

Characteristics and Motivations of Wellness Visitors in Portorož During the Low Season

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This paper aims to explore wellness visitors in Portorož with regards to their socio-demographic characteristics and to identify their push motivators and activities carried out by them.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey with structured questions was collected from 246 visitors to Portorož during the low season; 77 of them were identified as wellness visitors, and they were considered for further analysis on wellness visitors. Data were collected across several locations in Portorož. Descriptive statistics is used in empirical research.

Findings – Wellness visitors to Portorož are mostly older, employed, and regular visitors to Portorož. They mostly desire to get fit and relax. Of particular interest is that wellness visitors in Portorož are mostly engaged in passive activities and activities offered in the hotel facilities.

Originality – The paper provides an initial step in understanding wellness visitors in Portorož better and, therefore, contributes to the existing sparse literature on wellness tourism by adding the case of a Mediterranean destination during the low season.

Keywords: wellness, survey, wellness visitors, characteristics, motivations

Background

The development and the expansion of wellness tourism have become a trend inside the tourism industry, with the wellness product perceived to be a fashionable tourist product (Medina-Munoz & Medina-Munoz, 2013, p. 416). However, there are different terms, such as “health tourism”, “wellness tourism” and “medical tourism”, used in the literature. The distinctions between them are vague (Singh, 2013, p. 437) and differently defined by different authors. Health tourism is defined by Hall (2003, p. 274) as “a commercial phenomenon of industrial society which involves a person travelling overnight away from the normal home environment for the express benefit of maintaining or improving health, and the supply and promotion of facilities and destinations which seek to provide such benefits”. Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2013) state that medical tourism and wellness tourism are parts of health tourism. While

medical tourism involves specific medical treatment, wellness tourism is more difficult to define, because it has different meanings in different parts of the world. Smith and Puczko (2009, p. 7) argue that wellness is related to spa waters in Europe, while it has traditional spiritual aspects in Asia. Konu et al. (2010, p. 127) state that wellness and well-being are sometimes used as synonyms; nevertheless, well-being is defined more widely, including factors related to the basic things in life, such as wealth, and the availability of food and services, social contact, work, leisure activities and spiritual beliefs.

Wellness is usually connected with a healthy lifestyle that people attempt to pursue as a response to the demands of the modern fast pace of life. The wellness concept and its philosophy were developed by Dunn in late 1950s, consisting of three elements (body, spirit and mind) being dependent on their environment (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001, p. 2)

underlying the liaison between health and environment. Corbin and Pangrazi (2001) and Adams (2003 in Smith & Puczko, 2009, p. 54) define wellness as a multi-dimensional activity related to the quality of life and well-being. Moreover, Hettler (1984, p. 14) defined wellness as “an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward a more successful existence”, and developed six-dimensional model of wellness consisting of physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social and occupational dimensions. Therefore, the holistic approach of wellness is complex.

Many destinations today are attempting to position themselves as wellness destinations merely focusing on the physical dimension of wellness. This type of tourism is growing rapidly due to the growing importance of the healthy lifestyle philosophy. Mueller and Kauffmann (2001, p. 3) defined wellness tourism as:

[...] the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motive is to preserve or promote their health; they stay in a specialized hotel which provides the appropriate professional knowhow and individual care; they require a comprehensive service package comprising physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/meditation and mental activity/education.

Nevertheless, wellness tourism is an area with few empirical studies from which to gather information about wellness tourists (Voigt et al., 2011). Understanding the motivations of wellness tourists is central to designing tourism products and promotional messages (Frochot & Morrison, 2000). Although many studies of motivations in tourism have been undertaken (e.g., Sirakaya et al., 2003; Sarigollu & Huang, 2005; Park & Yoon, 2009; Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012), identifying dimensions of motivations in tourism with regard to push (internal) and pull (external) motivators, only a few attempts have been made to define the motivations of wellness tourists. A recent study of Wongkit and McKercher (2013) investigated motivators for medical tourists. Identification of motivators of wellness tourists could help to understand this particular target market and develop better tourism supplies.

Research on wellness tourism has somewhat increased since 2009, but it remains uncommon. Mueller and Kauffmann (2001) researched implications of wellness tourism for the hotel industry, while Weiermair and Steinhäuser (2003) researched segments of wellness tourists in the Alps, and Deng (2007) analysed destination attributes that are important for tourists in Taiwanese hot springs. Since then, the push motivators of wellness tourists have been analysed by Chen et al. (2008) in hot springs in Taiwan, by Mak et al. (2009) among Hong-Kong spa-goers and by Voigt et al. (2011) in lifestyle resorts in Australia.

