. Spa tourism may be promoted by using various social programs and integrated with other tourism types (wellness, cultural, sports), improving the international tourism market [1], [14].

Since ancient times, Romania was endowed with various mineral resources that sustained the development of spa and wellness tourism, used for healing purposes, mainly: mineral waters, thermal waters, therapeutic lakes, therapeutic mud, therapeutic gases, salt mines, and salt water. The therapies practiced in Romanian spa resorts include hydrotherapy, thalassotherapy, mud treatment, internal treatments with mineral waters, speleotherapy, aerosols, sand therapy, massage, etc.

Romania has impressive mineral water resources; the latest recorded hydrological research has highlighted over 2,500 springs and water wells, which address a wide spectrum of diseases. The quality of mineral waters is like the most important sources in Europe.

Various natural resources are in rural areas. Some of them have started to be used successfully in various spa resorts, but others have not yet been exploited for tourism purposes, due to the lack of investments and development projects.

The geothermal and thermo-mineral waters of Romania are used in external treatment and are recommended in numerous medical conditions, in resorts such as Băile Herculane, Felix, 1 Mai, Moneasa, Geoagiu Băi, Călan, and Călimănești. Various therapeutic (salty)

lakes are interesting destinations for tourists: Techirghiol, Amara, Lacul Sărat, Balta Albă, Ursu, and the lake complex from Ocna Sibiului.

The therapeutic mud used for curative purposes through external treatments, and mud baths, is found in resorts such as Techirghiol, Bazna, Sovata, Amara, Ocna Sibiului, Vatra Dornei, Ocnele Mari, and Govora.

Therapeutic gases are used in the treatment of peripheral circulatory disorders, high blood pressure, nervous system disorders or rheumatic diseases. Romania is one of the few European countries endowed with important therapeutic gas resources, in resorts such as Tușnad, Covasna, Balványos, and Borsec.

The speleotherapy is practiced in the therapeutic salt mines, Romania having several underground spaces with special renowned facilities (Praid, Târgu Ocna, Ocnele Mari, Cacica, Slănic Prahova, and Turda), where the salt mine climate is used to treat respiratory diseases.

The accommodation capacity in spa resorts is concentrated mainly in Băile Herculane, Băile Felix, Techirghiol, Mangalia, Călimănești - Căciulata, Sovata, Borsec, Covasna, and Vatra Dornei. Most of the resorts are in a special natural setting (mountains and secular forests) that offers the possibility to practice outdoor activities.

The capacity of accommodation of spa resorts decreased in 1993-2019 period, due to several problems related to: the long period of privatization, the degradation of the existing tourism capacity, etc. Still, an increasing trend of the bed-places number registered after 2014, with the emergence and development of new accommodation facilities (many Bed & Breakfast built with European structural funds), and with the renovation and the rehabilitation of the existing hotels. The accommodation capacity in the spa resorts represents about 10% of the total number of bed-places in Romania.

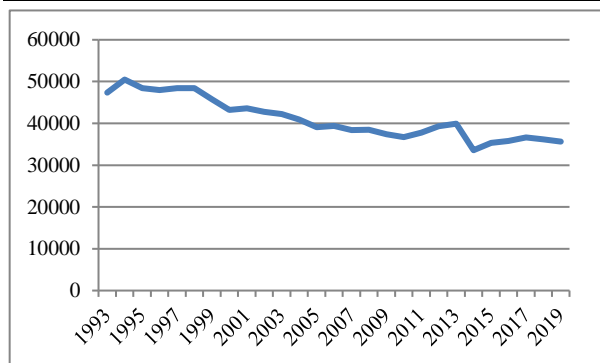


Fig. 1. Accommodation capacity in Romanian spa resorts (no. of bed-places), 1993 – 2019 period  
 Source: The National Institute of Statistics, Romania.

Although the number of tourists in Romanian spa resorts registered an oscillating evolution, it was mainly a positive trend. This evolution is remarkable, especially after 2014, with a growth rate of about 36%. The number of tourists exceeded 1 million persons in 2018. Still, the tourism flows are mainly domestic; the percentage of foreign tourists is around 5% or even lower.

