

## **The importance of certification in health and wellness tourism: the case of Termas de São Pedro do Sul**

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**Abstract** | Certification in health and wellness tourism is essential to ensure high standards of quality, safety and professionalism in the sector. It provides a differentiation strategy in a competitive market and reassures consumers that the services offered are reliable and effective. This paper seeks to understand the importance of certification in health and wellness tourism, especially in the tourism destination of Termas de São Pedro do Sul, and also to understand the perception of those responsible for local tourism accommodation, restaurants and tourism animation agents. The results of the surveys applied to the existing tourism offer in Termas de São Pedro do Sul show that the vast majority confirmed that sustainability is one of the most important trends in the development of tourism destinations, highlighting the fact that visitors are concerned about sustainability issues. In terms of certification programs, the prevailing opinion was that certification is a differentiator that brings improvements to companies. It was said that one of the main benefits of certification is that it reinforces the concept of sustainability. The company believes that the commitment to sustainability is a path that is being followed and will bring greater economic benefits in the short and medium term.

**Keywords** | Health and Wellness Tourism, Certification, São Pedro do Sul, Sustainability, Tourism Destinations.

### **1. Introduction**

Health, wellness and medical tourism have grown exponentially in recent years and are becoming increasingly important in many established and emerging destinations around the world (UNWTO, 2018). Nevertheless, the health tourism segment is still not well defined, with differences based on geographical and linguistic characteristics and the wide and broad diversity of associated cultural traditions. Moreover, the data is fragmented and limited.

Nowadays, sustainability is an issue that companies are increasingly addressing and thinking about. Tourists are more demanding, more informed and want to know whether companies are promoting sustainability practices (Guerra et al, 2022; Smith & Puczkó, 2016). Whether for environmental reasons or for political, socio-economic and/or cultural reasons, tourists are more

aware and attentive to what they buy, and they look to spas for some kind of validation of the efforts of the companies that manage them. In this sense, terms such as 'natural', 'organic', 'holistic', 'green', 'eco-friendly' and 'sustainable' are having a greater impact on the sector, both among agents and companies, as well as customers (SpaFinder, 2013). This validation is often achieved through sustainability certifications.

Sustainability certification is crucial for promoting responsible practices and ensuring environmental protection, social equity and long-term economic viability (Simões & Lopes, 2020). In the health and wellness tourism sector, it not only meets the needs of consumers for sustainable practices, but also promotes a healthy and sustainable environment, which is fundamental to the health and well-being of visitors. Therefore, sustainability certification should be seen as a valuable investment in the sustainable future of any organization or destination. It is important to understand the impact that health tourism can have on the development process of a place, taking into account the principles of sustainability, as in most cases this type of tourism is based on particularly fragile natural resources (IDTOUR, 2014; Smith & Puczkó, 2009).

The perception of stakeholders in health and wellness tourism destinations about certification is generally positive, as certification adds value and credibility to the destination and the services offered. However, perceptions may vary depending on the type of stakeholder and their position within the health and wellness tourism value chain (Font e Sallows, 2002; Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019; Simões & Lopes, 2020).

The main objective of this paper is to understand the importance of certification in health and wellness tourism, particularly in Termas de São Pedro do Sul, and also to understand the perceptions of thermal spa unit, local tourism accommodations, restaurants and tourism animation agents on this topic. The specific objectives are: (i) to reflect on the importance of the different types of certifications and best practices related to sustainability in the health and wellness tourism sector; (ii) to identify the requirements and impacts of the existing certifications pursued by Termas de São Pedro do Sul on the destination's governance and stakeholders; (iii) and to analyze whether the rest of the destination's tourism offer appreciates this commitment to certification, reflects on its impact and what actions they are taking in relation to sustainability.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Certification in health and wellness tourism destinations**

Health and wellness tourism is a fast-growing sector within the travel industry, driven by the growing global interest in maintaining and improving personal health and wellbeing (Dini & Pencarelli, 2022). This sector encompasses a wide range of activities, including medical tourism, wellness retreats, spa visits, fitness vacations and holistic health experiences (World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission, 2018).

Activities to promote and maintain health and to prevent and cure certain diseases are in high demand around the world. However, this has not always been the case, as in the past these activities were developed with the aim of curing rather than preventing (IDTOUR, 2014).

