

SPAS AT THE WEST OF THE COUNTRY - PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Abstract: *SPAS at the West of the country – Past, Present and Future.* The evolution of tourism in our country particularly balneary tourism, shows an extensive growth, especially after 1970 when material and technical resources started an ascending evolution which has linked, by its dimension and structure, to the dynamics of the consumers' demand of that time. It also reflects the decrease brought by the economic and social changes after 1989. The macroeconomic stability which began in 2000, illustrated in 2001 by an ascending average annual rhythm of growth, represents a favorable premise to reinvigorate the demand of tourism products and investments in this sector and a good dynamic of arrivals and income might have as an effect the growth of the tourism share to the gross national product, new jobs and a multiplier effect by involving economy fields which depend on the touristic phenomenon. However, the global economic crisis will certainly leave its mark upon the balneary tourism as well.

Rezumat: *SPA-urile din vestul țării – trecut, prezent și viitor.* Evoluția turismului din țara noastră, în special turismul balnear, indică o creștere extensivă, mai ales după anul 1970 când resursele materiale și tehnice au început o evoluție care era legată, prin dimensiunea și structura sa, de dinamicile cererii consumatorilor din acea vreme. Aceasta reflectă și scăderea adusă de schimbările economice și sociale de după anul 1989. Stabilitatea macroeconomică care a început în anul 2000, ilustrată în 2001 de un ritm mediu anual de creștere, reprezintă o premisă favorabilă pentru revigorarea cererii produselor turistice și a investițiilor din acest sector iar o bună dinamică a sosirilor și veniturilor poate avea drept efect, dezvoltarea turismului susținut de produsul național brut, noi locuri de muncă și un efect multiplicator prin implicarea sectoarelor economice care depind de fenomenul turistic, Oricum, criza economică globală își va lăsa cu siguranță amprenta și asupra turismului balnear.



Key-words: *spas; balneary tourism; tourism development.*
Cuvinte cheie: *spa, turism balnear, dezvoltarea turismului.*

1. PREAMBLE

The western part of the country is very rich in *thermal and mineral water resources* which have been exploited since roman times in well known spas like: Felix, 1 Mai, Stâna de Vale, Moneasa, Geoagiu, Vața de Jos, Lipova, Buziaș. Later on, based on those therapeutic factors, other smaller or seasonal spas have developed: Tinca, Călacea, Bogda, Boghiș, Zăuan, Zalnoc, Iaz, Bixad, Beltiug, Acâș, Valea Pomilor, Meseșenii de Sus, Valea Măriei, Tășnad, or are being only exploited punctually and insignificantly for bathing (Satu Mare, Carei, Oradea, Sânicolau de Munte, Săcueni, Tămășeu, Marghita, Mădăras, Arad, Timișoara, Curtici, Șofronea, Dorobanți, Nădlac, Sânicolau Mare, Lovrin, Deta, Sânmihaiu German, Jimbolia). In many locations, those thermo-mineral resources remained as closed wells in the „happiest case” (Chișineu Criș, Macea, Variaș, Periam, Lenauheim, Șandra, Salonta, Cheșereu) or are wasted on the field (Socodor, Biled, Teremia Mare, Beba Veche, Cărpiniș, Cebza, Tomnatic, Banloc, Ciocaia, Răbăgani, Albești, Finiș, Pădurea Neagră, Rapoțel). The present study shows a short history of the most important spas in the west of the country, as well as their actual state, as they are included in different financing projects which could transform the spas in real pearls of the balneary tourism in the south-eastern Europe.