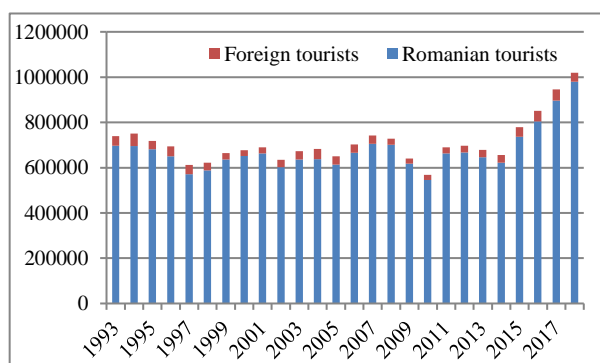


Fig. 2. Tourist flows in Romanian spa resorts, 1993-2018 period  
 Source: The National Institute of Statistics, Romania.

The occupancy rate in Romanian spa resorts was 44% in 2018, compared with 32% at the national level; the average length of stay is higher and the seasonality specific to this type of tourism is smaller. This rate is superior to other tourism destinations, because of the subsidization of this sector by the Romanian Government, offering treatment vouchers through the Health Insurance House and holiday vouchers for the public sector employees. Despite this growth, spa tourism has only 7.8% of all arrivals and 15% of total overnight stays registered in Romania, a

modest contribution, considering the presence of important natural resources.

The spa resorts are highly dependent on spa tickets. Thus, it is important to attract other categories of tourists in these resorts, such as young tourists, by diversifying the tourism products, including wellness services.

The health tourism in Romania involves the collaboration of several public bodies: the Ministry of Tourism - that elaborated the Masterplan for the development of the spa tourism, the Ministry of Health - that evaluates and certifies the spa treatment infrastructure, the Ministry of Labour - that grants vouchers for the spa tourism, the National Agency of Mineral Resources, etc. References to Spa tourism can be found in the Master plan for Tourism Development in Romania 2007-2026, elaborated by the Ministry of Tourism.

The Romanian Government issued the Ordinance 114/2018, which supports the spa resorts investments, through a public program. This document is in line with tourism development directions from the Governance Program. The draft decision of the Romanian Government from August 2019, regarding the approval of the Strategy for the spa tourism development, contains the objectives of this activity, for both medical and wellness tourism.

In the recent years, spa tourism clusters were developed, and included networks of stakeholders "(i.e. central and local public authorities, treatment bases, hospitals, clinics, physicians, universities of medicine and pharmacy, research institutes in the medical field and balneology, research institutes in tourism, tour operators, hotels, restaurants, equipment and devices suppliers, economic operators, and other organizations). They support and promote the members of the cluster and the Romanian spa tourism. The clusters adopt and promote high standards of ethical and professional medical care, identify attractions, define tourism products, initiate scientific research, facilitate a dialogue between the public and private areas, academics and specialists in healthcare, and develop integrated management and services oriented to tourists/patients" as mentioned by the European Parliament.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The **purpose of the research** is to identify the profile of the consumer who chooses as a holiday destination the spa resorts in Romania. This research relates to the opinion of young consumers regarding Romanian spa tourism, travel preferences, and habits.

The main challenge of the present research is to identify how attractive are Romanian spa tourism destinations among young people.

Apart from demographic data, in the analysis of the user requirements, it is also important to have information on tourism and travelling characteristics such as: location, length of holidays, main reason for journey, planning of holidays, organization of holidays, type of journey, sources of information, travel partner, average daily budget spent, favourite activities in a spa resort, and the main criteria for selecting a spa resort.

Consequently, **the objectives of the current research** were the following:

- O1. Estimation of the average length of stay and frequency of travel in the spa resorts.
- O2. Establishing the motivations for choosing a spa destination.
- O3. The identification of the favourite activities to be carried out during the holiday in the spa resorts.
- O4. Establishing the main criteria used in choosing spa tourist destinations.
- O5. Determining the sources of information used in choosing a spa resort as a holiday destination.