Health and wellness tourism is becoming increasingly relevant in many established and emerging destinations around the world. Nevertheless, the health tourism segment is still not well defined, with differences based on geographical and linguistic characteristics and the great and wide variety of cultural traditions associated with it. As Guerra (2016, p. 90) states, defining this concept is "a complex task, as there are various interpretations of the concepts associated with this topic". According to the same author, the definition of health and wellness tourism depends heavily on "the literature and its focus, as well as its nationality". Thus, he points out that the main reason for this complexity is that the concepts of "health" and "well-being/wellness" are conceptualized in very different ways in the most varied contexts (Guerra, 2016).

The World Tourism Organization (2019, p. 38) presents a definition according to which health tourism "covers those types of tourism which have as a primary motivation, the contribution to physical, mental and/or spiritual health through medical and wellness-based activities which increase the capacity of individuals to satisfy their own needs and function better as individuals in their environment and society. Health tourism is the umbrella term for the subtypes of wellness tourism and medical tourism."

In the tourism sector, the number of sustainability certification schemes for tourism products and services has increased (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). As Simões and Lopes (2020, p. 207) emphasize, certification is "an unavoidable issue in the most diverse competitive management strategies, as it reduces the production costs of goods and services on the one hand and guarantees quality to the consumer on the other." In order to obtain certification, operators must meet certain standards (national or international), which vary depending on the objectives of the different types of management systems (environmental, food, health, etc.) of the operators.

Certification programs are now starting to be adopted by many destinations as a way of achieving their sustainability goals while gaining tools to better manage their territory (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). They are seen as a way to ensure that a tourism destination meets certain standards where the infrastructural, economic, social and environmental aspects of tourism development are assessed simultaneously (Carvalho, 2021). Grapentin & Ayikoru (2019) affirm that destination certification programs force those responsible to look at their own territory and help them to recognize things that they may not have previously considered a problem. Recent research already presents a new perspective on destination certification, arguing that investing in destination certification is an attraction for the next generation of tourists, as they will see sustainable practices as one of their priorities (IPDT, 2021).

Dodds and Holmes (2020) point out that there is ample evidence that destinations that strive for sustainable tourism gain a competitive advantage through environmental certification. Font and

Sallows (2002) have already warned that greater efforts need to be made to promote standards and best practice in sustainable tourism globally through accreditation bodies.

Certification programs have the potential to become powerful tools that can strengthen the role of sustainability in tourism (Grapentin & Ayikoru, 2019). As there are not many certification bodies operating in destinations as a whole, they also have the potential to avoid the confusion resulting from the growing number of certification schemes for individual tourism businesses.

Turismo de Portugal (2023) assumes that Portugal has all the natural conditions and units of health and wellness tourism that have the potential to develop a differentiated offer and capture relevant markets. Thermal spas are part of this value chain, where the certification of the quality of services reinforces the purpose of the differentiated qualification and reputation of the thermal offer.

Certification in health and wellness tourism destinations is essential to guarantee the trust, safety and quality of the services offered. It provides a competitive advantage, attracts more customers and helps to maintain high standards of service. Although the certification process can be challenging and costly, the long-term benefits for both service providers and destinations are significant.

## **2.2 Termas de São Pedro do Sul: certification strategy**

The Termas de São Pedro do Sul, a spa town par excellence and home to the largest spa complex in Portugal, are located in the Viseu Dão-Lafões region, a sub-region of the central mainland of Portugal.

This health and wellness tourism destination has a large number of hotels and a variety of rural tourism businesses. These characteristics offer the Dão-Lafões region and the municipality of S. Pedro do Sul significant opportunities to promote and boost tourism (IDTOUR, 2014).

In terms of accommodation, the region has a wide range of tourist accommodation units, mainly concentrated in the Termas de São Pedro do Sul, whose operation is linked to and highly dependent on the operation of the thermal bath (the region's main product). According to the National Tourism Registry (RNT, 2023) and the Geographic Information System for Tourism (SIGTUR, 2023), there are around 60 hotels, other tourism businesses and local accommodation establishments in the Termas de São Pedro do Sul.

At the same time, the range of restaurants in the territory does not match the recognized accommodation capacity available. This is a particular opportunity for the territory, which is enhanced by the diversity and richness of the gastronomic culture of the area (Lafões region). According to Termalistur data (2023), there are 6 restaurants and 2 cafés/pastry shops in operation in the Termas de São Pedro do Sul.

It should also be noted that, according to RNT and SIGTUR (2023), there are 9 tourist entertainment companies in the municipality of São Pedro do Sul, of which only 3 are located in Termas de São Pedro do Sul. These companies offer three types of activities, namely: outdoor/nature/adventure activities, maritime-tourism activities and cultural activities/landscape and cultural touring.

