

The Southern Great Plain Region, as wellness destination from the visitors' perspective

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Hungary is not rich in natural resources but thermal waters are a notable exception. A whole industry is built upon these including hotels offering wellness services. The economic strength of these hotels is built on healthcare tourism. We present the situation of Hungary's Southern Great Plain Region concerning wellness services

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1 Introduction

Wellness has grown to become a popular, even key concept in our days. Wellness is the harmony of body and spirit and it is about the external beauty combined with internal beauty and balance (Töröcsik, 2004). The concept of wellness in the international literature refers to something even more complex than this: a special

state of the human welfare comprising the following factors: sense of responsibility, healthy eating, body fitness and spiritual activity (Dunn, 1961). From the point of view of health and wellness we can define two distinct market segments. The clients of the first segment look for a complete welfare of the body and soul through complex services, they participate in wellness programs in their spare time. The demands of this target group can be met primarily by the third sector enterprises. The clients of the second wish to achieve the complete welfare of the body and soul in their everyday lives. They are eager to find those foods and lifestyles which help them to integrate wellness in their everyday routine. Now, that good health and wellness are fashionable and have become status symbols the clients being actively aware of health issues have also changed. From the development of a domestic market perspective it is an extremely important market research task to be familiar with the current trends.

In such a dynamically developing market it is highly important to follow the developments in the clients' potential wishes and desires. A wellness service provider wishing to meet these demands needs studies that identify key client expectations, as well as the preferences of potential, future clients.

Last, but not least, the development of wellness services presents an opportunity for towns and regions to attract more visitors, who spend more guest nights and use additional services. Given the current economic situation this aspect may give priority to the development of wellness services in urban development programs (Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2007). The wellness services may also provide the local government with extra income in the form of local taxes and also by providing local enterprises with potential consumers. This is of crucial importance when the debt of local governments has reached critical levels threatening with a crack down in the near future (Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2008, Kovács, 2011).

2 Materials and methods

This study presents the results of a qualitative and a quantitative research. The aim of the first, explorative phase was to set the directions and establish the hypothesis for the subsequent, quantitative research.

The qualitative survey was carried out through individual in-depth interviews with a semi-structured guide including the following topics:

- Factors of holiday type and destination selection,
- Perceptions on wellness,
- Selection criteria for wellness services,
- Characteristics of the preferred and not preferred wellness services.

The survey was taken in April 2010 and a total of 30 questionnaires were assessed by traditional content analysis method.

During the quantitative survey, pretested, standardized questionnaires were applied including the following topics:

- participating in wellness tourism program; analysis of the factors of wellness service selection,
- consumer perceptions of the Southern Great Plain as wellness holiday destination,
- personal questions.

The survey was conducted through personal interviews. In total 120 complete questionnaires have been returned. We have evaluated these using SPSS 19.0.

The statistical sampling was not representative therefore the results cannot be generalized to the whole population. We nevertheless consider our survey – according to its purpose – a good starting point for the preparation of the next research concept.

3 Results

3.1 The results of the qualitative study

On the whole, we conclude that the preference-system on the choice of holiday destination is dominated by service quality elements and price, however the resort's reputation and the local recreational, and cultural facilities are equally important in the selection of a particular service provider.

The interviews also revealed that the structure of the preference system fundamentally depends on the season of the holiday (winter or summer holiday).

The interviewees have, without exception, expressed a preference for a waterside location in the summer and to have ample opportunities for leisure activities.

The interviews confirm the idea that the service users regard wellness services as experience goods and rely primarily on the opinions, experiences of their friends, acquaintances and other clients prior to making decisions to reduce risk.

The prospective client abounds in opportunities to do so as there are more and more clients actively sharing their opinions and experiences with others. The internet is the excellent tool for achieving this, allowing the message to reach millions of people within a short period of time without any restrictions.

The service provider's duties must therefore include – among the prioritised marketing aspects – customer retention and the evaluation of customer feedback. Positive word-of-mouth advertising matches or even exceeds the efficiency of a well-planned traditional marketing communications campaign.