**The hypotheses** of the research are the following:

- H1. A significant percentage of respondents are interested in travelling to Romania.
- H2. Individuals do not want to travel alone during the holiday.
- H3. The main reasons to travel to spa resorts are resting, relaxation, treatment procedures, and health improvement.
- H4. The preferable activities during spa holidays are related to nature, culture, and relaxation.
- H5. The main criteria used to select a spa destination are: recommendations, attractiveness, and price.
- H6. The main source of information used to

identify the travel destination is the Internet.

**Research coordinates.** The research is quantitative (in-depth, conclusive, assuming that the questionnaire is given to a large number of people; the data are accurate and statistically analysed). The research tool was the questionnaire.

**Questionnaire.** The information was collected through a questionnaire, consisting of 18 questions. The questionnaire was developed with the help of the online survey service; dichotomous closed questions and semantic questions on a scale were used, to determine the priority order given; also, questions with only one possible answer and identification questions were used.

The survey took place online and offline from March to April 2019. The data collection period was three weeks.

**Sample.** Considering that the scope of the research was to investigate the perceptions of young people about Romanian spa tourism, the sample was selected in order to include a significant number of young people. The distribution of the sample by age groups was: 18-35 years (42.5%), 36-55 years (30%), and over 55 year (27.5%).

A number of 93 questionnaires have been collected, and 80 (86%) were validated. For the validated questionnaires, in 70% of the cases, the respondents were women, and 30% were men, respectively. The results of the survey emphasized a gender imbalance of the sample, given that a majority of women (68.75%), double than the men respondents (31.25%), filled in the questionnaire.

In terms of place of residence, most of the respondents declared that they live in Bucharest (45%), followed by Brăila (3.75%), Arad, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Pitești, Slatina, Slobozia, Târgu Ocna, and Timișoara (2.50%), respectively.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, a filter question was introduced, to identify whether the subject is able to provide the type of information desired (travel visits in a Romanian spa resort, in the last five years).

Questions on the place of residence, gender, age, and education provide information on characteristics likely to influence demographic and health behaviour.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The large majority of respondents (74.2%) travelled in a Romanian spa resort **in the last five years**.

Travelling companion' preferences indicated that most respondents prefer trips along with husband/wife/partner (38.75%). People also travel with friends (32.50%), their relatives (21.25%), and only 7.50% are interested in spending their holiday alone.

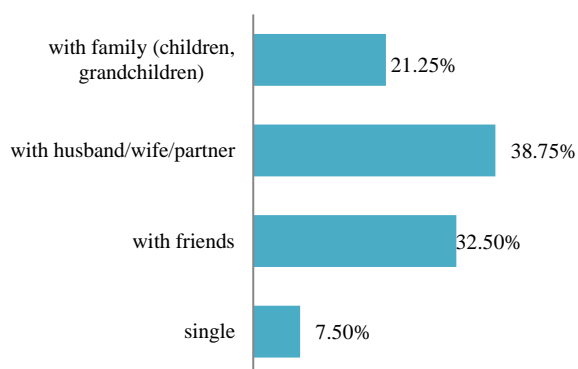


Fig. 3. Travel companions  
 Source: own calculations.

The respondents indicated in a large proportion (82.5%) that Romania is their favourite destination, and 17.50% declared they prefer to spend their holiday abroad.

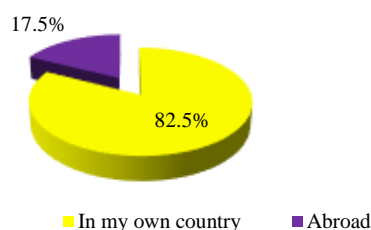


Fig. 4. Holiday destination  
 Source: own calculations.

The main reasons of the journey mentioned were rest and relaxation (76.25%), culture (60%), health and prevention (35%), leisure (27.5%), and visiting family and friends (13.75%). Religious reasons (1.25%) and other reasons (1.25%) are both not very common.

