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RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES OF WELLNESS TOURISM IN GEORGIA

REZUME

The work considers the wellness-tourism directions and potential of Georgia. In this regard Positive factors of wellness tourism in the economic development of the country are emphasized.

The article represents research results setting a goal of establishment of prospects of domestic wellness tourism in relation to potential Georgian consumers.

Among the research results, it is especially worth noting the position of the Georgian consumer, who has correctly understood and, accordingly, the Georgian society is mentally ready to contribute to the development of domestic wellness tourism.

At that, the article emphasizes the necessity of conducting of correct PR-campaigns and involvement of all categories of consumers.

Because of the research, there are represented behavior profiles of Georgian consumers, their wishes regarding wellness tourism, positive and negative characteristics of the local resorts, knowledge of which provides important information in the process of industry reformation.

Finally, it can be said, that very interesting findings are made via getting answers on questions crucial for achievement the research goal and through testing of hypotheses proposed, and on their basis, the prospect of Georgia regarding wellness tourism are shown, and a whole number of recommendations for industry development promotion is provided.

Key words: Wellness tourism, SPA-centers, eco-tourism, balneotherapy, resort.

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ველნეს ტურიზმის რეკრეაციული შესაძლებლობები საქართველოში

რეზიუმე

ნაშრომში განხილულია საქართველოს ველნეს-ტურისტული მიმართულებები და პოტენციალი. ამ მხრივ ხაზგასმულია ველნესი ტურიზმის პოზიტიური ფაქტორები ქვეყნის ეკონომიკურ განვითარებაში.

სტატიაში წარმოდგენილია კვლევის შედეგები, რომლებიც მიზნად ისახავს შიდა ველნესი ტურიზმის პერსპექტივის ჩამოყალიბებას პოტენციურ ქართველ მომხმარებლებთან მიმართებაში.

კვლევის შედეგებს შორის განსაკუთრებით აღსანიშნავია ქართველი მომხმარებლის პოზიცია, რომელმაც სწორად გაიგო და, შესაბამისად, ქართული საზოგადოება მენტალურად მზადაა, წვლილი შეიტანოს შიდა ველნეს ტურიზმის განვითარებაში.

ამასთან, სტატიაში ხაზგასმულია სწორი პიარ-კამპანიების ჩატარებისა და ყველა კატეგორიის მომხმარებლის ჩართულობის აუცილებლობაზე.

კვლევის შედეგად წარმოდგენილია ქართველი მომხმარებლების ქცევის პროფილები, მათი სურვილები ველნესიურ ტურიზმთან დაკავშირებით, ადგილობრივი კურორტების დადებითი და უარყოფითი მახასიათებლები, რომელთა ცოდნა მნიშვნელოვან ინფორმაციას გვაწვდის ინდუსტრიის რეფორმირების პროცესში.

დაბოლოს, შეიძლება ითქვას, რომ ძალიან საინტერესო დასკვნები მიიღება კვლევის მიზნის მისაღწევად გადამწყვეტ კითხვებზე პასუხების მიღებით და შემოთავაზებული ჰიპოთეზების ტესტირებით და მათ საფუძველზე ნაჩვენებია საქართველოს პერსპექტივა ველნეს ტურიზმთან დაკავშირებით და მოცემულია მთელი რიგი რეკომენდაციები ინდუსტრიის განვითარების ხელშეწყობისთვის.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ველნეს ტურიზმი, შPA-ცენტრები, ეკოტურიზმი, ბალნეოთერაპია, კურორტი.

INTRODUCTION

Wellness tourism is one of the most increasing areas of the global tourism and it is tightly connected with medical and health tourisms. It is one of the highly profitable branches of the tourism industry. Wellness industry

as a branch rapidly develops and includes such spheres as healthy eating facilities, fitness and sports halls, cosmetology, SPA-centers, and wellness hotels. In addition, it includes such branches of tourist industries as transport, trips, eco-tourism, horse-riding tourism etc., so in general it covers a wide range of services.

The term wellness itself was appeared in 1959 and first was used by American physician Halbert Dunn, who issued a book “High-level wellness”, where he formulated the principles of healthy life. He considered a harmonious physical, spiritual and mental development as a cornerstone of human health, and exactly this state was named wellness by him. Therefore, wellness is a complex approach in order to achieve physical, psychological, mental and spiritual harmony and to restore the health. It is focused not only on disease treatment or on its prevention, like health tourism does, but also is oriented on life force restoration.

