

Study of motivations for thermal spa tourism

LUÍSA AUGUSTO¹, JOAQUIM ANTUNES¹ & CRISTINA BARROCO¹

¹Instituto Politécnico de Viseu

Contacting author: laugusto@esev.ipv.pt

Keywords | Image of a destination, Health and well-being tourism, Thermal spa, Motivations

Objectives | Thermal spa, integrated into Health and Well-being Tourism, has tourism potential in terms of well-being, due to the current trend of searching for relaxation experiences and health prevention (Carneiro et al., 2021), due to the concern increasing with the achievement of well-being (Gonçalves & Guerra, 2019), and for a better physical shape and better quality of life (Ramos, 2008; Gonçalves & Guerra, 2019). For Quintela, Costa and Correia (2023), this type of tourism derives from the conditions of contemporary life, especially concerning stress and the increase in average life expectancy. According to Teixeira (2020), the main motivations that lead to the practice of thermal therapy have to do with health issues, namely respiratory, digestive, circulatory, rheumatic and musculoskeletal and skin problems and leisure and relaxation issues, particularly to escape from daily stress and spending time with family.

Several factors motivate the practice of thermal spa, with emphasis on the search for improving the population's quality of life (Pereira, 2022) but also “the increasing enjoyment of leisure time and practices, through the search for low-density spaces, for closer contact with natural resources and also for a growing appreciation of the body and care for it” (Mota, 2022, p.3). Thus, the literature review led to the definition of the objectives of the present study. Therefore, the objective of this study is to provide an analysis of the motivational factors that lead tourists to practice thermal baths. Thus, the aim is to understand more specifically the holiday habits of the Portuguese, analyze the motivations of those who go to thermal spas in Portugal and understand the image that tourists have of thermal spas in Portugal.

Methodology | The methodology used was based on a literature review on destination image, health and well-being tourism and motivations for health and well-being thermal spa. Based on a quantitative methodology, primary data research was carried out, using an online survey applied through social networks to a convenience sample. The analysis of the data collected was carried out using the SPSS-26 program and was the subject of a descriptive statistical analysis.

Main Results and Contributions | The sample for this study consisted of 118 respondents, with 70.3% of respondents being female and 28% being male. The majority of respondents are

between 18 and 24 years old (50.8%), 21.2% are between 42 and 56 years old, 13.6% of respondents are between 57 and 75 years old, 12.7% are between 25 and 41 years old and 1.7% of respondents are over 75 years old. The vast majority of respondents, 66.9%, have higher education and 28% have education up to and including the 12th year.

We sought to find out, about the use of the thermal service, which factors motivate the choice of health and well-being tourism and the image that respondents have of thermal resorts in Portugal. The analysis of the data collected allows us to understand that only 33.9% of respondents, 41 respondents, have already used thermal services. Of these individuals, 25 responded that they are motivated to practice thermal therapy for the sake of well-being, 14 said it is to undergo treatments and 2 respondents practice thermal therapy to prevent diseases. Regarding the question about what led people to practice thermal therapy, respondents responded that they consider relaxation, the search for improving quality of life, the fact that it is a natural treatment, and concern for health to be most important. Respondents do not consider medical recommendations, the improvement of family relationships, the fact that spas are a tradition, and the fact that thermal spas are considered a healthier way of spending holidays as important.

Of the total number of respondents, those who responded that they had never practiced thermal baths were asked what was their reason for never having done so. Regarding the reasons that lead people not to practice thermal spas, the data shows that the main reason given by 50% of respondents is that they prefer another type of tourism, 32% understand that they do not have much knowledge of thermal spas, 14,1% mention the fact that thermal spas are very expensive, 12.8% do not practice thermal spas because they have no information about the spas and around 6% say that the reason is that they do not have company.

Regarding the image that tourists have of spa resorts in Portugal, they were asked about a set of 15 items, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - I do not agree to 5 - I completely agree). The data indicates that respondents consider the fact that "The spas allow you to enjoy great relaxation" with an average of 4.18 to be very important, followed by "Helps to improve health" (4.13), "Escape from the everyday environment" (3.89) and "Allows you to enjoy nature" (3.63). The items with the lowest rating were "The entertainment activities are diverse" (2.88) and "They allow you to practice various sporting activities" (2.97).

Limitations | The results of this study have some limitations. The study sample is relatively small, so it is suggested to carry out the same study with a larger sample. The sample was carried out only online and given the target audience of the spas, an in-person study is suggested.

Conclusions | This study aimed to identify the factors that motivate the practice of thermal spas and the image that tourists have of spas. The data collected confirms that these are related to the search for well-being, the need for relaxation, concern for health, and disease prevention, with a

view to a better quality of life. In this way, these results are in line with the results of Teixeira (2020) who concluded that the main motivations for practicing thermal therapy are related to health issues, leisure and relaxation issues, and escaping daily stress.

The results of this investigation show that similar to what the authors refer to regarding the tendency to search for relaxation and health prevention experiences (Carneiro et al., 2021; Medeiros & Cavaco, 2008, p. 16). The results of this study also show that respondents are motivated to practice thermal therapy due to the need for relaxation, the search for improved quality of life, the fact that it is a natural treatment, and concern for their health.

The results of the present study bring contributions to academia, as well as significant practical implications, as it provides a set of guiding clues for the management and marketing of more attractive and competitive thermal equipment, given that it is essential to disseminate more information and content about thermal spas, in order to increase knowledge about thermal practice.

References

- Carneiro, M., Barbosa, M., Sobral, A. & Dias, R. (2021). Wellness and preventive health: a comparative analysis between the thermal spas of Monchique (Portugal) and vila de Vals (Switzerland). *Journal of Education, Technologies, and Health*, 8e, 158-158.
- Gonçalves, E., & Guerra, R. (2019). O turismo de saúde e bem-estar como fator de desenvolvimento local: Uma análise à oferta termal portuguesa. PASOS. *Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, 17(2), 453-472.
- Medeiros, C. L., & Cavaco, C. (2008). Turismo de saúde e bem-estar: termas, spas termais e talassoterapia. Universidade Católica Portuguesa.
- Mota, A. (2022). O Turismo de Saúde e Bem-Estar na economia e desenvolvimento regionais: uma análise ao território do Estrela Geopark Mundial da UNESCO (Master's thesis).
- Pereira, A. (2022). Fatores determinantes na escolha dos serviços termais. Dissertação de Mestrado. ISCET.
- Quintela, J.A., Costa, C., & Correia, A. (2023). Health and Wellness Tourism in the Pursuit of Quality of Life: A Case Study Approach for Portugal and Hungary. In Oğuz Doğan (Ed.). *Global Perspectives on the Opportunities and Future Directions of Health Tourism* (pp. 138-164), IGI Global.
- Ramos, A. (2008). O novo paradigma dos destinos turísticos termais. *Gestión Turística*, (9), 9-36.
- Teixeira, A. (2020). O Papel do Turismo de Saúde e Bem-estar nas Motivações dos Termalistas da Região Norte e Centro de Portugal. Dissertação de mestrado. Instituto Politécnico do Porto.