2. SHORT HISTORY OF THE SPAS IN THE WEST OF THE COUNTRY

The first records of the settlement of **Buziaș** are dated 1369 when it appears under the name of *Buzus* or *Bozas*. The archaeologists uncovered popes and bricks which prove that mineral water has been exploited as far back as the Roman Empire (Borza, A., 1943). The mineral water and carbon dioxide deposit was rediscovered between the years 1796-1805 and had an important role in the evolution of the settlement. In 1811 the first organized spa season opened and the spa came into being. Shortly, the therapeutic value of the mineral waters was known in Hungary and the neighboring countries, as the region was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. Until the end of the XIXth century, the waters were taken internally, by drinking water. The development of the spa is linked to the discovery, in 1903, of the artesian water bed which allowed the treatment of cardio-vascular diseases by bathing (bathing in strongly carbonated and heated mineral water). In 1840 dr. Gheorghe Ciocârlan first bottled mineral water and in 1906, Buziaș Spa was purchased by Jakob Muschong and stayed in Muschong-Patianski's family possession until the nationalization, in 1948. There still are

arguments upon the ownership of the spa and the legal problems limited the investments and consequently its development.

Moneasa has a history of over 100 years although the healing effect of the waters has been known since roman times. On May 13th 1886, the Imperial Internal Affairs in Vienna gave Moneasa the name “spa” (Gureanu, D., Ștefanov, T., Sever, D., Borza, G., Șimon, A., 2005). After the revolution of December 1989, despite its special natural assets, Moneasa once a pearl of Arad tourism, has decayed year by year and entered a vicious circle. Funds were no more available for investments in material assets which have depreciated and ensured no standards for tourism. Lack of tourists has generated lack of funds and so the circle has closed and almost brought to total and irreversible insolvency of the spa.

The area of **Geoagiu Spa**, known since pre-roman times under the name of *Germisara*, has been used since ancient times. This leisure and balneo-therapy area was known in roman times as *Termae Dodonae*, with balneary edifices which used the natural thermo-mineral springs (Munteanu L., Stoicescu C, Grigore L., 1978). The source used by geto-dacians was discovered by archaeologists inside a rounded travertine hillock called „Dâmbul Romanilor” (*“Romans` Hillock”*). The Romans arranged the spring and enlarged the pool, collecting water through a network of terra-cotta tubes that bear Marcus Aurelius`s, leader of XIII-th Legion Gemina, mark.. The marks of roman balneary buildings at Geoagiu explain the records like *„Tabula Pentingeriana”* in which Germisara is mentioned as being close to Ulpia Traiana, along the great imperial road to the capital Sarmizegetusa (Tudor, D., 1968). After a period of decline during middle ages, at the end of XXth century this geographic area reinvigorated and started to use thermo-mineral waters and new balneary edifices aroused. At first, the research was based on data gathered around the travertine hillock springs and later on the area widened and new sources of thermo-mineral water were valued. During 1960-1985 the overview of the thermo-mineral water deposit was completed after several multi-disciplinary researches which had the same goal, to optimize the exploitation of the thermo-mineral deposit. Nowadays, Geoagiu Spa has the air of a developing resort, although it confronted decay during the 90s.

One of the western attractions which underwent major changes year after year is **Lipova Spa**, one of the „Arad pearls”. Timișoara, Arad or the counties surrounding it, people come here every year either for the facilities or the mineral water known as „the water of the kings”. Although in present time people are making the same eternal journeys to provide themselves with mineral water directly from the two springs at the outskirts of the resort, during the 150 years of existence it`s had moments of difficulty, and those who made a habit out of visiting it, can confirm that. Before 1990, Lipova Spa was appreciated especially by people suffering from heart diseases, as the mineral waters here have healing properties. There were several hostels, treatment bases, hotels, mineral water springs. After 1990 everything was wrecked, but ten years ago, a businessman in the field of mineral water, bought the majority share package of a Lipova Spa in ruin. As far as the investments are concerned, those who passed by the resort at least once, can confirm that it is a real asset. But there are also voices

that say that nobody is eager to invest in the old treatment bases ever since they have been neglected for more than 19 years (Ciangă, N., 1997).