As of today, the leading and most famous wellness resorts are located in the following countries: USA, Italy, France, Indonesia, Thailand etc. The common feature of the famous wellness resorts is that primarily they were intended for rest and health restoration only (while the wellness ideology was established not very long ago, so it was used as an additional service), but afterwards they were transformed into leading wellness resorts (Pavliashvili N., 2018).

At present, Georgia has an enormous potential to occupy the leading position in the global wellness industry. First of all, it is stipulated by rich recreation environment, resorts rich in mineral waters and healthy climate, in separate cases we have resorts known for wine therapy, mud therapy, mineral wates, magnetic sand or SPA-centers (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2017).

Proceeding from mass tourism, wellness tourism promotes mitigation of negative impacts, as far as wellness travelers are oriented on authentic environment that in its turn causes less pressure on the local culture and traditional living environment. In addition, it assists tourism facilities to reduce the seasonality. For example, the sea resort hotel may become more attractive for wellness traveler in winter period, due to its calm atmosphere, assisting stress release.

As for economic effect, which may be gained by Georgia in case of wellness resorts development, it is actually large (Pavliashvili N., 2018):

1. Due to wellness resorts development Georgia will be ranked among wellness industry countries that in its turn, increases its recognition in the positive context.
2. Investment environment will be improved.
3. It will popularize healthy environment and healthy eating that creates a demand for ecologically clean agricultural production.
4. New workplaces will be created not only for employees engaged in this industry itself, but in the related branches, too, among which are transportation and tourism services.
5. Balneotherapy will be developed and move to a new level.

DISCUSSION

The major part of the resort and wellness consumers of Georgia are represented by foreign tourists, but pandemic and military situation in the world has had a huge impact on tourist flows and thereby has posed a threat to the tourism industry, including recreational/wellness tourism, as well. In order to prevent these risks and maximize the potential of the resident population, it is also rather important to figure out how well the citizens of Georgia understand the nature of this matter and if they consider the development of this branch of industry to be crucial.

That is exactly why we suppose that it would be important and interesting to investigate the wellness-behavior characteristics of Georgian consumers and thereby discover vast possibilities of this prospective field of tourism regarding Georgian consumers.

The goal of the article is to show the potential of the wellness industry in Georgia, especially in the post-pandemic period.

It also sets the goal of identification the prospects of domestic wellness tourism from the perspective of potential consumers of Georgia, which, in its turn, serves the elaboration of the necessary recommendations for planning and organizing activities, which contribute to the development of domestic wellness tourism.

1. The recognizability of wellness resorts existing in Georgia and the services offered by them.
2. Determination of situations, frequency and other preferences (behavior characteristics) related to the usage / possible usage of Georgian wellness resorts and their services.
3. The attitude towards Georgian wellness resorts that may limit the prospects of their usage.
4. Readiness for using Georgian wellness resorts in the post-pandemic period.
5. Foreign alternatives to Georgian wellness resorts for Georgian customers.

Research hypotheses:

1. **"For a Georgian customer, a wellness resort is mostly associated with a therapeutic place necessary to visit only in case of health problems, which hinders the development of domestic health tourism"** was not confirmed, because, according to the study, a potential Georgian customer mostly correctly perceives the concept of wellness and thus, this reason can not be considered as a factor hindering the development of this industry;
2. **"Georgian consumers are little aware of the services offered by Georgian wellness resorts and, therefore, are mostly looking for acceptable alternatives to health-improving (rather than therapeutic) procedures abroad"** was not confirmed, since the awareness of services offered by Georgian wellness resort is also quite high, and local customers do not give preference to foreign wellness resorts.

The target segment of the study were Georgian citizens, men and women of 21+ age category with average and above-average income, who use various health-improving and treatment procedures for their own health and/or beauty;

- Quantitative research, particularly an online survey, was used as the study method.
- The type of research instrument: a strictly structured self-administered questionnaire;
- The type of sampling: nonprobabilistic, convenient;
- Sample size: 250 completed interviews.

Considering the research results that implied **demonstration of the prospects of domestic wellness tourism in the view of potential Georgian customers**, we obtained quite interesting and important information related to the explored issues/tasks, which have been answered at the previous stage of research, namely:

Task 1: Recognizability of wellness resorts existing in Georgia and the services offered by them.

