

# BULGARIAN HEALTH TOURISM COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES OPPORTUNITY FOR FOREIGN INVESTORS

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## Abstract.

According to the Concept for the tourism regions in Bulgaria, seven out of nine tourism regions have an extended specialization in the field of health tourism, and for one of them health tourism is its main one. Based on that we can make the conclusion that health tourism is one of the leading specialized types of tourism in the country. Taking into account the current health and economic world situation, Bulgaria needs to aim sustainable tourism management, in particular in health tourism field. In the current global health crisis, priority for Bulgaria should be health tourism in its three subtypes - balneology, spa and wellness and medical tourism. **The purpose of the article** is to shed light on opportunities for local and foreign investments in the field of health tourism in Bulgaria. **The methodology of the research** is based on systematic and holistic approaches, and it covers: analysis and synthesis; induction and deduction; analogy; abstraction; comparative analysis; statistical and descriptive methods. Sustainable tourism management could include several measures related to the destination's external marketing, product policy, and other activities for encouraging investments, supporting the development of health tourism in the country and attracting international tourists. **The main results of the article** are related to the prove of the main thesis –attracting potential investors from all over the world based on identifying the potential of Bulgaria as a destination for health tourism and its competitive advantages. Bulgaria is a favourable country for investments in the health tourism field and in particular the investment processes could be directed in two main directions - in products and sites for health tourism, considering the specifics of each region and the level of development in the specialised superstructure.

**Keywords:** health tourism, investments, competitive advantages, marketing management, innovative approach

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, during the time of a global health crisis, priority for Bulgaria should be health tourism in its three subtypes - balneology, spa and wellness and medical tourism. Given the current situation, more than ever Bulgaria should focus on sustainable tourism management and in particular in the health tourism field. This could include several measures related to the destination's foreign marketing, product

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policy and other activities, such as investment promotion, consequently supporting the development of health tourism in the country and attracting international tourists. According to Basmadzheva, S. (2020) each type of health tourism meets the needs of consumers at different stages of achieving prosperity, namely: prevention; vitality recovery/recreation; treatment of problems and diseases; recovery after resolving a health problem; balance between body, mind, and spirit.

***The aim set in this article is to shed light on ways for encouraging local and foreign investors to invest in the health tourism field in Bulgaria.***

***The thesis concerns attracting potential local or foreign investors based on identifying the potential of Bulgaria as a health tourism destination, and the prioritization of the development for this type of tourism in respect of the national tourism policy, based on the Concept for tourism regions of Bulgaria where this type of tourism is a priority for seven of the nine tourism regions.***

The first basic argument in support of this thesis is the positive influence of some socio-political factors such as Bulgaria's membership in the EU, NATO and WTO, its membership in the Currency Board. Another factor is the competitive price for doing business in Bulgaria such as 10% corporate and private tax, 0% corporate tax in areas with high unemployment, competitive office rents and low utility prices. On a third place, the strategic geographical position and access to markets in European Union, Russia, Turkey / Middle East can be noted. And last but not least, the educated and skilled workforce with a competitive labor price, highly skilled and multilingual workforce in tourism for medium and high-level services in tourism sites. (Bulgarian investment agency)

**The subject of research** is the resource potential of Bulgaria as a health tourism destination in its three types (balneo, spa and wellness and medical), creating competitive advantages for investments and the regulatory structure. This will provide opportunities to the Destination Management Organizations (DMO) for implementation of adapted models for management of the tourism regions, based on the existing ones, realized by the Organizations for tourism region management in Bulgaria (OTRM).

Based on the Reuters' analysis report Bulgaria is among the countries that combine low prices of medical services with professional experience of medical staff and can become a preferred destination for so-called health tourists. It is a particularly suitable destination for health tourism, due to several **main factors**:

- o The country has excellent geographical, climatic and natural conditions.
- o There is a unique combination of sea, mountains, and mineral waters, which makes the country a suitable place for health strengthening all year round.
- o Traditions in balneology and balneotourism.
- o Renovated medical and rehabilitation centers and hotels.
- o Temperate climate with 4 seasons and significant influence of the Mediterranean.
- o Highly qualified specialists and experienced medical staff.
- o Relatively low price of medical services in Bulgaria according to European and world standards.
- o Well-developed network of private establishments for cosmetic surgery and dental clinics.

