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The High Potential of Health and Beauty Tourism in Bulgaria

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THE HIGH POTENTIAL OF HEALTH AND BEAUTY TOURISM IN BULGARIA

I. Introduction

The Bulgarian tourism industry has been booming over the last five years and is already attracting more than 2 million foreign tourists per annum. In 2004 there has been an increase of over 40 % and Bulgaria has received about 4.5 million foreign tourists. Initially, foreign tourists were primarily attracted to the Bulgarian sea resorts, but as they got to discover the country in more detail, an increasing number of them became fascinated with the Bulgarian health and beauty tourism opportunities. The combination of highly trained personnel, long-standing traditions in the sector, rich natural resources, and clean environment is bound to lure foreign tourists.

Bulgaria is a small country, but it can offer wonderful conditions for summer and winter vacations. Its beautiful seaside, high mountains and old history can attract the attention of foreigners, who would like to have the pleasure to discover the country. In the past few years there is a great increase of winter tourists in the fast developing mountain resorts like Bansko, Pamporovo and Borovetz. An example of the tourist potential of the country is that Bulgaria is the only European country besides Germany where the world hotel chain Kempinski manages three hotels – one at the capital, one at the seaside and one at the mountains.

The problem is that most of these summer and winter resorts are full only for the season, which means for a period of three to four months. During the remaining period, the hotels stays largely unutilized. In order to develop the tourism product, there are good conditions for cultural and country tourism, for health, beauty and spa tourism. Bulgarian tourist companies are in search of new services to attract full year foreign tourists, like for example through the so-called wine tourism, which offers the possibility to visit different wine caves and taste the high quality of Bulgarian wines.

But as specialists say, spa and wellness services have become more and more the business card that sells the hotel.

II. Opportunities for health and beauty tourism

Speaking about health and beauty tourism, we have to determine three groups – illness, wellness and spa. The first one is for people with different health problems. Here Bulgaria can offer now the services of many private clinics and balneology centres. Even under communism, an Institute for the Cure of Foreign Citizens was created at the Medical Academy, which attracted mainly patients from neighbouring countries and North Africa. This institute offered low prices, excellent conditions and the best Bulgarian specialists and professors, and the services ranged from examinations to surgery. But regardless of the good financial results, shortly after the fall of communism the Institute was closed.

With the expansion of private initiative, many private clinics were created, some of them very competitive in order to attract foreign patients, which show a big interest mainly in plastic and aesthetic surgery and procedures. Highly qualified personnel, good conditions and low prices are again the main assets of Bulgarian health services. But the development of the health illness tourism is slowed down by the lack of governmental level agreements with the countries, whose citizens are cured in Bulgaria for the use of their pension and health funds to reimburse these services. Similar problems exist concerning the opportunities of balneology centres.

Bulgaria is one of the richest countries in Europe in mineral sources. There are about 1600 natural mineral sites all over the country. The quality and components of some waters are similar to waters in the most famous world balneology resorts. Bulgaria has strong traditions in using curative mineral waters - they were used in old Thracia, and under the Roman Empire here were constructed many mineral baths. Now the riches of mineral waters serve as the best basis for the development of high quality wellness, beauty and spa tourism.

As recently, wellness has become a life style, there are big opportunities to attract foreign tourists. "Give health to healthy people" is the philosophy of wellness and spa tourism. But of all the 100 centres offering spa beauty and wellness services only about 50 all over Bulgaria are competitive. They are situated mostly at the seaside, where foreign tourists can combine the beach and sunshine, with wellness and beauty procedures all around the year. But as shown in "best practices" section recently there are also examples in some other balneology centres in the country.

III. Best practices

One of the most attractive places for spa and beauty tourism now is Hotel "Dvoretza" (The Palace) in the town of Velingrad, situated in the Rhodope Mountain in South Bulgaria. Velingrad is well known all over Bulgaria for the magic quality of its mineral waters, but under communism it was a resort, reserved mostly for state employees and workers. There are about 80 mineral springs with temperature from 26 to 95 Celsius and their total debit is 14.8 million litres daily. By contrast – the debit of mineral water in Karlovy Vary is 2 million litres, and in Baden-Baden 1 million.

In the past few years there has been impressive reconstruction of old buildings and construction of new spa hotels in order to attract foreign tourists. The 5-star hotel "Dvoretza" was primary a trade union station, build under communism. Purchased from the privatization by a private company, it was totally renovated and opened its door as a 5-star hotel two years ago. Just to mention, one of its owners and the general manager as well are women. It quickly became famous for its mineral outdoor and indoor swimming pools and the spa centre, offering more than 100 treatments and prophylactic procedures for wellness and beauty, like thalasso therapy, pearl, whirlpool and contrast bath with mineral water, herbs, lye or medical preparations, manual and underwater massage with bio-products and lotions, and aromatherapy. Dvoretza is the first hotel in Bulgaria offering classical ayurveda anti-stress therapy and many cosmetic and slimming procedures. It is attracting more and more foreign tourists and the interest is increasing - especially from Greece, followed by Great Britain, Israel and Germany.

IV. Key Risks

Maybe the greatest problem of the whole Bulgarian tourist industry is the lack of an appropriate state policy for the promotion of Bulgaria as a tourist country abroad. As many international specialists had said, there are three crucial things to assure the success – marketing, marketing and marketing. Often, advertising is only partial, made by the tourist companies or hotels themselves, and in many cases in the old-fashioned manner of "mouth to mouth".

Other problems especially for health, spa and beauty tourism are the bad infrastructure, bad communications, lack of highly qualified personnel that is fluent in foreign languages. Situated mostly in small towns and villages near the mineral springs and far away from airports, the spa and balneology centres are difficult to attend via bad and damaged roads.

V. Key Opportunities

In 2004 three tourist companies, the city of Varna, an international business group and a big insurance company presented a memorandum to the Bulgarian government asking to declare the health tourism in its three variations – illness, wellness and spa as a leading priority for the country. In this memorandum they insisted for negotiations with the institutions of the European Union and the countries members in order to regulate the use of financial resources from their national pension and health funds for health tourism of their citizens in Bulgarian medical and balneology centres. They also proposed to the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Economy the creation of a special department for health tourism in order to regulate the development of health tourism according to the standards of the European Union. In the document, they also show the

need of elaboration of state norms and standards for the health tourism. Another request is to promote Bulgarian health tourism abroad and to assist Bulgarian companies specialized in health tourism in being represented at international fairs and other fora.

This year for the first time in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria will organize an international fair for spa and wellness tourism from 19 to 22 October. The organizer is the Bulgarian Association for Spa and Wellness Tourism with the assistance of the International Fair Plovdiv and Bulgaria Air. The main goal of this fair is the promotion of spa and wellness concept of life and the possibilities of Bulgaria among Bulgarian and foreign tourist companies.