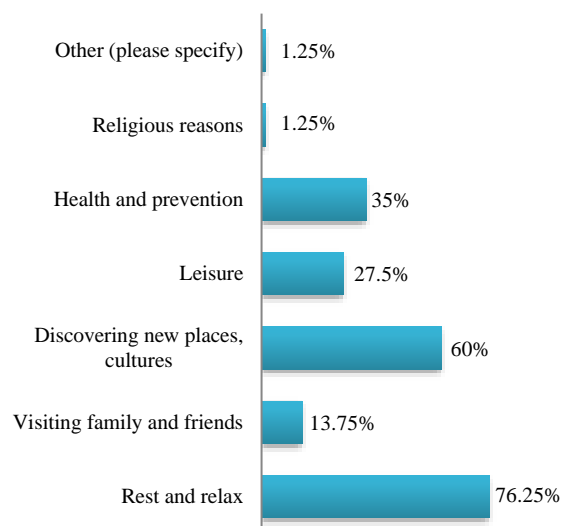


Fig. 5. Motivation for travel  
 Source: own calculations.

The average length of stay of the respondents in spa destinations were between 4 and 7 overnights (40%), 1-3 overnights (32.5%), 8-13 overnights (16.25%), 2-3 weeks (10%), and a holiday of more than 3 weeks is rather uncommon (1.25%).

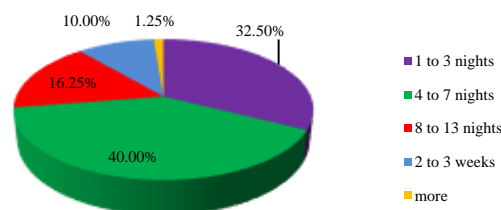


Fig. 6. The average length of stay  
 Source: own calculations.

Participants were asked to state how often they visited a spa resort. Responses varied from 47.50% going once every few years, 31.25% going once every year, and 21.25% going on a spa resort more than once a year.

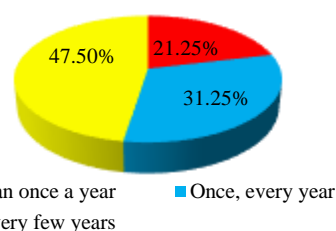


Fig.7. Holiday frequency  
 Source: own calculations.

Most of the respondents mentioned that the main reason for visiting a spa resort is relaxation (36.6%). The other reasons mentioned are rest (16.9%), treatment (15.5%), and health improvement (14.1%), followed by curiosity and nosiness (2.8% each). The other reasons (discover new places, fresh air, recreation, leisure, visiting friends, and walk) have an insignificant share (1.4%).

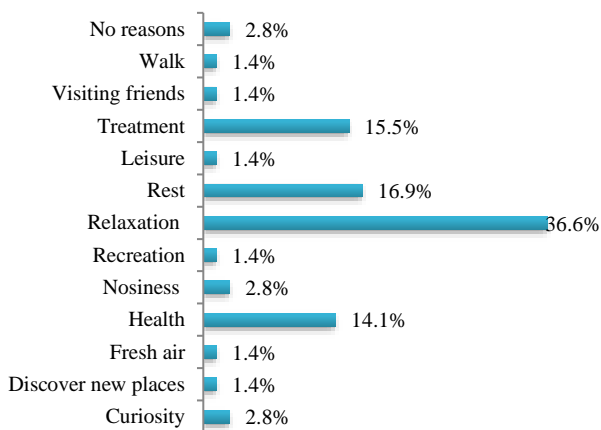


Fig. 8. Motivation to visit a spa resort  
 Source: own calculations.

The activities preferred by respondents to get involved during their holiday were relaxation in nature (66.25%), visiting new places and cultural objectives (52.5%), spa treatments (42.5%), and swimming and beach (41.25%).

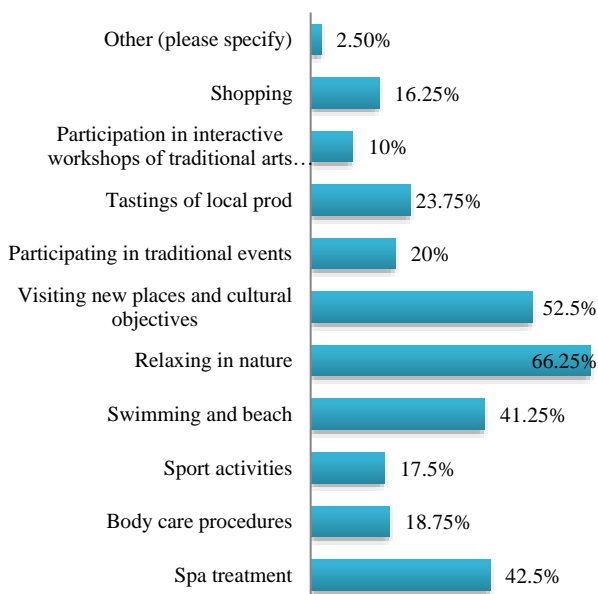


Fig. 9. Favourite activities  
 Source: own calculations.