Discovered in ancient times, *Felix Spa* and *I Mai Spa* have geo-thermal springs with proved healing properties and the mineral waters here were certified in 1221. It was known as “Sânmartin Spa” after the settlement nearby, or “Episcopal Baths” During 1711–1722 the baths undergo extensive development and modernization works, due to H. Felix. In 1763 chemical analyses of the water were made and a first map of the area. From the work „Thermae Varadiensis”, published in 1777, we find out that Felix and I Mai Baths were flourishing. They were appreciated for treatment both by locals and by patients coming from far away. Many traveler’s notes show that in the XVIII, balneary treatment started to shape as organized tourism. Brick pools were built for the rich as well as rooms to accommodate in winter while common people had wooden pools which only could be used in summer. In 1857, only one year after an official doctor was appointed for consultations during summer, the treatment tax was introduced for those who needed treatment for more than four days. That was the actual start moment of the balneary tourism assisted by specialists even though the most spectacular development of the baths area was to start only after 100 years.

The date the thermo-mineral waters at *Vața de Jos* started to be used is unknown, but we know that the first baths belonged to the voivode of Hălmagiu, Ștefan Moga and that the benefic waters were also used by the ottoman invaders to treat their wounds and rheumatic problems (Date din Arhiva Romtel Turism, Vața de Jos). The first wooden establishments were built at that time, in the swampy area in the middle of the settlement where snow never lays in winter. At the beginning of the XIXth century, the balneary establishments got into the ownership of the family of a Jewish trader Bercovici, who came here from Bucovina. The new owners replaced the wooden buildings with new, brick ones, they built accommodation two pools, restaurants and leisure areas. They also planted trees in the park around the resort on a structure that lasted until 1994. Later on, the resort was taken by the Hunedoara County Tourism Office and it made a lot of important investments, building a new and modern equipped treatment base. In 1994 the spa was bought by the State through ROMTELECOM, which invested both in accommodation facilities and in the treatment base, bringing it to European standards. But in the summer of 2005 the spa was closed.

In 1882 the Greek Catholic Episcopacy, following Bishop Mihai Pavel’s initiative, built at *Stâna de Vale* a small chalet and in 1883 the first hotel, called “Siberia” and the restaurant Elisabeta. Later on, Hotel Pavel and several villas were built, all being sustained by the new road built in 188, partly in use today between Budureasa and Stâna de Vale. Given up at the end of the XIXth century to the Greek Catholic Church by the empress Maria Theresa, the resort knew a period of stagnation until 1932 when a 42 km long narrow gauge railway was built along the line Valea Iadului – Bulz – Stâna de Vale at Bishop Valeriu Frențiu’s initiative. In 1933 Hotel Pavel was refurbished and Hotel Belvedere and Hotel Excelsior were set up, all endowed with central heating, hot water and electricity. Bihor Tourism Club set up here the first

shelter, preserved until today, in the shape of a small church. After 1950, the resort was taken over by the Romanian State and it entered the County Tourism Office which started the modernization of the existing facilities. In 1976 Hotel Iadolina, Cerbul Villa and the restaurant are built and in 1987 the first cable ski lift device, the cableway on the ski slope Măgarul, in use today (Berlescu Elena, 1971). Nowadays, the resort's situation is not very comforting, because of the dispute over the ownership of the land, claimed by the Greek Catholic Episcopacy and also because of the strong competition of the new tourismic area at Vârtop.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF THE BALNEARY TOURISM IN THE WEST OF THE COUNTRY AFTER 1990

After 1990, Romanian balneary tourism went through a crisis, but after the year 2000 the resorts in the west of the country seemed to revive. Only the name remained from the fame Romanian balneary tourism once had, because the resorts Felix, 1 Mai, Tinca, Lipova, Geoagiu, Vața de Jos, Buziaș have continuously degraded, the hotels are in decay and the stylish villas are almost broken down. The period during which the hotels and villas were in the administration of some companies was the culmination of their decay. Rescue came from some investors who found solutions to bring the resorts in the west of the country in the top of Romanian resorts.