Pull motivators of wellness tourists were researched by Lee et al. (2009) for hot springs in Taiwan, by Pesonen et al. (2011) among well-being tourists in Finland, and by Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2013) in wellness centres on Grand Canaria. The demand characteristics of wellness tourists in Greece were researched by Magdalini and Paris (2009). Moreover, Bertsch and Ostermann (2011) analysed the effects of wellness brand awareness on expected and perceived service quality in Western Austria.

Review of studies of wellness visitors profile (Smith & Puczko, 2009, p. 134) shows that traditional spas, which offer sitting in mineral waters, massage, sauna and steam room, are visited by older people with specific diseases or complaints; meanwhile, hotels and day spas, which offer beauty treatments, relaxing massage, aromatherapy, Jacuzzi, are usually visited by high income visitors, business tourists, usually women. Moreover, seaside resorts and thalassotherapy centres are visited by older high income guests. Thus, older populations usually are the consumers of wellness facilities. Kaung-Hwa et al. (2013) investigated older consumers, hotel personnel, and expert opinions in the hotel industry in Taiwan and found that hot spring hotels can focus on critical customer-service items for wellness tourism, resource management, and resource allocation to improve competitive advantages in the tourism industry. In contrast, Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2013) found that wellness centres on Gran Canaria are visited by middle-aged visitors.

Wellness tourism is important in order to extend the high season, and lower seasonality in seaside destinations usually characterized with high seasonality.

ty. The issue of seasonality during the low season is addressed in a few research papers (e.g. Spencer & Holecek, 2007; Figini & Vici, 2012). Wellness tourism is suitable for reducing seasonality in seaside destinations. In fact, Huang and Kucukusta (2013) found that fresh air, clean water and natural features are the most important attributes for wellness tourism, Mediterranean seaside destinations have tried to reposition themselves also through wellness with health services (Crabtree, 2007). Moreover, Chen et al. (2008), Smith and Puczko (2009) and Rodriguez et al. (2010) argue that wellness tourism is increasingly sought in combination with other tourism products.

There is a paucity of empirical research of wellness tourists in the Mediterranean area. Portorož, a small destination in the North Mediterranean, is used as a case study; its wellness facilities are in the form of hotel spas. Portorož has the largest segment of so called “well-being visitors” in the shoulder season in spring (Nemec Rudež et al., 2013). This segment is represented by visitors who seek benefits related to physical activity and price convenience but do not frequently visit spas in Portorož.

The purpose of this study is to uncover the characteristics of wellness visitors to Portorož during the low season and, therefore, enhance understanding of wellness visitors in that season. It will enable wellness tourism stakeholders to make decisions on the supply side to match consumer needs (Dwyer et al., 2009 in Medina-Munoz & Medina-Munoz, 2009, p. 416). Additionally, this paper contributes to the understanding of wellness visitors in a seaside destination that has undergone a process of repositioning from a mass 3S destination towards a modern sustainable-oriented destination with diversified tourism products.

Methodology

The objective of the paper is to gain insight into the characteristics of wellness visitors to Portorož and their push motivators. This study is a part of a broader study on foreign visitors to Portorož. A survey using a structured questionnaire was conducted. There were questions related to socio-demographic and travel-related characteristics in the first part of the questionnaire and 15 five-point Likert-type scales on push motivations in the second part of the questionnaire. Push motivations were selected based on the

literature review of push motivations (Nemec Rudež et al., 2013).

Proportional quota sampling was used in the research in order to meet the structure of visitors to Portorož. The data were collected between November 15, 2010 and January 20, 2011. Face-to-face surveys were carried out in several public locations in Portorož.

Only visitors to Portorož who often visit spas there were included in the present research. Among the 246 visitors who completed the questionnaire, 77 declared that they usually visit spas; they are identified as wellness visitors for the purpose of the study. These visitors represent the research sample. Descriptive data analysis was used to describe the characteristics of the wellness visitors, their travel-related characteristics and push motivations. Since the sample is too small to conduct factor analysis in order to reveal the dimensions of push motivations, descriptive analysis using means and standard deviations was undertaken.

Findings

Less than one third (31.3%) of visitors to Portorož go to the spas during the low season in Portorož. Table 1 shows the demographics of wellness tourists. Half of wellness visitors were female (50.6%), and half were male (49.4%). The largest age groups were between 40 and 49 years old (28.6%) and between 50 and 59 years old (28.6%). The age structure shows that more than three quarters of wellness visitors were 40 or over. Almost half (45.5%) of the wellness visitors come from Italy. Wellness visitors are mostly employed (46.8%) or self-employed (22.1%) and there only 14.3% are retired people. They are mostly (57.1%) high spenders (spending more than €60 per person per day); meanwhile one third (33.8%) of them spend between €30 and €60 per person per day, which is relatively high spending since the study is during the low season, when prices are lower.