It has become increasingly important for Termas de São Pedro do Sul to obtain different types of certifications, mainly because they want to have a positive impact on spas worldwide and stand out in the market. As a company committed to the project and the future of the planet, Termalistor always supports environmentally friendly initiatives.



**Figure 1** | Certification seals attributed to Termas de São Pedro do Sul

Source: Website of Termas de São Pedro do Sul (Termalistor, 2024)

- (i) "Clean & Safe" Seal: Termas São Pedro do Sul were the first to receive the "Clean & Safe" seal, which is awarded by Turismo de Portugal in collaboration with the Associação das Termas de Portugal;
- (ii) Biosphere Certificate (2023 and 2024): This certification refers to the development of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda in the Termas de São Pedro do Sul. This certification aims to strengthen good practices and make Termas de São Pedro do Sul a sustainable tourism destination;
- (iii) ISO 14001 - Environmental Management Systems: By obtaining this ISO certification, Termas de São Pedro do Sul has been able to demonstrate its commitment to environmental protection, strengthen its institutional image and keep pace with the constant evolution of the market;
- (iv) "European Tourism Covid-19 Safety" Seal: This seal guarantees compliance with the health and safety measures established by the health authorities to prevent the spread of Covid-19;

(v) "Sustainability Engaged" Seal: Termas de São Pedro do Sul recently joined Turismo de Portugal's 360º Tourism Companies Program, a measure included in the "Reactivate Tourism Build the Future Plan" which aims to place companies at the heart of the sector's sustainable transformation process;

(vi) "Portugal Sou Eu" Seal: This seal identifies and certifies national products and services with a high national content (percentage of the composition of the product or service that is Portuguese). It is declared for products destined for export, but also serves as an identification mark of national production abroad;

(vii) Declaration "Less Footprint More Future" (2022): This declaration communicates the environmental benefits associated with joining the waste management system supported by Sociedade Ponto Verde (SPV).

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology adopted is based on a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, based on data collection in conjunction with the consultation of various documents and secondary data on the subject and case study, consulting in particular the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the Tourism Association of Portugal, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the Portuguese Government and the Secretary of State for Tourism, Regional Coordination and Development Commission of Center Region (CCDR) and Tourism Regional Entity (ERT) - Center of Portugal Tourism, and research by various authors, as well as the application of surveys to (47) local business owners of tourism accommodation, restaurants and tourism animation agents present in Termas de São Pedro do Sul, and also an interview with the administrator of Termalístur, E.M., S.A., the company responsible for the management of Termas de São Pedro do Sul.

For the interview with the administrator of Termalístur - Termas de São Pedro do Sul, E.M., S.A., an interview script was prepared and applied in advance, consisting of three parts: Sustainability and Practices; Certification in Tourism; and Destination Termas de São Pedro do Sul. The interview took place on July 20, 2022 and lasted 30 minutes.

The data collection tool for the companies consisted of a questionnaire survey designed for this purpose. This survey consists of four distinct parts: Characterization of the organization; Certification and sustainability; Evaluation of the tourism destination Termas de São Pedro do Sul; and Personal identification. The data was collected between November 2022 and March 2023 by means of a questionnaire survey and distributed on paper.

The IBM SPSS Statistics 26 program and Excel Microsoft Office were used for the statistical processing of the data obtained through the questionnaire in an essentially descriptive approach.

#### 4. Results

Of the 47 local business owners of tourism accommodation, restaurants and tourism animation agents who responded to the survey, the majority (70,21%) are from accommodation-only establishments, but accommodation establishments in general represent 89,36% of the total respondents (Table 1).

**Table 1 |** Distribution of companies by typologies

<b>Typology of the companies</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>%</b>
Accommodation	33	70,21%
Restaurant	3	6,38%
Tourism Animation Agent	2	4,26%
Accommodation and Restaurant	8	17,02%
Accommodation, Restaurant and Tourism Animation Agent	1	2,13%
Total	47	100%

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the results of applied questionnaires

In our sample, 57,8% of the companies were founded after 2010. 86,9% of them are micro enterprises (less than 10 employees), 2,2% are small enterprises (less than 50 employees) and 10,9% are medium-sized enterprises (less than 250 employees).

Of the company's local representatives surveyed, 52,2% are female, 63,8% have a college degree, mainly in the fields of Management/Economy (36,4%), Tourism (18,2%) and Acomodation and Restaurants (13,6%) and 55,3% have more than 10 years of professional experience.

