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## COMPLEMENTARITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THERMAL BATHS, SPA AND WELLNESS TOURISM <sup>1</sup>

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### Summary

*Serbia has a long tradition in thermal baths tourism development. In the second half of the twentieth century, this branch of tourism attracted a significant segment of tourist demand, both domestic and foreign. However, due to difficult business conditions in the nineties, its infrastructure became outdated. This resulted in negative trends in tourism development and a negative image appeared in the tourism market.*

*On the other hand, rural tourism is a relatively new form of tourism. In Serbia, it started developing from the 1970ies. A significant interim in this form of tourism was also noticed during the nineties. Today, these two forms of tourism are emphasized as the development chance of Serbian tourism and economy in diverse development-strategic documents by the Government and the departmental ministry.*

*The conceptual approach to these forms of tourism is used in this work, in order to scope the possibilities of their complementary development. What is primarily borne in mind is the resource basis that Serbia possesses for their development, but also the newer tendencies and trends on the tourism market. Expectations are that a synergic cooperation of these forms of tourism would ensure better results, and Serbia would position itself higher on the international tourism market.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, tourist destination, thermal baths, spa, wellness.

**JEL:** Q1, Q26, O13

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## Introduction

The modern trends in the tourism market move further from the concept of mass tourism offered by vacations in destinations located on the seashore and/or mountain ski resorts. There is striving towards activating all segments of tourist demand in order to achieve the best results in tourism development. In this way the countries, i.e. destinations that do not possess the resource bases for developing the so-called “mass tourism” seek their chance on the tourism market by offering alternative tourism products.

Literature usually names two tourism concepts – the so-called “new” and “old”. *Old tourism* is characterized as mass, standardized, rigidly packed with respect for the consumers, management, technology, production, and production resources. On the other hand, the concept of *new tourism* is said to be characterized by flexibility, segmentation, integration, and attentiveness to the surroundings and the tourist as the consumer. This *new approach* changes the rules of the game, evoking new strategies in order to ensure market success. Innovation is especially insisted on, as the base for gaining competitive advantage (Poon, 2003; Vanhove, 2005; Porter, 2008).

This is precisely where Serbia’s key to success on the tourism market lies. Great resource bases significant for the development of thermal baths, wellness and spa tourism on one hand, as well as rural tourism on the other, create the possibility of their interaction and forming an integrated tourism product that could be made into a brand, and as such, be positioned on the tourism market. In this way, Serbia could create a completely new tourism image, and reposition itself on the market as a tourist destination.

### **The concept of rural tourism and the dimensions of its development in Serbia**

The first accounts of people massively visiting rural areas for vacation date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lane, 1994; Feifer, 1985; Runte, 1990). This cannot, however, be considered as the beginnings of rural tourism, because people have visited rural areas for vacation, rest, and recreation even earlier. Numerous vacation facilities used by the privileged social classes bear witness to this. The number of these facilities is the highest in Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Russia, etc. (Vuković et al., 2010).

The OECD gave the basic characteristic of rural tourism in the document *Tourism Strategies and Rural Development* (OECD, 1994):

1. It is located in a rural area.
2. It is functionally rural – built in a world of special rural characteristics with small businesses, open space, it is in contact with nature, cultural heritage and traditional practice.
3. There is “rurality” in the form – both in the sense of the number of facilities, as well as the settlements and it must therefore be of small proportions.
4. It has a traditional character, slow growing, organic, connected to local families.
5. It is made of different forms of tourism, which represent a complex scheme of a rural environment, economy, history and location.

The same document emphasizes the factors one must consider when determining rural tourism (type of vacation, intensity of vacation use, location, management, style, degree of integration with the community), (OECD, 1994).

The UN FAO (Scialabba, Williamson, 2004) differentiates between the following forms of tourism that take place in rural areas: *ecotourism*, *agro tourism*, *agro-ecotourism* and *eco-organic tourism*.

*Ecotourism* is about activities that support the preservation and quality improvement of life resource. *Agro tourism* is a symbiotic interaction between tourism and agriculture. It is a key element to ecological and socially responsible tourism in rural areas. Agro tourism can take on several forms: vacation on farms, vacation in farm households, camping on farms, vacation in mountain resorts, vacation in centres for horse sports and other accommodation forms in a rural area. *Agro-ecotourism* is a combination of ecotourism and agro tourism. Rural areas usually represent a combination of “the wild” and the agro-ecosystem. Diverse landscape, with semi-natural habitats has a larger aesthetic and recreational potential than the uniform, degraded and/or polluted agricultural area. When agro-ecotourism develops around an organic farm, it is called *eco-organic tourism*.