After a long period of time, when they were deprived of enterprise, privatisation saved them but the investors found themselves owners of agonizing resorts, with huge hotels, shabby treatment bases in need of colossal investments, many villas in the same condition and camping areas which do not conform to the EU standards. Economic mechanisms were considered to reinvigorate the resorts by attracting other investors, under different legal forms that took over a part of the shares and invested in renovation. Some of the resorts represent a bet won with chance because they were nearly wiped off the touristic map of Romania, like it happened with some small resorts developed during the Austro Hungarian period (Bixad Baths, Zăuand Baths, Zalnoc Baths, Meseșenii de Sus, Valea Pomilor, Chieșd, Beltiug, Balc, Iaz Baths, Bogda, Ivanda, Teremia Mare), (Figure 1).

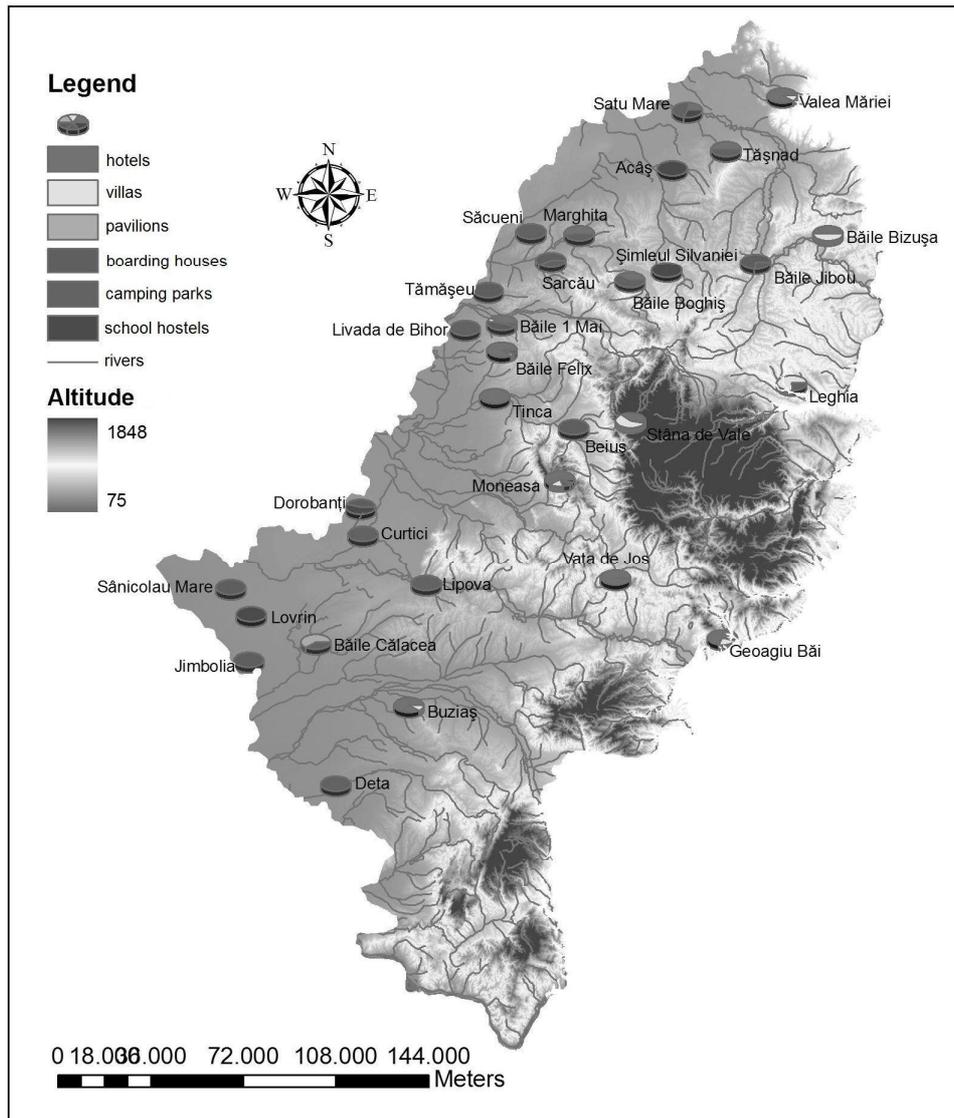


Figure 1: Allotment of accommodation spaces developed based on therapeutic factors in the west of the country