The majority (85,1%) of local representatives of accommodation providers, restaurants and touristic animation companies stated that sustainability is one of the most important trends in the development of tourism destinations.

The reasons given for considering sustainability as a trend in destination development were: "Sustainability brings important environmental and socio-economic practices that must be followed by tourist destinations" (30,4%); "Climate and environmental changes make sustainability increasingly important and necessary in companies and destinations" (26,1%); "Because through sustainability it is possible to create new sustainable development projects" (15,2%); "It is very important to consider sustainability as a path forward for the development of a tourism destination" (8,7%); "The more sustainable the destination, the less we pollute and tourists look for sustainable territories and value these situations" (8,7%); and "After Covid-19, sustainability

came to assert itself even more and, therefore, it is important that destinations become more sustainable" (4,3%).

Most of participants, namely 78,3%, attach great importance to sustainability issues ("important" 48,9% and "very important" 28,3%) (Table 2).

**Table 2 |** Level of importance to issues related to sustainability

Level of importance	Freq.	%	Accumulated %
Not important	0	0,0	0,0
Little important	4	8,7	8,7
Moderately important	6	13,0	21,7
Important	23	50,0	71,7
Very important	13	28,3	100,0
Total	46	100,0	

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the results of applied questionnaires

The vast majority (74,5%) of participants believe that customers are concerned (51,1%) or very concerned (23,4%) about sustainability issues, and the other 25,5% are somewhat concerned.

Table 3 shows the opinions on certification programs. The statements "Certification is very important as it offers our customers more security" (30,4%) predominate, followed by "Certification in terms of sustainability is important for the company and the destination as it sets us apart from the competition and makes us competitive" (26,1%).

**Table 3 |** Level of importance to issues related to sustainability

Opinions regarding certification programs	N	%
Certification is very important, as it provides greater security to our clients.	14	30,4
Sustainability certification is important for the company and the destination, as it makes us differentiating and competitive compared to other companies.	12	26,1
Sustainability certification will bring new customers and even partnerships with new entities.	4	5,2
Certification brings more credibility and visibility to companies.	2	4,3
Certification brings new costumers and partnerships.	7	15,2
The intention of certification programs is valid and precise, however, they are poorly customizable, significantly theoretical and reactive programs.	7	15,2
It's just bureaucracy	1	2,2
Total	46	100,0

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the results of applied questionnaires



More than half of the sample (68,1%) stated that their organization has a sustainable label such as Biosphere, Green Globe, Clean & Safe, HACCP, ISO 21401 or ISO 14001. Reinforcing this idea, the vast majority of respondents (93,6%) stated that the main benefit of certification is "Strengthening the concept of sustainability". Other benefits cited were: Improved corporate image, competitive advantage over non-certified competitors, access to new markets, especially those with environmental requirements, access to financing and lower interest rates, and higher quality of services provided.

The sensitivity to sustainability issues is reinforced by the fact that 100% of respondents agree (53,2%) or fully agree (46,8%) with the introduction of sustainable measures and practices. In contrast, only 48,6% assume that investments will be made in the area of sustainability in the near future.

With regard to the interview with the administrator of Termalistor, E.M., S.A., we would like to highlight some important aspects.

The Administrator had the following to say about the work carried out at Termalistor with regard to sustainable management systems:

"... we hope that by the end of summer we will have completed this entire process and will have a Biosphere certificate as a thermal care unit. But we are also working on another more complex component, ISO 21426 Medical Spas, which, although it concerns the provision of thermal SPA services, also has a part linked to sustainability... We were one of the 50 companies signing the 360° tourism commitment letter, so we are working hard to align the UN SDGs"

The Administrator reflects on the key responsibilities and actions of the Sustainability Department, which:

"The sustainability department seeks, to collect all the information available at the company level, to define a set of objectives, goals and services that have to work towards achieving these goals and objectives and disseminate information all those that are the company's objectives and quality and sustainability policies so that we are all aligned with this challenge"

Considering the main gains that the sustainability policy brings to the thermal unit, the Administrator mentioned:

"... indirect gains that are always difficult to measure. Then there is a direct gain from an economic point of view and from the point of view of CO2 emissions into the environment through the reduction of waste, the reduction of consumption and the commitment to sustainability, whether environmental or social. We also measure that part of the social commitment we have towards the society in which we operate."

