

# **Assessing Demand Characteristics of Thermal Tourism in Greece through Survey of Entrepreneurs and Visitors**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years the international tourist trend is focused on the alternative forms of tourism seeking tourist services different from the usual sea-sun model. Today, more and more people are visiting the thermal springs to take advantage of the therapeutic and beneficial properties, enjoying preventive and comprehensive health treatments. Thermal tourism is of great importance for Greece, since it has a huge number of thermal springs rich in physicochemical character, suitable for the treatment of various diseases that jet naturally and are not artificially pumped. The aim of this paper is to present the basic characteristics of the thermal tourism as well as part of the results of the primary survey to the visitors and the entrepreneurs of the thermal tourism in Greece. For the literature review, secondary survey was conducted through the collection of tourism statistics from libraries, organizations and internet. The primary survey was conducted through two new questionnaires addressed to the visitors who are using spa facilities and healing services of the towns Edipsos and Methana and to the businesses which are providing thermal tourism services in Greece. The revival of the thermal spa services in global scale requires that our country will also take the necessary measurements in order the thermal tourism centers to be converted into treatment and leisure centers offering services that respond to tourists from all the economic and social levels and ages throughout the year. The tourism development should move towards to the development of alternative forms of tourism, the modernization of the existing tourist accommodation and the implementation of a special tourism marketing program.

**Keywords:** Thermal Tourism, Characteristics of Demand, Visitors, Entrepreneurs, Healing Services, Greece

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## **1 Introduction**

Nowadays, the trend of the international tourism has focused on the alternative forms of tourism seeking tourist services whose main features are environmental friendliness, active recreation and authenticity (Danchev & Paratsiokas, 2012). More and more people are visiting thermal springs in order to take advantage of the therapeutic and beneficial properties, enjoying preventive and comprehensive health treatments, mental balance, relaxation and rejuvenation programs combined with other recreational and cultural activities (Mintel, 2007).

Thermal tourism is an alternative form of tourism based on the use of hot springs to prevent and restore physical and mental health. Over time, healing tourism has been evolved by the use of new technologies and activities related to health, wellness services such as sauna, massage and other relaxation techniques, with a range of therapeutic and preventive treatments as well as physical activities (Sfakianakis, 2000, Mintel, 2006).

## **2 Purpose**

The aim of this paper is to present the basic characteristics of the thermal tourism as well as part of the results of the primary survey addressed to the visitors and the entrepreneurs of the thermal tourism in Greece. Due to the importance of the understanding the tourism demand and the lack of sufficient economic data and statistics in the thermal tourism in Greece, it was chosen to record and conduct conclusions of economic figures related to tourism demand. The purpose of the questionnaire of the primary survey is the depiction of tourism demand by recording the profile of the visitors of thermal tourism, the tourist behavior, the expected benefits, and the satisfaction level. Regarding the companies which are offering thermal services, the survey was related to the characteristics of the business, of their clients and the business policy.

## **3 Material-Methods**

For the literature review, secondary survey was conducted through the collection of tourism statistics from libraries, organizations and internet. The primary survey was conducted through two new questionnaires addressed to:

- ❖ Visitors using spa facilities and healing services of the towns Edipsos and Methana
- ❖ Businesses providing thermal tourism services:
  - Thermal Spas
  - Hotel businesses with thermal facilities

The primary survey was conducted through both hard copy and electronic questionnaires. The processing of the results of the research and the outcome of conclusions was made by using the SPSS statistical program.

For the needs of the survey of the thermal's tourism visitors a structured questionnaire was drafted in two languages, Greek and English. The questionnaire consists of 24 closed questions. Two thermal tourism destinations, Methana and Edipsos, were selected as research parties. The sample consists of 142 tourists who accepted to participate in the survey. The questionnaires were completed during the visit of the researcher twice in Edipsos and once in Methana. The survey was conducted during the months of July, August and September 2015, where the largest tourist activity for thermal tourism is concentrated.