4. TOURISTIC ACTIVITY IN BALNEARY RESORTS AT PRESENT AND IN THE FUTURE

At present the activity of the balneary resorts is flourishing as many investments are developing. The societies of balneary treatment are now quoted at the market, the main stockholder being the “Transylvania Society of Financial Investments”. Since 2005 important renewal works have been started and the process means not only the improvement of the accommodation and treatment base but also a wide process of redefining the clientele. In the first place, a higher comfort degree was desired for all accommodation facilities and many hotels have been renewed and comfort degree has risen from two stars to three, four or even to five stars. Important amounts of money have been put into balneary sector, for setting up modern treatment bases. The fact led to the financial evolution of the company which recorded a 200% higher income in 2008 compared to the year 2005. In addition, the income has doubled even though the number of tourists has decreased with almost 1,000 to a total of about 4,000 tourists. The evolution was based on the clients` base which was reorganized and reoriented from the subsidized mass tourism to the “well paid” tourism. Even so, the Pensions Office remains the main client of the spas Buziaş, Felix Baths, 1 Mai Baths, Tinca, Călăcea Baths. The Pensions Office provides them with that category of clients called “the assisted”. In 2005, 70% of the clients were pensioners but it’s dropped to 49% up to present. (Bibirigea, I., R., 2007). The present object of the company management is for contracting as many private tourists as possible.

As quality tourism can’t be done with low skilled staff, the important spas in the west of the country have invested a lot in training, both for services and medical staff. Retraining is also necessary for waiters, cooks, housekeeping staff and receptionists. The company management has requested to the representatives of the educational system, to prepare young people in special tourism classes.

The investments projected for the spas do not stop here. Long term strategy makes provisions even for renewing the old parts of the spas Buziaş, Moneasa and Felix. Unfortunately, these investments address only the old parts of the spas which are owned by the company: the old Casino, Imperial Villa, Phoenix Villa in Buziaş, Apollo pools area, Pavilion II in Felix Baths. The same kind of investments are being made in other spas too: Pavilions and the restaurant din Tinca Baths, Moneasa villas, pavilions in Călăcea Baths, but the works are made by those who purchased the buildings. At the same time, the necessary investments have been started for enlarging and modernizing the pools and treatment bases in Felix Baths, 1 Mai Baths, Buziaş, Lipova, Moneasa, Geoagiu, Stâna de Vale, Călăcea, Tăşnad, Marghita. The project for the new pool at Buziaş is quite an impressive one; it will be 24 meters long and seven meters wide. The pool will be covered by two glass pyramid skylights.

Within the activity of the spas, business tourism is not used at full capacity. Big spas, like Buzias, Felix Baths, Geoagiu, Moneasa, Stâna de Vale have an important advantage and can take pride in having accommodation possibilities for business tourism. Due to the great number of rooms and conference halls which are already functioning, meetings, seminars and big conferences can be organized here. At the same time future projects include new conference rooms. Businessmen expect spa and wellness centers and many such projects have been already implemented: in Buziaș the project foresees two Jacuzzis and some water games and also milk baths, so called “Cleopatra’s baths” very much appreciated by spa visitors.

Moneasa is renewing on European funding on a 3 million grant out of which 80% irredeemable, project made by the Arad County Council. Through this project, a sports ground will be modernized and given multiple functions and a gym will be built.

After a visit in Lipova you will be impressed by the beauty of the place and the tourism potential of the spa. Starting with the two pools and three restaurants, after massive investments a bungalow park was set up, with 15 bungalows (with twin beds, running hot water and shower). At the same time, as a support for visitors who like trips and trailer camping, there is a trailer camp with connection to electricity, fresh water pipe or for tents. As for the future, plans are to get as many grants as they can, and invest in the treatment base, in saunas, hydro-massage, plus a sports ground with a soccer field, a tennis court and a mini-golf course.