Besides these, literature also states other definitions of rural tourism. The EuroGites (<http://www.eurogites.org>) organization, where Serbia is an active member, has also given significant contribution to theoretic development of rural tourism.

The document *Development Strategy of Tourism in The Republic of Serbia* (Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Service of The Republic of Serbia, 2005) defines rural tourism as a set of activities, services, and additional content organized by the rural population on family households in order to attract tourists and create additional income, while respecting the principles of sustainable development and preserving natural resources.

Until the year 2011, there were no reliable indicators of rural tourism development in Serbia. That is when *The Master Plan of Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism* (2011) was made, which presented the results that 106 local tourist organizations made in cooperation. According to this source, rural tourism encompassed 2.7 million overnight stays, which is the sum of individual overnight stays in rural tourism (145,354)<sup>5</sup> and the number of common tourist overnight stays usable for rural tourism (2,556,128)<sup>6</sup>. Rural tourism provides more than 32,000 beds (registered and unregistered), where more than 10,000 beds are in the countryside. The total number of beds is estimated to bring more than 5 billion RSD annually in income and 5 bn. RSD in direct income to the tourism

5 This data comes from the municipalities and LTOs. As pointed out in this document, “no central institution is in charge of gathering this data, except the Council of each municipality or the LTO”, p.15.

6 The Master Plan states: “the common tourist overnight stays usable for rural tourism” mean accommodation in rural areas that can be used by tourists who visit the rural areas, but cannot be called “rural households”.

sector. The income of 10 bn. RSD does not include visitors who stay for a night or stay with their friends or family (although they also spend money on tourism and other services during their stay) and it does not include the indirect contribution to the local economy in the sense of income and employment. The income of 10 bn. RSD is 16% of direct GDP from travel and tourism, as calculated by the *World Council for Travel and Tourism in Serbia* for the year 2010, which is 64.2 bn. RSD<sup>7</sup>. Based on this, we can conclude that rural tourism today has an up-going trend in development.

### **The conceptual approach to thermal baths, spa, wellness, health and medical tourism**

The basic attraction which animates the demand interested in this form of tourism, are the medicinal properties of natural recourses which a destination possesses (thermal and mineral waters, clean air, a healthy natural ambient, favourable climate conditions etc.), i.e. the possibility of using appropriate medical and health services that are within the tourist offer.

#### *Thermal baths tourism*

The term *thermal baths tourism* (or *hot springs tourism*) is the closest translation of the Serbian term *banjski turizam*, stemming from the Serbian *banja*. The *banja* are tourist destinations with favourable conditions for people suffering from various chronic and acute illnesses, as a rule including thermal baths, mineral waters, and mud (occasionally destinations with clean air for people who suffer from respiratory problems). The presence of licenced health care professionals is common, which puts the Serbian *banja* close to a medical spa in its nature. Hence, *banjski turizam*, or *thermal baths tourism*. However, with the expansion of the scope and the quality of service in these destinations, the original term *banjski turizam* was expanded to include *wellness* and *spa tourism*. In order to avoid this long and complicated term (*thermal baths, wellness, and spa tourism*), certain authors use a new term – *balneary tourism* (i.e. Ungreanu, Tešić, 2014).

The term of thermal baths tourism in this sense is narrower, as it focuses on treating the tourists only with water and its chemical and physical properties in order to improve the health state of the guests. However, this term cannot be universally accepted, because this conceptual approach excludes the visitors of the *clean air spas*, such as the mountain *Zlatibor*, often visited by people with problems with the thyroid gland and/or tourists who use *baths with medicinal mud*, found for example in the *Rusanda* spa in *Melenci*,<sup>8</sup> etc.

That is why it is necessary to have a partial approach to each of the tourism products in order to precisely define the possibilities for its development and complementary connection to rural and other forms of tourism.