Local activities are appreciated, such as tastings the local products (23.75%), participating in traditional events (20%) and participation in interactive workshops of traditional arts and crafts (10%). Last, it seems that spa visitors prefer cultural activities, rather than sports activities (17.5%) and shopping (16.25%).

The criteria mentioned by respondents when to choose a spa resort were the doctor recommendation (4.3), the attractiveness of the area (5.2), the price (4.9), recommendation from friends (3.8), and content of the tour package (3.8).

Table 1. Main criteria influencing decisions

Main criteria	Score
The doctor's recommendation	4.3
The price	4.9
The attractiveness of the area where the tourist destination is located	5.2
The recommendations from friends	3.8
The content of the tour package	3.8
The accessibility	3.2
Other activities that can be carried out in the resort	2.8

Note: 1 - most important, 7 - least important  
 Source: own calculations.

A high majority of respondents (85%) chose to organize their holidays individually, compared to only 8.75% who rely on a profile organization, like Health Insurance House. Travel agencies are the organizers of holidays for 11.25% of the respondents.

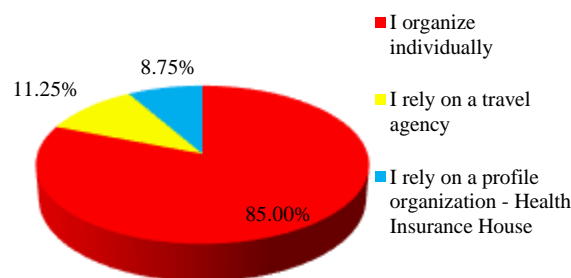


Fig. 10. Travel planning  
 Source: own calculations.

The respondents used multiple information sources in their attempt to select their holiday destination. The Internet is the main source of information when planning a holiday,

mentioned by 76.25% of the respondents. Next in the list was the information provided by relatives and friends (50%), followed by social media (31.25%), and the own doctor (23.75%). Travel agency, guidebooks, and specialized magazines are the least used sources of information (17.50%) when deciding about a holiday destination.

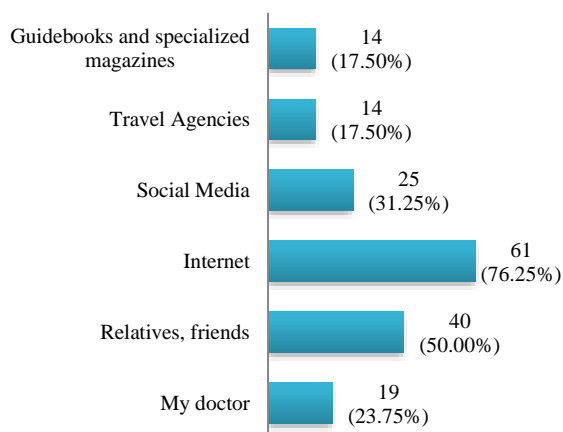


Fig. 11. Sources of information  
 Source: own calculations.

The daily budget available is less than 50 euro per day for most of the respondents (51.25%); the budget is between 51 euro and 100 euro per day for 38.75% of the respondents, not considering the transport tickets to the destination. A low percentage (2.5%) belongs to a budget between 101-300 euro per day.

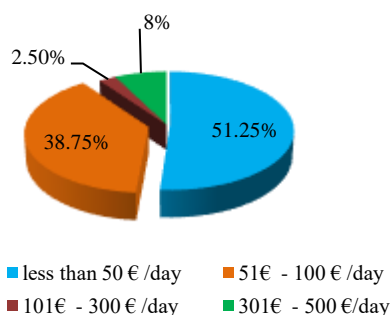


Fig. 12. Holiday's budget  
 Source: own calculations.