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## 2. Competitive advantages of Bulgaria as a health tourism destination based on its resources.

The availability of **natural resources** is of fundamental importance for the health tourism development in the country. Among the most valuable natural resources of Bulgaria are the diversity and abundance of:

- Hydrothermal mineral water;
- Healing mud;
- Sea;
- Healthy sea and mountain climate;
- Beautiful nature and picturesque landscapes;
- Over 1,600 springs, over 600 which are mineral, located mainly at the foot of the mountains;
- Dozens of lagoons and deposits of healing mud;
- Sources of peat with therapeutic effects.

**The hydromineral resources of Bulgaria** are especially numerous, diverse and often unique. During the last years the usable capacity of the mineral springs has increased to 4500 l / s or 389 million l / day (24 hours).

Other arguments in support of Bulgaria`s competitiveness in terms of investment in health tourism projects are:

- Bulgaria is second in Europe after Iceland and ahead of countries with proven traditions in balneology, in terms of existing, developed and registered (certified) mineral water resources.
- In Bulgaria, more than 600 mineral water sources have been discovered and studied, grouped in nearly 240 deposits, with 1,600 springs with a total flow rate of 4,900 l / s, but a small part of them are used for balneotherapy (only 0.4%).
- Temperature (10 ° C - 103 ° C) with proven healing properties
- In Bulgaria there are almost all types of mineral waters that are found in the world..

**The second main element** of the Bulgarian balneological resources is **the healing mud** called peloid. (Luga.bg, 2015) Four types of therapeutic muds can be found in Bulgaria: sea lagoon mud, peat and spring mud and bentonite clay. Between 700 and 1000 mineral springs are known, and the hundreds of destinations for active health tourism rank our country in the top 5 of the SPA destinations in Europe. The mineral springs in our lands have been known and valued for their healing properties since ancient times, when the Thracians built nymphs around them for hydrotherapy.

**The main advantage** of the Bulgarian spa destinations is their location in areas with extremely favorable **climate**. The combination of these natural resources with the modern hotel base of sea resorts such as Albena and mountain resorts such as Bansko and Velingrad, make Bulgaria an excellent destination for year-round spa treatment and recreation.

Bulgaria ranks first in Europe in terms of the availability and variety of mineral waters and spa resorts. It provides significant opportunities for recreation and tourism with its 102 resorts:

- 34 of national importance (five in the mountain and ten on the coast);
- 68 of local importance (spa, forest and coast).

Bulgaria has 58 balneo resorts, 55 climatic mountain resorts and 48 climatic sea resorts. In December 2019. competition held by the Ministry of Tourism determined which are the new Bulgarian Eden destinations (“Best European destinations”) under

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the project “Health and spa tourism GRO / SME / 18 / C / 065 - Bulgaria Sanus per Aquam”. (Economy.bg, 2019) Kostenets municipality is ranked first, followed by Samokov municipality (Belchin village), Banite municipality, Sapareva Banya municipality and Ardino municipality.

*From what has been deduced so far, we can conclude that Bulgaria has many competitive advantages as a health tourism destination in terms of its resources. In defense of the thesis, in addition to the health resources in the country, we could consider the other competitive advantages that Bulgaria has in the health tourism field, namely - traditions in health care, strategic geographical location and macroeconomic stability.*

### **3. Competitive advantages of Bulgaria as a health tourism destination based on good traditions in healthcare, strategic location, macroeconomic stability.**

The good traditions in healthcare in Bulgaria are related to the following characteristics:

- Experienced professionals (doctors, dentists, nurses, therapists, pharmacists, researchers) and internationally recognized doctors in various specialties such as heart disease, orthopedics, oncology, dentistry and others.
- Low prices of medical procedures.
- Established private health insurance funds.
- Possibility to build private medical centers for the use of the existing labor force, adequate legislation, production of medical materials, devices and pharmaceutical products. (Invest Bulgaria Agency, 2010)

**Health resorts and baths**, which are the result of traditional tourism development, and in particular health tourism in Bulgaria, are located all over the country. Product analysis of “Explica - Global Metrics” (2019) indicates that according to their natural healing resources, our health resorts can be divided into several main types:

- baths which are using healing mineral waters, peat and mud;
- climatic resorts based either on sea water and coastal healing climate, or on mountain healing climate (example - Sandanski, Velingrad);
- health resorts of mixed type, using various combinations of natural healing resources such as mineral water and healing climate or sea climate and healing peat or mud.