Note that location is among the top spontaneously mentioned factors, regardless of the service providers. The selection of the holiday destination is also influenced by the infrastructure, accessibility (public transport, highways), the local geography, opportunities to discover the nature, the cultural programs and the entertainment facilities.

3.2 Associations with wellness

In the next part of the interview the interviewees were requested to give ideas they associate with wellness. We found only positive attitudes and no negative opinions or bad experiences were voiced at all.

Based on the opinions of the interviewees the type of services of wellness service supply were analysed separately. Following the results of the association it was not surprising to see some kind of thermal water (hot water, thermal water) mentioned first among the preferences, followed by “sauna” and “massage”. Many emphasised that the “wellness feeling” includes an attractive and pleasant surroundings.

The interviewees are well informed which is proven by the fact that everybody could name at least one city or town where wellness services are offered. The most mentioned towns and villages were Hajdúszoboszló, Hévíz, Bükkfürdő, Göd, Lillafüred, Balaton, Egerszalók, Tapolca, Zalakaros, Sopron, Esztergom, Visegrád Szeged.

The interviewees shared similar views on foreign wellness service providers. The majority of respondents believe that the services in Hungary are catching up with those in Western Europe. In many cases the same quality services are provided to the guests in Hungary but the hotels abroad are still some way ahead. Particularly the use of supplementary services gives them a competitive edge: they offer much more diverse and varied opportunities for leisurely activities and offer more professional, better organised programmes.

3.3 Quantitative research results

3.3.1 Factors of selection of the wellness service

We study the importance of various factors when selecting a holiday destination. The most preferred elements have been the sport facilities, relaxing surroundings, thermal baths, spas, the massage and sauna services. (Table 1).

All this is in line with the results of our qualitative research where, among the spontaneous associations related to wellness, the most frequently mentioned expressions have been sauna, massage, swimming pool and tranquility.

Factors	Year 2010		Year 2009	
	mean	deviation	mean	deviation
Holiday resort in Hungary	2,66	1,08	3,24	1,37
Nature	2,98	0,90	4,06	1,03
Holiday resort abroad	1,98	0,90	2,33	1,19
Thermal bath at or near location	3,07	1,03	3,21	1,27
Spa at or near location	3,07	1,10	3,32	1,31
Cultural programs at location	2,98	0,87	3,77	1,11
Tranquil area	3,32	0,81	4,23	0,94
Beauty services at the hotel	2,10	1,04	3,2	1,3
Sporting facilities in the hotel	3,34	0,82	3,94	1,14
Babysitting available in the hotel	1,73	1,20	3,18	1,52
Sauna in the hotel	3,10	1,29	4,14	1,1
Massage in the hotel	3,05	0,99	4,05	1,22
Medical supervision, advice in the hotel	2,44	1,07	4,13	1,12
Presentations about healthy lifestyle available in the hotel	1,93	1,00	2,25	1,21

Table 1.:

The importance of the factors considered when selecting the holiday resort (value=average, where 1= not important at all, 5= extremely important)

Source: own research, 2010. N= 120; 2009. N= 195

3.3.2 The Southern Great Plain in view of the wellness services from the clients' perspective

For a further analysis, the interviewees have been requested to evaluate the following statements. Based upon these assessments, the most common characteristics are: “accommodation at favourable price”, “family-friendly environment”, “amiable, hospitable residents” (Figure 1.).

Note, however that none of the statements scored an average higher 3.00 which on a 0.0-4.0 scale (where 4= completely typical) shows that interviewees regarded none of the characteristics a speciality of the South Plain region. Furthermore, the high standard deviation value also proves that the interviewees did not have a homogenous opinion suggesting the lack of unified, well positioned, characteristic, positive image.

From the regional tourism point of view the result is especially negative, given that there is a lot to be improved in the wellness services of the region- according to our respondents. The high quality wellness hotels are the least typical in the region but the lively cultural life or the entertainment facilities are also not among the main attractions.