The distribution of respondents considering the educational level indicated that more than half of the respondents (57.50%) have higher education, followed by 27.50% of respondents with high school degrees; only 15% of them

reported to have graduated post-university studies.

An overwhelming percentage of respondents have as a first-choice spending holidays in Romania, and just 17.50% of the respondents declared their preference for spending holidays abroad. Most people prefer travelling with a partner: husband/wife/partner (38.75%), or friends (32.50%). The usual length of holidays is predominately for less than one week.

Regarding the reasons for the journey, resting and relaxation are the main reason to travel, followed by culture, and treatment and health improvement. The top five most popular spa resorts for respondents are Băile Herculane, Călimanești - Căciulata, Covasna, Eforie Nord, and Sovata.

The respondents prefer to organize by themselves the holidays and thus, the Internet is the main source of information when choosing a holiday destination, followed by relatives and friends, and social media.

During their holidays, the activities that have been considered the most important are relaxing in nature, visiting new places and cultural objectives, and spa treatments. Together with the great appreciation for nature, other important activities during holidays mentioned by respondents are spending time in local villages, enjoying local activities, meeting people and interact with them, and activities developed to understand local lifestyles (tasting local products, participation to traditional events, and getting involved in interactive traditional arts and crafts workshops).

Regarding the importance of the main criteria that influence respondents' decision when choosing a spa resort, the doctor's recommendation ranks first as an attribute when choosing a spa resort, followed by the attractiveness of the area, and the price.

## CONCLUSIONS

The spa resorts have an outdated infrastructure and the products are not yet adapted to the international trends and demands of the tourists, being oriented towards the curative side rather than the prevention/wellness side. The Romanian spa destinations are dependent

on the government grants, throughout treatment vouchers and social insurance system.

Romanian spa resorts failed to invest in the renovation of the infrastructure and the creation of new spa products. Therefore, a huge need for the modernization of the spa and wellness treatments, and the associated infrastructures, exists in several spa destinations. On the other hand, the lack of transport infrastructures and utilities in some resorts makes difficult to invest in new accommodation or treatment /spa therapies.

It is necessary to create a competitive and modern spa-product, based on the discovery of local specificity, the thermal and mineral waters, and the therapies, along with the traditional food and the pure natural environment, where the well-being and relaxation in nature represent the main benefits for tourists.

Romanian spa resorts should enhance and use the local landscape, to promote the location of the resort in a pure, untouched area, while remaining in the area of advantageous prices at European level.

An important challenge for owners and staff in spa treatment facilities is to change the paradigm, from a reactive to a more proactive approach, meaning to focus more on the prevention side, and not on the curative side.

Considering the current profile of tourists visiting Romanian spa resort, especially elderly people who came for curative treatment, the marketing approach needs to be changed. Thus, new target groups need to be tackled, from the younger generation, aged 18 - 25 and 26 to 35 years.

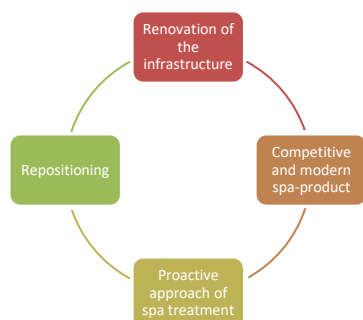


Fig. 13. Recommendation for spa destinations  
Source: own calculations.

Consequently, the repositioning of tour operators towards promoting the wellness and prevention potential of spa destinations is important, in a sector dominated by social tourism, which entails risks of a too rapid and strong decrease of revenue.

The most important difficulties that the local public authorities face in accessing the dedicated European funds are the poor administrative capacity, few resources for co-financing, and the unclear situation of the ownership of the spa infrastructure. Moreover, the staff of the wellness & spa field needs better training, and the spa treatment centres require trained medical staff. Also, given the extremely unbalanced seasonality, with relatively high inflows of tourists only for 2-3 months in the summer period, the spa destinations have to adopt measures to attenuate the seasonality and to attract a larger number of tourists throughout the entire year.

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