For the survey needs of the businesses which are providing thermal tourism services, a structured questionnaire in the Greek language was designed. It consists of 22 closed questions, while in some of them the respondent can give more than one answer. All of the 60 enterprises which operate and offer spa tourism services in Greece were selected. The total of 57 questionnaires were gathered, which accounts for 95% of the total spa thermal facilities. The online questionnaires were sent by email to the businesses through the Google Form. In a few cases the questionnaire was completed by telephone through personal interview of the respondents by the researcher. Also in the cases of Methana and Edipsos towns the hard copy questionnaires were completed in the area of the spa facilities by the entrepreneurs themselves or by the researcher based on their answers. The survey was carried out from spring 2015 until autumn 2015, where most thermal Spas facilities were operating and concerned the data for the year 2014.

## **4 The Main Characteristics of Thermal Tourism in Greece**

According to the latest inventory of the Institute of Geological and Mineral Exploration in 1988, the recorded sources of thermal water in Greece are 822. Most of them are in coastal areas, less in plains and even less in mountain ranges. The geographical distribution of the thermal springs is associated with the morphology of the country mainly due to volcanic eruptions and tectonic cracks, while some are not related to volcanic activity and are found in mountainous areas. Of all the sources, 752 thermal springs are utilizable, while only 348 of them are in use. 180 are used for balneotherapy, 148 for drinking therapy and 20 for both balneotherapy and drinking therapy. Thermal sources can be divided into two categories: the Thermal Sources of Tourist Importance and the Thermal Sources of Local Importance. There are 23 Sources of Tourist Importance in Greece, in 16 of them hydrotherapy is applied and 53 of local significance, 36 of which are functioning (Koumelis, 1996, Spathi, 2000).

The demand for thermal tourism is characterized by a high seasonality in large spa resorts, as the majority of visitors are visiting them from August to September. The demand concerns mainly domestic tourism, older people, women

in the highest proportion, of low socio-economic level motivated to cure a disease rather than revitalizing the body. Several thermal sources, although are considered to be very valuable due to their geographical location, their quantity and their quality of their thermal waters, are not exploitable at all or are characterized by lack of modern facilities. Due to the financial situation in Greece, there have been many budget's cuts in health care and insurance funds, and as a result fewer insured people are given the opportunity to use thermal services, while modern luxury facilities are considered inaccessible to the average Greek people. At the same time, the lack of resources for investment to upgrade facilities, the non-enrichment of thermal tourism with other forms of alternative tourism and the small range of wellness products are preventing the development of health tourism. In addition, inadequate information about the use of thermal waters not only for the rehabilitation but also for the prevention of illnesses at all ages, as well as the lack of integrated planning by the state, so that there would be strategic marketing programs for the promotion of thermal tourism in Greece and abroad, have prevent the development of this kind of tourism (Sfakianakis, 2000, Kouskoulis, 2016, Venetsanopoulou, 2006, Papageorgiou, 2010).

## **5 Results of Survey to the Visitors of Thermal Tourism**

In 2015, a primary survey was conducted to the visitors of thermal tourism in the towns of Edipsos and Methana in order to gather more data for the demand for this type of tourism. The results regarding the satisfaction of the thermal facilities according to the demographics data of the participants showed that the primary/ secondary/ high school graduates had significantly higher satisfaction score compared to the Vocational Training Institute/ University/ Master graduates. There was also a significant difference in the satisfaction score according to the annual individual income of the participants. In particular, it was found that participants with up to € 10,000 annual personal income were significantly more satisfied than participants with annual individual income over € 15,000. These results confirm the theory that people with higher education and income are more demanding, more informed, more experienced travelers and demand better value for money.

With regard to the duration of the use of the thermal facilities, participants with up to € 10,000 income are using the thermal facilities for more days to complete the therapeutic healing spa treatment cycle compared to those with higher income who may wish to acquire more travel experiences. Also participants with income up to € 10,000 were more satisfied with cleanliness than participants with higher-income. As far as the facilities are concerned, as income grew, the sauna was used more in addition to the classical hydrotherapy method of bathing.