Word of mouth is the most valuable source of information for wellness visitors, since 31.2% of wellness visitors gather information from relatives and friends. It is followed by the internet, used by 27.2% of wellness visitors to obtain information about the destination. Brochures are the primary source for information for one of six (or 16.9%) wellness visitors to Portorož. Moreover, guide books and other sourc-

es of information (e.g. tourism offices, tourism fairs, and media advertising) are less important.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of wellness visitors (n = 77)

	Frequency (percentage)
Gender	
Female	39 (50.6%)
Male	38 (49.4%)
Age	
19 and below	1 (1.3%)
20–29	8 (10.4%)
30–39	9 (11.6%)
40–49	22 (28.6%)
50–59	22 (28.6%)
60 and over	15 (19.5%)
Country of origin	
Austria	15 (19.5%)
Italy	35 (45.5%)
Germany	9 (11.7%)
Other countries	18 (23.3%)
Occupation	
Employed	36 (46.8%)
Self-employed	17 (22.1%)
Student	6 (7.8%)
Unemployed/housewife	6 (7.8%)
Retired	11 (14.3%)
Other	1 (1.3%)
Spending (per person per day)	
To €30	7 (9.1%)
Between €30 and €60	26 (33.8%)
More than €60	44 (57.1%)
Primary source of information about destination	
Brochures	13 (16.9%)
Friends and relatives	24 (31.2%)
Internet	21 (27.2%)
Books	2 (2.6%)
Other sources	17 (22.1%)

Regarding travel-related characteristics (Table 2), about one third (36.4%) of wellness visitors travel with children, and only one tenth (11.7%) of wellness visitors travelled to Portorož with a tour group. More than one quarter (28.6%) of wellness visitors were in Portorož for the first time, but about half of them (48.1%) are regular visitors there. They mostly stay at hotels (76.6%) and are much less interested in other types of accommodation, e.g. private rooms, apartments, accommodation at friends and relatives.

Table 2: Travel-related characteristics of wellness visitors

	Frequency (percentage)
First visit to destination	22 (28.6%)
Regular visitor to destination	37 (48.1%)
Travel with children	28 (36.4%)
Travel with organized tour	9 (11.7%)
Accommodation	
Hotel	59 (76.6%)
Apartment	6 (7.8%)
Private room	3 (3.9%)
Friends/relatives	5 (6.5%)
Other	4 (5.2%)

There are different push motivators of wellness tourism. In order to understand them better, mean values and standard deviations were calculated for each push motivation (Table 3). Wellness visitors mostly want to get away from everyday life (mean = 4.30), relax physically (mean = 4.34), release tensions (mean = 4.31), “recharge batteries” (mean = 4.27) and enjoy comfort (mean = 4.20). Standard deviations of these items are less than one showing relatively narrow spread of answers. Having fun is also sought by wellness visitors (mean = 4.00) having a standard deviation around 1.00. Getting fit is also evaluated relatively high (mean = 3.86). Wellness visitors search less frequently for physical activity (mean = 3.45), seaside enjoyment (mean = 3.59) and enjoyment of tranquillity (mean = 3.56).

Table 3: Mean and standard deviations of push motivations of wellness visitors

	Mean	Standard deviation
Go away from everyday life	4.30	0.95
Relax physically	4.34	0.89
Release tensions	4.31	0.85
Learn new things	3.15	1.40
Get new experience	3.34	1.17
Have fun	4.00	1.03
“Recharge batteries”	4.27	0.87
Meet new people	3.06	1.20
Physical activity	3.45	1.15
Spend time with friends	2.83	1.59
Enjoyment of tranquillity	3.56	1.29
Do nothing	3.38	1.28
Get fit	3.86	1.16
Enjoy the seaside	3.59	1.22
Enjoy comfort	4.20	0.97

However, wellness visitors are less interested in spending time with friends (mean = 2.83), meeting new people (mean = 3.06), learning new things (mean = 3.15); however, the high standard deviations of these items show that answers are widely spread. Having new experiences is evaluated a bit higher

(mean = 3.34), but this shows that learning and new experiences are not the central benefits for wellness visitors. In line with this, wellness visitors prefer doing nothing (mean = 3.38). High standard deviations (1.15 and above) show dispersed answers for these push motivations.