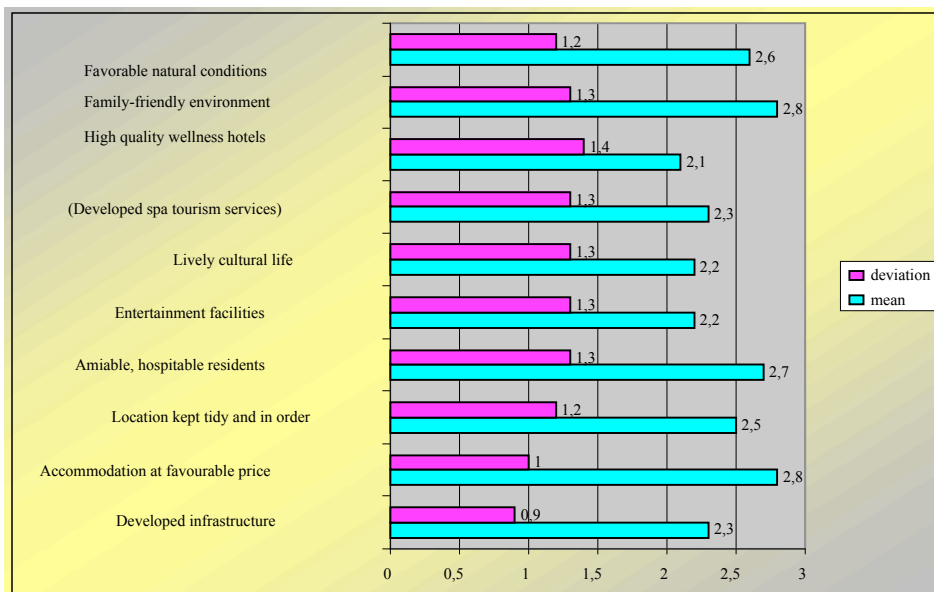


Figure 1.:
 The characteristics of the South Plain region
 Source: own research, 2010. N= 120

In this study our special interest is in the Southern Great Plain as wellness destination. In light of this, a separate analysis was conducted on the number of wellness service providers (town or hotel) of the region that could be listed spontaneously by the interviewees. 30% of the respondents could identify the service providers by name; those mentioned the most were in order Gyula, Szeged, Tiszakécske. Others mentioned Békéscsaba, Gyoma, Kiskunmajsa.

We intended to learn how many of the interviewees already used wellness services in the region, where exactly in the region and how pleased they were with them.

Few of the interviewees (a mere 10%) have already participated in a wellness program of the Southern Great Plain region which is not astonishing in view of the results proving that the interviewees do not really regard this region as the destination for a wellness holiday.

Those already taking part in such wellness program mostly did so in Gyula, Szeged and Szarvas and the majority (86%) would gladly use these services again.

The result points to the fact that the wellness services of the South Plain region are of high quality, the reason of the low usage of these services is rather due to the lack of reputation and it cannot be associated with the low quality of the services. This is why in our opinion the region has to be repositioned, the marketing tools used for popularization reconsidered and the image of wellness revived.

4 Conclusions, proposals

Based on the results of our qualitative research it could be declared that the key components of the preference system on the choice of holiday resort included the quality and the price as well as the good reputation of the resort and the characteristics of the village or town (infrastructure, environmental and natural conditions).

The majority of the interviewees have positive associations about wellness and negative concepts were excluded from the answers. The interviewees are fully aware of the services related to wellness and also know the service providers, namely the regions, cities or towns that provide these services.

According to the interviewees, the quality of wellness services in Hungary is comparable to those of the foreign competition, Hungary is behind in additional services only.

We found that the key factors of wellness provider selection were sporting facilities, the tranquil vicinity, local thermal baths and spas, and the availability of massage and sauna services. Interviewees mostly use wellness services during the long weekends for 1-3 days and are willing to spend HUF 32.000 – 70.000 / person on average for a full week of wellness holiday.

The main advantages of the Southern Great Plain are the favorably priced hotels, the family-friendly environment and the amiable, hospitable residents to welcome the guests. The lively cultural life and the high-quality wellness services are not included among the advantages of the region.

The interviewees' views about the region are neither homogeneous nor uniformly positive. A well-chosen dynamic image, uniformed both in its content and format is necessary to build along with the regional marketing program with a strategic view in order to encourage the tourism services of the region.

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