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**BALNEARY TOURISM TRENDS
BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC.
CASE STUDY: BALNEARY RESORTS
IN THE VÂLCEA SUBCARPATHIANS**

Abstract. The tourist area of Vâlcea Subcarpathians includes numerous elements of the natural setting, ethnographic elements, historical and cultural aspects. The period 2019-2021 was marked by the Covid 19 pandemic, a particularly serious virus that affected all of humanity, including related economic activities. In the field of tourism, the Covid pandemic primarily affected tourist accommodation and public catering units and implicitly employees in the field. The particularly harsh restrictions resulted in high maintenance costs of the activity, the unemployment of employees, operation at reduced capacity and even the closure of some of the units (especially small units). Unfortunately, solutions were found for only a low percentage of these problems. The purpose of the study is to highlight the mineral potential of the region, the effects of the pandemic on accommodation capacity, but also on patients, as well as the measures that are being taken to remedy the existing situation. A series of indicators (economic and touristic) were analyzed, based on which an attempt was made to determine the degree of adaptability of the spa resorts to the changes that occurred in the context of the pandemic crisis, as well as what was the impact on tourist activities and spa treatment services.

Keywords: *balneary tourism, balneary resorts, Subcarpathians, tourist indicators, Covid 19*

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the activities with a strong social and cultural impact, favouring intercultural exchanges, stimulating the development of infrastructure,

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while contributing to the preservation of world and national heritage. The aging of the global population determines an increase in demand for balneary tourism (Aluculesei & Nistoreanu, 2016, p. 538), while also having beneficial effects on both the economies of the world's countries and their societies (Noni, 2018, p. 28).

Balneary tourism is not only aimed at people with medical problems, but also at those who want to relax, or have a physical and mental condition. The concept of health, defined in a first form as a "state of physical, mental and social well-being" (World Health Organization, 1948), over time, has taken on various forms and dimensions (health, wellness, medical tourism) (Figure 1).

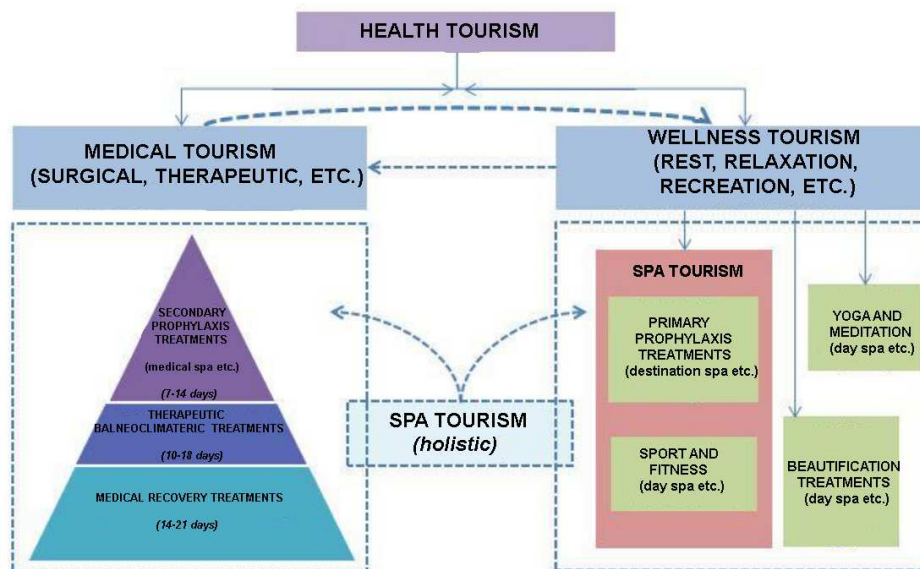


Figure 1. Dimensions of health tourism
(Source: Stăncioiu *et al.*, 2013, p. 126)

Although the term wellness has been used since the 17th century, the 21st century was a time when it was widely spread, a time when it became one of the most important industries around the globe (Diaconu, 2021, p. 64). Although it is found that the wellness consumer market is very large, its saturation level is still low (Knowledge Sourcing Intelligence LLP, 2020). According to studies, at an international level wellness

tourism is considered to be travel associated with the aim of maintaining or improving personal well-being (Wellness Tourism – Global Wellness Institute, 2025).

Regardless of the names it bears, balneary tourism is a form of tourism that involves the travel of people of different ages, to localities with balneary potential for cure, care or treatment (Gîrneț, 2018, p.154).

This is the reason why tourism has become an important segment in economic activities. It should not be overlooked that spa tourism, regardless of the name it bears, also involves other aspects such as the quality of mineral and thermal waters or their chemical composition or categories of conditions that can be analysed or treated.