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. pp. 74-75.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.banjarusanda.rs/o-nama>

Literature uses different definitions of spas. They can be divided into two approaches – the wide and the narrow approach. Langvinienė and Sekliuckienė (2009) do not only focus on the medical treatment of guests, but also have a wider approach and indicate the significance of a complete tourist experience during the stay. They emphasize the influence that all pension and out-of-pension content has on the health state and the satisfaction of the visitor.

Langvinienė and Sekliuckienė based their stand on several studies that looked into the demand for *extra services* that are important to tourists when choosing a spa destination (Bennett et al., 2004; Church and Robertson, 1999). These values for thermal baths, spa and wellness tourists are: 1) the improvement of health, 2) rest and 3) spending time outside of the accommodation.

In a narrower approach to defining spas as tourist destinations, the ISPA (*International Spa Association*)<sup>9</sup> defines them in the year of 2011 as places dedicated to promoting the quality of life through different forms of professional services that improve the renewal of the mind, body and spirit.

#### *Spa tourism*

The word spa comes from the Latin expression *Sanitas Per Aquam* (*health through water*). Literature in English does not differentiate between thermal baths and spa tourism, as literature in Serbian does. However, the concept of spa tourism in itself is narrower than the classical idea of (thermal) baths tourism. It is about treating the tourists exclusively with water in order to improve their health, i.e. psychosomatic state (Crebbin-Bailey et al., 2004).

#### *Wellness tourism*

The first name for destinations including contents connected to bathing after which their guests felt themselves better are the *thermae* (Latin for *baths*). This term, that was dominant for centuries, has now been replaced with the term *wellness*. The basic idea is that people do not have to use water treatments only when they are sick, but that the goal of their water treatment is the improvement of one's overall health, i.e. psychosomatic state.

Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) differentiate between health, wellness tourism with and without hot springs. They state the reasons for these treatments: disease prevention, health awareness, thermal balneology, recovery from illness, relaxation and recreation, life style.

The International Spa Association has defined seven kinds of spa/wellness capacities (Table 1).

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.experienceispa.com/>

**Table 1.** Seven kinds of spa/wellness capacities

<b><i>Club Spa</i></b>	The primary use is fitness, but it also offers a wide array of professionally led spa services on a daily basis.
<b><i>Cruise ship Spa</i></b>	A spa centre on a cruise ship that offers professionally led spa services, fitness services and wellness components, as well as a spa menu with carefully chosen meals.
<b><i>Day Spa</i></b>	A spa centre that offers professional spa services on a daily basis. This kind of spa is best developed in western Europe.
<b><i>Destination Spa</i></b>	A spa that gives its clients the possibility of choice, in connection with improving life style and improving health through professional spa services, fitness, educational programmes and accommodation within the centre. A spa menu is found in the special offer.
<b><i>Medical Spa</i></b>	Its primary role is giving a complete health and wellness service in surroundings that integrate spa services with conventional and special treatments and therapies. This category is predicted to have the greatest growth in the next ten years because of the increasing demand for holistic medical treatments and therapies.
<b><i>Mineral Springs Spa</i></b>	A spa that offers natural minerals, thermal or other springs used for hydrotherapeutic treatments. This kind of a spa centre is the most typical of the European spa/wellness sector.
<b><i>Resort /hotel Spa</i></b>	A spa within a hotel or a resort that gives professional spa services, fitness and wellness components with a spa menu. It is the second in size of all seven categories, due to the fact that the hotel industry has accepted it as a standard in order to increase profitability, but also because of the increased interest of guests in this type of offer.

Source: *The Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia – The First Phase Report* (2005), Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Services, Faculty of Economy - University of Belgrade, Horwath Consulting Zagreb.

### *Medical and health tourism*

The OECD (Lunt et al., 2010) differentiates between medical and health tourism. *Medical tourism* encompasses all those services that consumers use when traveling with the intention of getting some form of treatment. This treatment can contain a full or a partial scope of medical treatments. It is necessary to clearly define the boundary to what health includes, how it is medically treated and what kind of tourist services is included (aesthetic surgery can certainly not be included in the segment of medical tourism). *Health tourism* is a wider term. It includes organized travel outside of the place of residence for the purpose of improving or restoring an individual's health through various forms of medical service.