Bulgaria offers political stability and low costs for starting and developing small and medium-sized business. Bulgaria is strategically located and provides access to the following markets:

- Southeast Europe - a high potential market with a population of 122 million people.
- European Union - Bulgaria offers the lowest market access to 500 million people.
- Russia / CIS, Middle East and North Africa.

Bulgaria offers a combination of political and macroeconomic stability and many incentives to start a business:

- Stable parliamentary democracy - a member of the EU, NATO and the World Trade Organization.
- The Bulgarian currency is pegged to the euro under a currency board.

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- The lowest tax rates and some of the lowest labor costs in the EU, supported by specific incentives for investors in the country.

- EU funding - more than € 10 billion from EU funds over the next few years.

According to Eurostat (2018) Bulgaria is among the leading countries in the EU in terms of the number of medical practitioners and the number of dentists per 100,000 population:

- Bulgaria has 29,667 general practitioners in the country;

- 7,240 dentists work in modern dental practices in Bulgaria. Bulgarian dental medicine meets all world class criteria. (Eurostat, 2019)

- 46,332 Medical health care professionals are employed in the sector. (National Statistical Institute, 2018)

Opportunities for human resources development in the health tourism sector are conditioned by two factors: the tourism policy relying on health tourism as a priority and the traditions in education and training. We can point out the following examples:

- There are bilateral agreements for students and teachers exchange under the EU program for cooperation in university education SOCRATES / ERASMUS.

- Many medical practitioners specialize abroad.

- Health professionals are motivated to work in the private sector.

- Language learning is compulsory in medical schools.

- Medicine and tourism are considered desirable sectors for education and development.

- In Bulgaria, labor costs are among the lowest in Europe, which is the main reason for the competitive prices of medical services. (Invest Bulgaria Agency, 2010)

*Taking into account the analysis so far, we can conclude that Bulgaria is a favorable country for development and investment in the field of health tourism due to the richness of natural, anthropogenic and human resources in the field, as well as due to the presence of economic, political and geographical advantages. Finally, we should consider the competitive advantages of Bulgaria, specifically related to its tourism policy in specialized types of tourism and in particular in health tourism.*

#### **4. Competitive advantages of Bulgaria as a health tourism destination based on its health tourism development policies.**

The priorities in the tourism field are in line with the priorities set by the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The basic parameters of sustainable tourism, its implementation and management are applicable to all forms of tourism and all types of destinations, including mass tourism and various segments of tourism niches.

The present study fully corresponds to the “National Research Strategy” as it relates to tourism regions, the development of which has been identified as a priority and strategic for the country by the Ministry of Tourism. As the strategy aims to support the development of science in Bulgaria for its transformation into a factor for the development of an economy based on knowledge and innovation activities, the study of innovative approaches in specialized types of tourism meets the principles of the strategy. The development of knowledge and innovation activities, focused on specific target groups, is ensured by modeling innovative approaches that meet another of the principles of the Strategy, where innovation is the basis for achieving dynamic and sustainable economic growth.

By modeling innovative approaches, this study meets the requirements in line with the objectives of the Innovation Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria and the measures

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for its implementation, aimed at increasing the competitiveness of Bulgarian industry by strengthening the scientific capacity. In this regard, the Bulgarian Investment Agency (2020) creates areas that will be a priority for investors (Balneo and Medical Tourism), emphasizing their advantages for promoting them to potential investors.

In terms of **regional priorities**, the proposed study is fully in line with the Strategy, as its results focus on updating scientific knowledge as well as developing future research on international projects, such as Horizon 2020.

A Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism 2014-2030 (Ministry of Tourism, 2014) has been implemented in Bulgaria, which is also related to the sustainable development of destinations, the quality of the tourism product, the business identification and the brand recognition on the respective tourism market. The current article analyzes the Concept for tourism regions (2015), which is directly related to the implementation of the new Law on Tourism (2013) (Art. 15. (1)), concerning the differentiation of the tourism regions in the country. The main goal is to create regional tourism products, to implement regional marketing and advertising and effective marketing management carried out by the Organizations for tourism region management in Bulgaria (also called Destination management organization). The study is focused on the tourism business (especially on innovation, knowledge and training) and on supporting its activities in the ever-changing challenges accompanying the tourism development in Bulgaria.

In the current analysis, attention is also paid to the **European priorities**. In European Union policy, tourism is placed as an important sector of the economy that supports economic growth and employment. The challenge for the union is to strengthen and improve the sustainable development of tourism in order to ensure the long-term competitiveness of the industry. Sustainable development aims to raise awareness of the limitations and opportunities of the existing tourism resources. Europe's priority is to maintain its position as the world's leading tourism destination. Sustainability policy is ensured through the creation of a European Tourism Indicators System (a set of tools for sustainable destinations).

The development of the "Concept for tourism regions in Bulgaria" shows the relevance and importance of the problems related to the tourism regions in Bulgaria, as well as investment opportunities in seven of the nine tourism regions in which health tourism is a priority. It should be taken into account the fact that the successful management and operation of tourism regions affects the sustainability of Bulgarian tourism at the macro, meso and micro levels. Efficient management and investment in tourism regions contribute to the development and sustainability of the destinations, influencing the positioning of the health tourism products in the respective tourism region, as well as its successful promotion.

*In Bulgaria, the problems related to the tourism regions and the opportunities for encouraging investors in the individual regions have not yet been thoroughly studied, which is a prerequisite for the emergence of the proposed current study.*

By implementing innovative approaches in the specialized types of tourism (incl. health tourism) models will be offered for successful functioning of the tourism regions of Bulgaria. The main goal will be a sustainability of tourism and promotion of our country as a **year-round destination for health tourism**.

For this purpose, it is necessary to take into account the part of the Tourism Act, which aims to create conditions for the development of specialized types of tourism and in particular health tourism, and differentiates its subtypes. In addition to the Act, an updated Ordinance № 04-14 of 9 October 2019 was issued in order to set the terms and conditions for certification of "balneotherapy (medical spa) center", "spa center",

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“wellness center” and “telasotherapy center”. The types of centers subject to certification are determined according to the services that they provide.

*For the purpose of the study, it is crucial to determine in which regions (according to the Concept), in which destinations, in which objects and subtypes of health tourism (according to the Tourism Act and the Ordinance) the investment processes should be directed and whether to invest in products or objects of health tourism. In the last part of the present study a model of an innovative approach in the marketing management of a tourism regions will be proposed. It will try to answer all listed questions in order to encourage investment in the area.*

## **5. Model of an innovative approach in the marketing management of a tourism region, specialized in health tourism in Bulgaria, to encourage investors**

By using an innovative approach in the specialized types of tourism, a model for the successful operation and promotion of the tourism regions of Bulgaria, specialized in the field of health tourism, can be offered. One of the goals is to encourage new investors which will lead to sustainability of tourism and development of our country as a year-round health destination.

The state of research on the problem at this stage is reflected in the application of several models, mainly in countries outside Bulgaria and which have sustainable traditions in the tourism industry. For the purposes of successful meso-level tourism management in the developed European countries, a model based on the creation of the so-called “Destination Management Organizations” is used, which have a number of rights and obligations regarding successful and sustainable development, as well as the promotion of the respective tourism region. According to a research made by Ianeva and co. (2020) the main task of the Destination Management Organization is to promote a city, region or country in order to increase the number of visitors. It encourages the development and supply of a destination or region, focusing on conventional sales as well as marketing of tourism and services. The model has been tested successfully worldwide and is applied in most tourism regions, forming long-term and lasting success in the tourism industry.

Attempts are being made to implement this model in Bulgaria at both macro and meso level for specific tourism regions (Rila-Pirin with Bansko location), but it should be noted that changes are needed in the regulatory framework of the country, to implement this well-established and successful model. (Portarska, V., 2018)

When analyzing the existing models and its application for the tourism industry of Bulgaria, it should be noted that currently in the country the administrative districts with local government and the new tourism regions do not have identical boundaries, which creates the specifics of their management. This creates a challenge applying the most appropriate models for managing tourism regions. (Ianeva, M., Portarska, V., 2019).