2. General presentation of the area

Tourism is generally a component part of the service system, each change affecting this sector of activity.

If in European health systems, balneary resorts represent important tourist destinations for both health-seeking consumers and those seeking leisure, in Romania the balneary tourism product focuses either on traditional services – procedures and treatments specific to a certain condition (Kapczynski & Szromek, 2008, p. 115), or on highlighting the harmony between physical and mental health (Smith & Puczko, 2009, p. 5) or primary prophylactic treatments – preferred by healthy people who present risk factors and who pay special attention to their health (Teleki & Munteanu, 2012, p. 56).

Romania benefits from a high spa potential due to the natural resources present along the Carpathians, but the lack of infrastructure and limited promotion create shortcomings both for the tourist infrastructure and especially for consumers (Aluculesei & Nistoreanu, 2016, p. 547). At the level of the area, the use of natural factors has a long history, representing a preventive and curative practice (most often being subsidized by the state).

Hydrogeological research reveals the existence, at the level of the Vâlcea Subcarpathians, of important spa resources represented by numerous therapeutic mineral substances, but also beneficial climatic factors.

All these aspects have determined the highlighting of existing tourist services, which have certain particularities compared to other economic branches: they can only be evaluated after tourists have benefited from them, they cannot be delivered like other categories of services, the quantity and quality of tourist products are determined by tourist demand, being also influenced by the quality of goods delivered by related branches.

2.1. Structure of the existing balneary tourism potential at the area level

The Vâlcea Subcarpathians constitute an area with a notable potential from a spa point of view, especially through the diversity of mineral sources, both numerically and qualitatively. These resources are focused at the level of the 6 existing resorts, namely 3 resorts included in the international circuit (Băile Olănești, Băile Govora, Călimănești-Căciulata), 1 resort of national interest (Ocnele Mari), 2 localities of local interest (Costești and Sălătrucu). Unfortunately, the hydromineral sources existing at the level of the Sălătrucu locality (Argeș) were abandoned, with no development or maintenance operations, and over time they dried up.

The geological composition of the Vâlcea Subcarpathians is varied; at this level, the sedimentary formations are arranged in the form of strips oriented mostly west-east (Dinu, 1999, p. 36). It is worth noting that, at the contact with the mountain there is a series of depressions (Călimănești-Căciulata, Băile Olănești, Bărbătești, Horezu, Pietrari, Costești), followed by a series of hills with heights ranging between 400-700 m (Pietrari, Păușești, Tomșani, Băile Govora, Ocnele Mari-Ocnița) (Treaty of Geography, 1992).

The existing balneotourism offer at the level of the area allows the treatment of a diversified range of ailments. If until 1990 the offer had an excessive extension, based on ensuring a considerable number of accommodation places, at affordable prices, currently the Vâlcea Subcarpathian resorts are included in international circuits, investments have been made to increase the quality of the balneal cure tourist product, the number of accommodation units has increased, and especially of the treatment bases both belonging to the accommodation units and individual ones.

An important characteristic of spa tourism is the existing spa tourism potential. At the level of the area, the 5 spa resorts have a variety of hydromineral sources, their qualities being exploited in internal cures, external cures, inhalation cures, injections, etc. (Table 1).

Table 1

The range of conditions that can be treated in the spa resorts of Vâlcea Subcarpathians

Resort	Hydromineral source	Treatment procedure	Range of conditions
Băile Olănești	Mineral waters	Injections	Rheumatic diseases
	Mineral waters	Vaginal irrigation	Allergic diseases
	Mineral waters	Internal cure	Diseases of the female genital tract
	Mineral waters	External cure	Renal, hepatic, gastrointestinal, digestive, respiratory, ENT diseases
Ocnele Mari	Therapeutic sapropelic muds	External cure	Diseases of the musculoskeletal system
Băile Govora		Poultice	
		Mud Wraps	
		Mud Baths	
Călimănești Căciulata	Mineral waters	Injections	Allergic diseases Rheumatic diseases Liver diseases
	Mineral waters	Internal cleansing baths	
	Mineral waters	Hot water installations	
	Mineral waters	Mud and paraffin wraps	
	Mineral waters	Dry massage	
	Mineral waters	Swimming pools	
	Mineral waters	Sauna	
Băile Govora	Mineral waters	Hot baths	Renal, digestive, metabolic, respiratory diseases
	Sapropelic mineral mud	Wraps	Diseases of the musculoskeletal system, peripheral nervous system, chronic genital diseases, thyroid gland diseases
Ocnele Mari Ocnița	Mineral waters	Hot water baths	Gynecological diseases
	Mud	Tubs	Diseases of the respiratory system, Diseases of the musculoskeletal system
	Saline	Treatment pools	Respiratory diseases

Costești	Mineral waters	Cold mud baths followed by lake baths	Diseases of the musculoskeletal system, allergic diseases, liver diseases
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Source: field data processing

2.2. Global and local pandemic situation

In December 2019, an epidemic (Covid-19) broke out in a small town in China, which quickly spread across the globe. Worldwide, the Covid-19 pandemic had a disastrous effect on tourism, causing revenue declines of approximately 50%, respectively 20% job losses in 2020 (Bacsi, Kovacs & Loke, 2024, p. 1). Studies highlight that a pandemic can leave deep traces in the thinking and feelings of tourists and can also change the way they travel (Zenker & Kock, 2020, p. 2).