### **Dimensions in thermal baths tourism development in Serbia**

According to data provided by the TOS (Tourism Organization of Serbia), health tourism, i.e. thermal baths tourism has the longest tradition. There are more than 1,000 hot and mineral springs in Serbia, rich natural mineral gas repositories, and medicinal mud. More than 53

thermal localities. Serbia also has more than 40 spas (baths) and destinations with favourable climate that provide services for the widest spectrum of illnesses. These are most often treatments including drinking medicinal mineral water, but also medicinal baths.

As of 2005, wellness tourism also started developing in Serbia. The first such destination was the Special Hospital *Merkur* in Vrnjačka Banja.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after, other baths centres opened their own wellness tourism offers (Koviljača, Soko Banja, Kanjiža, Prolom Banja, etc.).

The movement of the number of tourists and their overnight stays in the Republic of Serbia in the period of the years 2008-2013 is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Tourists and overnight stays in baths in the period of years 2008-2013.

Year	Tourists			Overnight stays			The average number of tourist's overnight stays <sup>1)</sup>	
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign
2008	366,098	343,063	23,035	2,367,730	2,266,766	100,964	6.6	4.4
2009	358,481	334,155	24,326	2,286,661	2,189,568	97,093	6.6	4.0
2010	344,967	319,953	25,014	2,210,710	2,106,273	104,437	6.6	4.2
2011	375,473	341,585	33,888	2,308,435	2,176,622	131,813	6.4	3.9
2012	347,192	310,088	37,104	2,035,938	1,901,499	134,439	6.1	3.6

Source: Municipalities in Serbia, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, SORS, Belgrade.

Note: 1) Although the TOS states that Serbia has more than 40 baths, SORS only includes Arandelovac, Bogutovačka Banja, Vranjska Banja, Vrnjačka Banja, Vrujci – Gornja Toplica, Gamzigradska Banja, Gornja Trepča, Koviljača, Lukovska Banja, Mataruška Banja, Niška Banja, Prolom Banja, Sijarinska Banja, Soko Banja.

### **The possibility of connecting the tourism offer of rural with thermal baths, spa, wellness, medical and health tourism**

Cetinski and Weber (1996) have classified the offer based on the intensity of medical content appearance:

- *Complementary health contents*: These are contents that complement and improve, and can be part of some other tourism product. Except for the health aspect, they also represent an attractive foundation for the widest array of tourist demand.
- *Important health contents*: Recreational and healthy activities, i.e. products where certain health contents (treatments, massages, etc.) play an important role and are the object of interest for a smaller number of subjects of tourist demand.
- *Main health contents*: As their name states, they represent the main tourism product, i.e. the main motive for traveling to a certain destination.

10 Special Hospital *Merkur*, Vrnjačka Banja ([www.vrnjcispa.com](http://www.vrnjcispa.com))

This classification is important since it gives the possibility to complementary connect the tourism product of rural tourism with some of these health contents in strategic planning.

In that context, the first of the stated products, the so-called complementary health contents, has the widest base of potential consumers, and therefore the biggest chance of tight connection with rural tourism. In other medicinal programmes, this volume is reduced, and so the possibility of complementary connection with rural tourism is reduced as well. In the third case of main health contents, this possibility is also the smallest.

*The Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia (2005)*<sup>11</sup> leaves the possibility of complementing health and wellness tourism with appropriate contents.

“With the main motives of coming to spa destinations, these guests also like to engage in activities in the open, such as golf, cycling and hiking, but they also like to get to know the historical and cultural heritage of the surroundings they visit. Sometimes, during their stay in the spa destination, they decide to go on a short field-trip in the surrounding area, with interest in local events and festivals...”

Having in mind the activities included in rural tourism and mentioned by a certain number of authors (Roberts and Hall, 2003; Lane, 1994; Thibal, 1988), and that are said to have the possibility of happening in a rural area, i.e. be part of the out-of-pension tourism offer of rural tourism, it is justified to conclude that an appropriate combination of rural tourism offer with health contents that can be included in the categories of complementary and important health contents, we can create an integrated tourism product of rural with health and wellness tourism.

Examples of this exist in the world, and the countries that have developed this type of connection the most, are the Nordic countries, Austria, Switzerland, Iceland and Canada.

The basic idea is that the tourists who are accommodated in rural households consume baths, spa, wellness, medical and health tourism services of the destination, as well as all other services in the offer of rural tourism.