As a result, we have seen that the top-rated five answers completely consist of not curative, but health-improving, relaxational and stress-releasing services/conditions, which precisely repeat the characteristics of wellness. In this case, they are not focused on treatment and health promotion only, but rather set a goal to achieve harmony between spiritual and physical state – serves their well-being, and these criteria necessary for welfare are individual for different categories of consumers.

The fact that a Georgian consumer correctly understands the wellness-resort concept demonstrates a high level of awareness of Georgian society regarding wellness industry and therefore, its readiness to the development of the domestic wellness tourism.

Task 2: Determination of situations, frequency and other preferences (behavior characteristics) related to the usage/ possible usage of Georgian wellness resorts and their services;

As a result, we have established, what types of service are the reasons of the customers' visit / future visit to another wellness resort, namely: health-promoting (54%) and relaxational (42%), SPA services (23%), different procedures related to stress release (12%), fitness, cosmetological, dietetic or other services (12%);

- The most important thing which directly fits into wellness-resort concept characteristics, is the reason – simply take a rest and relax in a calm atmosphere – which is called by 48% of respondents as the reason to take a holiday at the wellness resort.

The fact that a relatively small part of resort consumers names the healing goals as the selection criterion confirms that the focusing on curative opportunities of the specific resort with the purpose of wellness tourism development is an incorrect policy.

- This explanation is confirmed by another question of the preferences block, which was related to the interestingness of the offer made by wellness-resort to a customer and which shows that health-promoting and relaxational (59%), SPA (23) and anti-stress (21) services are the top priorities for a wellness resort visitor;

- No less significant part (41%+24%) would be interested in the offer of comfortable and affordable rest and relaxation in a calm atmosphere;

- Worth noticing emergence of very important parameters of the wellness-concept, such as ecologically clean and authentic (pristine) environment on the wellness resort (12%) and possible proposals for adventure and educational tourism (11%);

These two latter components completely fit into the modern wellness concept characteristics and their emphasizing / paying attention could be a good recommendation in the process of tourism industry development in this direction.

- We have established those services desirable for respondents, which could be preferable to be offered by wellness resorts – nutritional therapy, aqua-aerobics, one-day trips, yoga courses, horse-riding expedition, meditation, bike ride, and various events related to amateur performance, breathing exercises, acupuncture.

Except for relaxational, health-promoting, anti-stress and SPA services of other types, they name among other answers activities, which point at their wish to have a very active rest-relaxation and thereby it is a good tip for the process of tourism development in this direction.

Task 3: The attitude towards Georgian wellness resorts that may hinder the prospects of their usage;

- A wellness-resort, attractive in the eyes of respondents, has to create natural or artificial conditions for obtaining health-promoting, relaxational, anti-stress services. It has to provide the customers with financially affordable offers to rest in a calm, comfortable atmosphere;

- It has to meet the expectations of enthusiasts of active and creative recovery, as well as of the category of respondents waiting for treatment-related preferences;

- Thus, the necessity of ecologically clean and authentic environment and conditions is clearly expressed in this case, too.

The presented model of an ideal wellness-resort will be very useful to the development of the PR strategy of a wellness resort and proper prioritizing in communication activities with customers.

- We have established what the Georgian holiday-makers reckon as the positive aspects of Georgian wellness resorts.

As a result, one may say in favor of Georgian wellness resorts that almost all characteristics definitely necessary for wellness resorts are named by Georgian customers as positive aspects of Georgian resorts, and ***the fact that the conditions necessary for wellness resorts are already available in the reality of Georgian wellness industry, lays the ideal groundwork for addition of other necessary and desirable services and thereby for opening up the opportunities of maximum gratification of customer interests.***

- Among negative characteristics of Georgian wellness resorts respondents point at the difficulty of modern and comfortable rest at an affordable price.

This fact confirms the axiom that the opportunity of diverse infrastructural offer adapted for all categories of customers truly makes the resort more popular and attractive to from the viewpoint of its possible use.

We would like to emphasize the second top-rated important parameter: “Peculiarities of wellness industry are not comprehended well (28%)”.

This parameter points at the fact that it would be relevant to know well the scientific principles of this modern field of tourism and following practical implementation of its component for the better development of Georgian wellness industry.

As the especially noteworthy negative characteristic, one can mention that customers incur a deficit of information on the resorts.

This parameter directly indicates the incorrect communication policy of wellness resorts with target audience and, therefore, gives the recommendation to carry out strategical, consistent and targeted PR-campaign, which will increase the frequency of wellness resorts used by both Georgian and foreign customers.