Table 4: Activities undertaken by wellness visitors during the low season (n =77)

Activities	Never	Sometimes	Often
Lying by the pool	6 (7.8%)	28 (36.5%)	43 (55.9%)
Eating out	3 (3.9%)	31 (40.3%)	43 (55.9%)
Visit historical sites	11 (14.3%)	34 (44.2%)	32 (41.5%)
Visit cultural sites	22 (28.6%)	33 (42.8%)	22 (28.6%)
Visit events	19 (24.6%)	29 (37.7%)	29 (37.7%)
Going out in the evening	5 (6.5%)	28 (36.4%)	44 (57.1%)
Going for walks	1 (1.3%)	27 (35.1%)	49 (63.6%)
Playing tennis	54 (70.1%)	12 (15.6%)	11 (14.3%)
Visit countryside	34 (44.2%)	28 (36.4%)	15 (19.4%)
Participate in excursions	34 (44.2%)	35 (45.5%)	8 (10.3%)
Shopping	8 (10.3%)	37 (48.1%)	32 (41.6%)

Frequencies of activities undertaken by wellness visitors (Table 4) show that wellness visitors seemed to be mostly interested in lying by the pool, eating out, going out in the evening and going for walks. They also engage in visiting historical and cultural sites, visiting events and shopping. Wellness visitors are less engaged in playing tennis, visiting countryside in the surroundings and participating in excursions.

Conclusions

Intensified tourism destination competition in the wellness tourism market calls for the understanding of wellness visitors and their profiles. This paper enhances the slim body of knowledge on wellness visitors and suggests that wellness visitors in Portorož are not homogeneous in terms of push motivators and activities undertaken. However, the study is limited to descriptive statistics.

The study included a sample of 246 visitors in Portorož during the low season resulting in one third of wellness visitors showing that Portorož is positioned as a wellness destination during the low season. It alludes to the importance of applying efforts of wellness tourism development within the broader context of destination development, and it is compatible with Crabtree (2007), who notes that Mediterranean seaside destinations have attempted to repo-

sition themselves also through wellness with health services

Despite the smallness of the sample, some features of wellness visitors are notable, calling for further in-depth research. Wellness visitors appear to be similar to those in the previous studies of Smith and Puczko (2009) and Kaung-Hwa et al. (2013), i.e. predominantly older. They are employed and regular high-spending visitors who come mostly from Italy and primarily use word-of-mouth to gather information about Portorož. The gender of respondents is not relevant for demand of wellness products. The level of income was not asked to respondents, but high spending suggests that they are well situated. This is in line with findings of previous studies (Smith & Puczko 2009, p. 134), who found that wellness visitors have high income.

This study provides insights and cues for the further development of wellness tourism in Portorož. The identification of motivators that affect the decision-making of wellness visitors shows the need to create attractive wellness products related to getting fit and relaxation. The findings are similar to the study of Chen et al. (2008), who found relaxation, persuasion of multiple activities and recreation as the most important push motivations. Similar to the findings of the studies of Mak et al. (2009) and Voigt et al. (2011), motivators related to “escape” and

“relaxation” were identified in our study. Furthermore, the evaluation of push motivations shows that wellness visitors in Portorož are less interested in socializing and intellectual activities, since push motivations related to learning and meeting new people have lower mean values. According to Hettler’s (1984) six-dimensional wellness model, it can be concluded that only the physical dimension is present among wellness visitors to Portorož, while other dimensions, such as intellectual and social, are not present, according to push motivations.

As already found in the previous studies (Chen et al., 2009; Smith & Puczko, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2010), the integration of wellness products with other tourism products is recommended. Indeed, consideration of the activities carried out by wellness visitors suggests product bundling. Wellness visitors seem to engage more in passive activities and activities related to the hotel facilities, suggesting, above all, the creation of specific hotel wellness products. This is in accordance with the argument of Mueller and Kaufmann (2001), stating that wellness visitors stay in hotels with appropriate professional care and knowledge.

In line with activities undertaken by wellness visitors, it can be stipulated that the promotional strategies of wellness tourism should be oriented towards the promotion of restaurants, evening entertainment, but also walking paths to present the attractive wellness destination. Moreover, the development of wellness packages for self-organized visitors is recommended.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study

In terms of limitations, a number of them should be acknowledged. Firstly, it must be noted that the study is based on a small sample of foreign wellness visitors during the low season. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized, because they are not representative for all wellness visitors in Portorož. Secondly, the present study is limited to the descriptive statistics because of the size of the sample. Thirdly, the methodological approach of the current study represents an initial step for the understanding of wellness visitors in Portorož, and it also needs to be redefined in future studies with the usage of a larger sample.

Fourthly, since each destination is unique, the applicability of the study findings is restricted.

Although this study has shed some light on wellness visitors to Portorož, considerable research is still required in order to fully understand them and to develop a detailed wellness tourism strategy. As a final word, further research must have a larger sample to increase the reliability and validity of the findings. Future studies may also explore different segments of wellness visitors. Comparative analysis, including the high season, and expansion of the research to the close seaside destinations are also suggested.

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