Another advantage of the spas Buziaș, Felix Baths, 1 Mai Baths, Moneasa, Stâna de Vale, Geoagiu is that they could successfully develop the week-end and leisure tourism as big cities nearby offer good perspective in the matter. But there are conditions needed, to attract week-end tourists with something. People won’t come in a spa just to have a drink at the bar or at the restaurant (as poor the offer is), but to have access to a quality recreation area. Therefore, more pools are needed and also quality services. Competition comes from Gyula, Mako, Bekescsaba, Oroshaza-Gzoparos, Gzoma, Jula Hajduszoboszlo, Szeged in Hungary, very much appreciated and visited especially by Romanians from Timișoara, Arad and Bihor. The difference between the spas in Hungaria and the ones in the west of Romania is that we also have mineral water and we are specialized in treatment cardiovascular, gynecologic, rheumatologic and locomotive diseases, and the prices are lower than abroad.

Foreign tourists are of no concern at the moment, although Buziaș, Felix, Moneasa, Geoagiu, Stâna de Vale accommodate groups of tourists from Germany, Austria, Czech Republic who say that they discovered the spas and come back every year. We can also mention the Swabians who left Romania, people who know about the healing qualities of the thermo-mineral waters in the west of the country and who could come in the future for treatment. This category represents a strong object for the western tourism companies. They also try to promote balnear vacations among the Romanian communities in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, etc.

The continuous development of the resorts depends not only on the investments of the companies that manage them but also on the local authorities. In this respect, companies organized meetings with Hungarian mayors as they wish to set up a Development Association and obtain European grants on cross border projects.

The plumbing must be modernized as well as the sewerage in the resorts, country roads must be repaired and parks must be set up. For the near future, the resorts in the west of the country wish to become pearls of the European tourism, and foreign tourists to come here for leisure or treatment, and for that, tourism information centers must be opened in all the resorts in the west of the country (Botezat Elena, 2003).

The adherence to the European Union compels the treatment centers to invest massively so that one star or two stars classifications are no more in use at spas hotels. The resorts will need a re-certification and pass from one or two stars to three stars or more, thing that involves huge investments (INCDT, 2000).

All hotels are private and modernization expenditures are in charge of the owners. In its turn, the National Tourism Agency has decided to assign almost 90 million euro for the rehabilitation of the spas` infrastructure (utilities, parks, public lighting, etc.). Money will be transferred to the County Councils, but the resorts which will benefit by financing. Therefore, if re-launching balneary tourism is desired, grants both from private investors (in hotels) and the state (in infrastructure) will be needed. Some of the investors have conditioned their investment in hotels, by the infrastructure rehabilitation. SIF Transilvania, the biggest investor in balneary tourism, allocates important amounts of money for transforming accommodation structures from two stars classification to a superior category and to do that, an investment of about 8,000 euro is needed per room. The developers have understood that medium and upper class are the future of balneary tourism, not pensioners. Also an important asset will be European tourists who come not necessarily for treatment but also for leisure.

The number of Romanian tourists has fallen year by year, despite the promotion campaigns made by ANT. Last year the Agency invested almost 1.5 million euro in creating and broadcasting an advertisement. Hundreds of thousands euro have been spent for advertising Romanian balneary tourism abroad. The amounts of money are considerable, but there are no reports regarding the effects of these campaigns. Meantime pensioners are the only constant clients of the spas (Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism 2007 – 2026).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Romanian spas, including the ones in the west of the country, will be rehabilitated and modernized in the next three years through European funds by involving many foreign investors interested in the balneary potential of our country. The modernization process of the Romanian

spas requires the progressive use of SPA concepts (health through water) but the medical component of the session will be kept. The possibility addresses not only the spas but also the potential beneficiaries of the environment factors. A few projects of renewing the spas and attracting foreign clients are the chance to transform balneary tourism in the west of the country in a landmark on the map of the Euroregion tourism.

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