The money which was spent by the participants during their stay, was found to be related to the frequency of their visits to the thermal facilities. Specifically, the more often they were visiting them, the less money they were

spending. The majority of people who are visiting the baths less than once a year are spending more than 51 euros per day while those who are visiting them one or more than 2 times are spending up to 30 euros. As far as the duration of the visits, it happens the same; those who are using the thermal facilities 1-7 days are spending over 51 euros while those who are using them over 8 days are spending up to 30 euros. Regarding the wellness services which are used, those who are spending up to 30 euros are using mainly the bath facilities while those who are spending from 51 euros and more are using mainly except from bath facilities, massage and sports activities.

## **6 Results of Survey to the Businesses providing Thermal Tourism Services**

Concerning the results of the thermal spa centers, the duration that their visitors usually are using the thermal facilities with regard to their ages are almost equally distributed at ages less than 50, 47.4% are making use up to 7 days and 52,6% over 7 days. Instead, the ages over 50, at 70.3% are using more than 7 days the thermal facilities probably in order to complete the healing spa treatment cycle rather than recreation and prevention. Concerning the expenditure, the overwhelming majority of 91.9% in the age group over 50 spends up to 30 euros per day for thermal tourism services where the low income retirement age group belongs, while the age category below 50, at 72.2% spends up 30 euros per day. At the question of how often do they repeat approximately their visit to the thermal facilities, customers over 50 years old are visiting them once a year at percentage 94.7%, significantly higher proportion compared to those under the age of 50 who in percentage of 52.6 % are visiting them once a year and 47.4% of them, even more often. Also, the rates of people who are using massage, clay therapy and beauty treatments were significantly higher when customers were under 50 years old compared to those who were over 50 years old, indicating that the focus on healing tourism should be targeted at younger ages.

As far as the tourist offer is concerned, 87.7% of the businesses had the intention of expanding their services in the future, which is very encouraging. The biggest competition exists in Italy, as 48.4% of the businesses declared. 63.2% of the enterprises said that tourism development in the region should move towards to the development of alternative forms of tourism, 57.9% towards to the modernization of the existing tourist accommodation, while 52.6% towards to the implementation of a special tourism marketing program.

## **7 Conclusions**

The revitalization of the thermal spa services in global scale requires that our country should take necessary measurements in order the thermal tourism centers to be converted into treatment and leisure centers offering services that respond to tourists from all the economic and social levels and ages throughout the year. Thermal tourism is of great importance for Greece, since it has a huge number of thermal springs rich in physicochemical character, suitable for the treatment of various diseases that jet naturally and are not artificially pumped. In combination to the favorable climatic conditions, the different natural alternating environments (mountainous, lowland, lakeside, seaside), the rich cultural and historical heritage, the Mediterranean diet, the privileged position on the tourist map and the fact that Greece is a safe tourist destination, are an excellent combination with a lot of capabilities for the development of spa tourism and other forms of alternative tourism, offering an additional diversified tourist product for the country (Hellenic Association of Municipalities with Thermal Springs, 2006, Aggelidis, 2014).

The exploitation of the therapeutic properties and the capacity of the thermal springs would bring many economic and social benefits that will contribute not only to the economic development at national level but also in areas that are untapped, such as job growth, extension of the tourist season and income growth. Some of the measures in this direction are: to adapt the legal framework so that people from abroad can come through their insurance funds, to define a national strategy for the promotion of thermal tourism and to identify the identity of the thermalism centers. Furthermore, it would be important to include the centers of the healing therapy and the thalassotherapy centers in the primary health care and to recognize the hydrotherapy, the clay therapy etc. as a healing treatment. Finally, businesses should expand the offered services beyond balneotherapy by enriching the healing tourism product in the direction of wellness throughout the year (Aggelidis, 2014; Aggelidis, 2017; Kouskoukis, 2014).

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