For the Administrator of Termalistor, E.M., S.A., the company is committed to investing in partnerships with institutions, associations or local entities to implement sustainable practices, with

the aim of passing on good sustainability practices to suppliers and partners. The local community's awareness of the importance of sustainability is already beginning to be visible, but still insufficient, as there is still much to be done.

In terms of environmental protection, the principles upheld by the company and the main actions developed to protect the environment and preserve the destination are particularly noteworthy:

"... use either in natural mineral water or in the river water itself, to be able to use it to cool the natural mineral water, as well as in the water consumption itself...  
Impacts that the activity has on the water table, because thermal water is discharged into the river...  
We do not use any type of pesticide in urban hygiene or garden treatment and we try to use renewable energy sources as much as possible...  
We have developed an ambitious project to supply geothermal energy, which is renewable energy, to all hotels and tour operators in the area...  
minimize the use of reactive energy, which is almost zero, through the use of condenser batteries, as well as carrying out some type of management of the use of energy needs during peak hours and making maximum use of geothermal energy also internally within the resorts themselves. ...  
the acquisition of green energy which is also a commitment to sustainability...  
Waste control is aligned with the entire sustainability policy, seeking as much as possible to implement total waste separation...  
We are increasingly trying to use recyclable materials."

With regard to certification, the administrator emphasizes that:

"At the moment, the Company does not have any certification, but is working on Biosphere certification (...) which is also in the tourism part and on the ISO Medical Spas certification part (...), being aligned at the level of Turismo de Portugal with the 360° companies with the commitment letter...  
The Company (...) will certainly obtain improvements in its efficiency, effectiveness and also in its external image before the customer and the supplier"

Finally, the administrator emphasized that the destination Termas de São Pedro do Sul benefits from the investments in the certification of tourism services:

"Our idea is to seek to create a unique destination here, which is being created, (...) to create a unique destination here that functions almost like a thermal resort (...) in which people feel like they are in a sustainable destination, environmental quality, with quality of service and that there is a common trunk between all these services that are provided. And certifications, standards and all this work that has been done together are fundamental for this to happen."

## **5. Conclusions**

As the UNWTO (2018) affirms, health tourism is certainly one of the fastest growing forms of tourism today. As part of a health tourism strategy, destinations should address issues of travel attraction, such as accreditation and certification of health tourism facilities and practices.

Faced with competition from other tourism destinations, companies in the sector often refer to sustainable destination management strategies to attract the interest of tourists. Sustainable

tourism is based on a practical vision and expert guidance to help tourism destinations and companies implement effective measures and achieve tangible performance objectives.

In the specific case of Termalistur - Termas de São Pedro do Sul, the company already has a number of certifications, including the Biosphere Certificate, ISO 14001, ISO 9001, the Official Carbon Footprint Declaration 2022, the "Sustainability Engaged" Seal, the "Portugal Sou Eu" Seal, the "Clean & Safe" Seal and the "European Tourism Covid-19 Safety" Seal, and is currently working on the ISO Medical Spas certification.

The results of the surveys applied to the existing tourism offer in Termas de São Pedro do Sul show that the vast majority of respondents confirm that sustainability is one of the most important trends in the development of tourism destinations, which underlines the fact that customers are concerned about sustainability issues. In terms of certification programs, the prevailing opinion was that certification is a differentiator that brings improvement to companies. However, there are still a significant percentage of companies not have any award, quality management system or certification as they are at an early stage of awareness of the issue, which has been strongly encouraged and strengthened by the thermal spa's initiative. It should be noted that these companies are small and medium-sized, which could explain why they participate less frequently in these certification programs.

The data analysis has shown that certification is a very important investment, as Simões and Lopes (2020) mention, and that it provides more security for visitors and clients of health and wellness tourism. Sustainability certification is important for the company and the destination, as it is a differentiating factor and a competitive advantage over the competition, as Dodds and Holmes (2020) mention.

Certification and the adoption of sustainability practices have guided the current management of Termalistur and have been one of its main bets, always keeping in mind the social commitment towards the society in which the company operates and towards its customers, which is in line with the majority of the participants interviewed.

The limitations of the study lie in the fact that the surveys were only conducted on the supply side of tourism and only focused on one case study. For future research, it would be interesting to conduct customer surveys in the Termas de São Pedro do Sul and to apply this study to other health and wellness tourism destinations.

It has thus been established that sustainability and certification is no longer an optional extra. Consumers and investors are pushing for companies to use their resources to make a positive contribution to society, in line with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. When companies prioritize their social responsibility, there are numerous opportunities for them to succeed.

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