There are two main models for destination management, respectively applicable to tourism regions - the conceptual and descriptive model. (Angelo Presenza, 2005 and Arbogast, D., Deng, J., and Maumbe, K., 2007)

The conceptual model created by Dore & Crouch (2003) is based on the main marketing activities that organizations should strive for and that they should develop in order to carry out their tasks, namely the promotion of destinations and the increase of the tourism revenue. According to this model, the roles of these organizations and their activities can be organized into two main functions: 1) External marketing of the

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destinations, which should aim to attract visitors and investors to a particular destination. Specific activities, selected to be as comprehensive as possible, are applied. After creating a marketing plan, organizations can use various promotion tools such as personal sales, direct marketing, advertising, promotions, publications and public relations. 2) The internal development of destinations, which can be considered as all other forms of activity (other than marketing), which are undertaken by the DMO's in order to develop and maintain tourism in the destination. The function of the destination development is internal, ie. its activities focus on initiatives within the destination itself. Many of the activities require actions and resources from other stakeholders in the destination, and the management of the destination depends on the ability of these organizations to coordinate specific stakeholders as well as potential investors.

Descriptive model, created by Arbogast, D., Deng, j., and Maumbe, K. (2007), is associated with the categorization of possible activities of DMO's. It has two dimensions related to site management and in this sense a two-dimensional graph is built with a vertical direction, representing the actions of the organization in the external development of the site and a horizontal direction, representing the efforts of the organization in its internal improvement.

For example, the model considers certain situations, such as the construction of new high-end sites and their impact on the change in the appearance of the destination in terms of attracting more solvent tourists and whether it would increase tourist flow or increase only revenue in the destination. On the other side, the construction of new high-end sites requires the encouragement of new investors or those who have already expressed similar interest through specific measures and incentives implemented through programs by the OTRM's and DMO's.

Another hypothesis in this model addresses issues to avoid additional effort in terms of increasing resources and to emphasize the redistribution of activities in the DMO. The main goal is to achieve a more balanced approach in its management. It is argued that the management of destinations and regions is a function of internal and external development.

*In the developed tourism countries different frameworks are applied based on both - descriptive and the conceptual model, which are modified and tested by the respective DMO. These frameworks are the basis for creating a model that corresponds to the specifics of health tourism in Bulgaria and its resources, in terms of development of this type of product. A similar model is being developed by Basmadzhiyeva, S. (2020) in her study related to the management of health tourism destinations, aiming at the tourism regions in Bulgaria specialized in the development of health tourism and it is necessary to be applied.*

## 6. Conclusion

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In the article **the thesis and the purpose are proved**, namely - the opportunities for encouraging local and foreign investors for investments in the field of health tourism in Bulgaria. **The subject of the research is argued** and based on that **the**

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**results and contributions of the scientific report can be deduced**, as well as the application in the management of health tourism regions with an emphasis on investment promotion.

### **Results:**

1. After a detailed analysis made in the article it can be concluded that Bulgaria has many competitive advantages as a destination for health tourism in terms of its resources.

2. Bulgaria is a favorable country for development and investment in the health tourism field due to the richness of natural, anthropogenic and human resources, as well as the presence of economic, political and geographical advantages in the area.

3. According to the Concept for tourism regions of Bulgaria, in seven out of nine tourism regions there is expanded specialization in the health tourism field and some of them have a more developed superstructure than others.

*The main areas that we can identify as key and suitable for future investment processes are:*

1. **Hiring highly qualified staff** in the health tourism sites and investments in prescriptions for additional training and qualification.

2. Purchase of **high-tech and modern equipment** and modernization and enrichment of the range with new and innovative procedures.

3. In areas rich in health tourism resources, but with an underdeveloped superstructure, investment in **new specialized sites** would be successful.

*In conclusion, we could note that Bulgaria is a favorable country for investment in the field of health tourism and in particular it would be appropriate for investment processes to be directed in two directions - in health tourism products and sites.*

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