Generally, the attitude towards Georgian wellness resorts is very positive, which is confirmed by unanimous consent concerning the desire to take a holiday at Georgian resorts.

Task 4: Readiness for usage of the Georgian wellness resorts in the post-pandemic period;

The main reason of possible expansion of wellness resorts is stated to be the desire to relieve stress caused by pandemic background (22%), while the wish of taking preventive measures, improving immunity, passing relaxation SPA-procedures takes a similar place in the rating (22%+5%).

Therefore, emphasizing these parameters among communicative activities of resorts in the post-pandemic period will become the correct and goal-oriented message for potential customers in order to make a choice in favor of the resort desirable for them.

Task 5: Foreign alternatives to Georgian wellness resorts for Georgian customers;

Respondents name resorts known and used by them, as well as speak about preferences of their usage, among which they point out: comfortably arranged and financially affordable resting places equipped according to up-to-date standards (34%), which “provide more accessibility of treatment and health-promoting procedures, have more natural or artificial curative and health-improving conditions, well-adjusted and well-ordered infrastructure, comfortable and customer-oriented environment – for any category of holiday-makers” (24%).

Affordability is the main preference of wellness and resort services, since according to the modern wellness-concept there is no necessity for it to be expensive and luxury, or even health-promoting and calm resort – its main concept is to provide such an environment, in which any holiday-maker will feel well; it has to be a place oriented at keeping vacationers well (well-ness), which has to take into account and fit not only physical, but emotional and financial interests of all categories of humans.

That is exactly why the readiness for diverse curative-health-promoting-entertaining- relaxational services, infrastructure, interests and at that different financial needs is the main initial point of wellness concept and cornerstone of success, as well, and its provision is the main path of achieving success in this industry.

The other preference named: „wellness concept is more protected (7%) and wellness industry features are better comprehended (7%) - is a direct indication of the fact that, first of all, Georgia needs the understanding, perception of this industry concept and afterwards, its adaption for Georgian customers, the more so as natural and service prospects of Georgian wellness and resort places not only stand toe-to-toe with foreign analogues, but also are better in quite a few cases.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can state that we have tested our hypotheses thanks to the findings of the given study:

- We assume that the wellness resorts are associated among Georgian consumers with a curative place, and they planned to visit them in case of health-related problems only, which inhibits domestic wellness tourism;
- Recognizability of services offered by Georgian wellness resorts is very low among Georgian customers, and thereby they mainly look for affordable alternatives of health-promoting (but not curative) procedures abroad.

It should be noted that none of them has been confirmed, since as we have seen, poor understanding of opportunities of Georgian wellness resorts on customers' part doesn't hinder the development of wellness tourism, moreover, Georgian customers are well aware of the features and possibilities of wellness tourism.

The recognizability of services provided by Georgian wellness resorts is either low or incorrect, which could cause flows of Georgian customers to foreign wellness resorts

Attitude towards Georgian wellness resorts is positive in general, though a range of problems is identified, solution of which could promote wellness industry development and thereby could bring this type of tourism to the forefront.

There have been identified current problems and reasons impeding the development, which are given in the main findings of the research and based on which we will try to elaborate recommendations in support of wellness industry.

Proceeding the information obtained via the research, I am inclined to believe that the goal of this work is achieved and on its basis it is possible to give recommendations promoting the wellness tourism.

Those resorts, which are more associated with rest-health-promotion-relaxation of humans with specific needs, which is mostly related to passive rest (such as Sairme, Tskaltubo, Akhtala, Nunisi, Abastumani etc.) have to pay greater attention to the development of infant and youth infrastructures, since family recreation form is a preferable rest for Georgian customers that necessitates taking into account the interests of all family members (especially underagers) when selecting a resort.

It is important to have all categories of infrastructure, including those adapted for inclusive customers, family recreation, youth/active routes that will attach more attractiveness, popularity to this resort and thereby will increase frequency of its use.

Wellness resorts have to provide customers with diverse infrastructural, service and financial choices (the more so the list of desirable services is directly given in the research report) that will make the resort adapted for all categories of customers.

The government has to develop projects assisting local population, as well as local businesses in order to make possible arrangement of their own infrastructure at an appropriate level and to offer services to holiday-makers that will broaden the opportunities to rest for people with different financial capacities and at the same time will assist the self-employment of local population. **The voucher system** may be considered among such supporting projects. The mentioned project of financial support is successfully used in many countries. In the post-pandemic period, this will help the industry sector to achieve some financial stability and make some calculations that in the long run will promote its correct development.

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