Bearing in mind the unfortunately outdated and poor infrastructure of the Serbian baths and climatic destinations, as well as the potential for the development of rural tourism, it is justified to expect that minor investments in accommodation capacities and better technical and medical equipment of the health resources, we can increase the efficiency of these tourist destinations. We could reduce the fixed expenses, and the tourists would have a possibility of choice of service:

- Only rural tourism services,
- Only health and wellness tourism services, or
- A suitable combination of the two.

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<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. p. 77.

To this, we should add the possibility of completing the stay with appropriate common out-of-pension contents.

In this way, we would create the possibility for branding certain tourism products, and the large number of baths that now have problems with reception capacities could come to life again. The farmers would also get the possibility of making additional income (on accounts of tourist accommodation, selling agricultural products etc.). In this way, we could stop the negative trends that burden both rural areas as well as the development of numerous thermal baths.

### **Conclusion**

Serbia does not have the resources significant for the development of mass tourism, i.e. seashore and mountains with favourable conditions for the development of ski tourism (with the exception of the Kopaonik Mountain). It must therefore seek its chance on the tourism market in theme tourism.

Two potentially perspective forms of tourism are baths (with wellness, spa, health and medical tourism) and rural tourism. This point of view is based on resource bases the country possesses. More than 85% of Serbia's territory is rural areas, populated by about 45% of the total population<sup>12</sup>.

Serbia also has more than 40 baths and 50 thermal springs<sup>13</sup>.

What comes as a problem is the outdated infrastructure of the baths' facilities and equipment. The problem of high fixed expenses could be reduced by increasing cost-effectiveness and efficiency, by combining rural with baths tourism. The idea is that tourists could use the receptive capacities of rural tourism in combination with treatments offered by health and wellness tourism. This would solve key problems that burden doing business in tourism in Serbia today – and that is cost-effectiveness in business.

Since many baths in Serbia are located in rural areas, the possibilities for this model of development are great. Already today, some baths (such as Vrnjačka Banja, Banja Vrujci etc.) use this kind of tourist accommodation. The strategic documents however, did not pay sufficient attention to this. In other words, this possibility for development was left to a kind of chaos. This implies the policy of undifferentiated marketing, where tourism products do not focus on certain market "targets". In this way, the results of tourism are smaller than what is realistically possible. As an alternative, there is the strategy of focus, which precisely defined tourism products.

The expectations are that this approach to tourism development in Serbia could, on a mid-term (5-10 years), revive most of the now neglected balneary capacities and improve the development of rural tourism.

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<sup>12</sup> Data from the 2002 Census.

<sup>13</sup> Data from the TOS.

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## KOMPLEMENTARNOST U RAZVOJU RURALNOG SA BANJSKIM, SPA I WELLNESS TURIZMOM

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### Rezime

*Srbija ima dugu tradiciju razvoja banjskog turizma. U drugoj polovini dvadesetog veka veliki broj banja privlačio je značajan segment turističke tražnje, kako iz zemlje, tako i iz inostranstva. Međutim, zbog otežanih uslova poslovanja tokom devedesetih godina, došlo je do njihovog infrastrukturnog zastarevanja. To je imalo za rezultat negativne trendove u turističkom razvoju i stvoren je negativan imidž na turističkom tržištu.*

*Sa druge strane, ruralni turizam je relativno noviji vid turizma. U Srbiji je počeo da se razvija od sedamdesetih godina dvadesetog veka. Značajan zastoj u razvoju i kod ovog vida turizma zabeležen je takođe u devedesetim godinama. Danas se upravo ova dva vida turizma proklamuju u razvojnim strateškim dokumentima od strane Vlade i resornog ministarstava, kao razvojna šansa Srpskog turizma i privrede.*

*Konceptualni pristup ovim vidovima turizma se u radu koristi kako bi se sagledale mogućnosti njihovog komplementarnog razvoja. Prevažodno se ima u vidu resursna osnova sa kojom Srbija raspolaže za njihov razvoj ali i nove tendencije i trendovi na turističkom tržištu. Očekivanja su da bi kroz sinergijsko dejstvo ovih dvaju vidova turizma se ostvarili bolji rezultati, a Srbija bi se kao destinacija bolje pozicionirala na međunarodnom turističkom tržištu.*

**Ključne reči:** *ruralni turizam, turistička destinacija, banja, spa, wellness.*

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