In Romania, the first case appeared in February 2020 and because the effects were very serious, and the number of cases was multiplying, the first measures imposed by the authorities soon appeared. These are a series of legislative, medical and administrative measures. We recall:

a. legislative measures

- February 2020 – issuing of an Order of the Ministry of Health for the establishment of quarantine measures in emergency situations;
- March 16, 2020 – the President of Romania signed a presidential decree establishing a state of emergency;
- March 17, 2020 – the first Military Ordinance was issued regarding some first emergency measures;
- March 2020 – March 2022 – 7 other military ordinances were issued imposing strict rules regarding the population's access to various public spaces.
- 2021 – the state of emergency was replaced by a state of alert (which came with the decongestion of certain measures regarding the population's access).
- March 2022 – mandatory measures became recommendations following the end of the state of alert.

b. administrative measures

- an interministerial committee was established to monitor cases of infection at the national level;
- establishment of the quarantine measure (by Ministerial Order);
- prohibition of public or private events, etc.

c. medical measures

- a vaccination campaign against Covid-19 has begun;
- medical units that treat infected patients, as well as the main regional centres, have been designated. Later, their number expanded to include all major cities.
- installation of thermal scanners to check body temperature (over 38.0 constitutes a risk of infection);
- permanence has been ensured in all medical centres etc.

At the national level, the pandemic had major effects on all levels, affecting all economic sectors, including tourism. The establishment of measures imposed by military ordinances led to major decreases in tourist flows at the national level, implicitly at the level of the analysed area. There were also decreases in tourism revenues, major layoffs and even closures of accommodation units. Many economic agents sought solutions to comply with the legislation, but also to ensure a minimum of services to tourists (see analysis Subchapter 4.1.).

First, as in the existing situations at a global level (Cashdanm & Steele, 2013) tourists began to develop a fear of pathogens, avoiding unknown places (Zenker & Kock, 2020, p. 4), then a change in travel behaviour is observed by avoiding overcrowded areas (Wang & Ackerman, 2019), but also a trend to select domestic destinations to the disadvantage of foreign ones (see analysis subchapter 4.1.).

3. Methodology

In order to ascertain the impact generated by the Covid 19 pandemic on the tourism market, an evaluation of it is necessary, an evaluation that takes into account the presentation of existing tourism products in the area under analysis.

For this, extensive research was carried out that targeted two aspects: a statistical analysis, as well as the development of an impact study and the monitoring of consumer behaviour. The statistical analysis consisted of a comparative study of indicators that target tourism development (number of tourists, number of arrivals and number of overnight stays compared to existing accommodation capacity), indicators that also characterize existing problems at the local level. On the other hand, an attempt was made to carry out an impact study that also included tourists' perception of the quality of spa tourism products, generating a problematization of them in the ante and post covid period, but also monitoring consumer behaviour. For this, opinion polls were conducted among tourists regarding consumption behaviour and travel intentions. The surveys were conducted on a number of 120 respondents, during the reference period July-August 2022 and July-August 2024, respectively, periods with a high tourist flow due to the predominantly seasonal nature of these resorts.

4. Results

The pandemic has reduced consumer preferences for international tourism in favour of domestic tourism. In order to monitor the effects and level of sustainable tourism development from a qualitative point of view, the following factors were analysed: 1. The level of tourism reflected in both demand and tourist supply; 2. The profile and level of satisfaction of tourists.

4.1. Analysis of the tourist supply

The balneal tourist supply is particularly varied in the area under analysis, also due to the fact that of the 5 resorts, 3 are permanent resorts at which the tourist flow is high.

Among the most important tourist indicators, we mention: accommodation units, accommodation capacity (number of places in units), the number of tourists visiting the analysed destination, number of overnight stays.

During the period 2019-2024, according to the analysis carried out at the level of the spa resorts in the Subcarpathian Valley, the curve is continuously increasing, with the exception of 2020 when there was a decrease in the number of accommodation units. The cause of this decrease is the Covid pandemic, namely the drastic measures to restrict access (Figure 2).

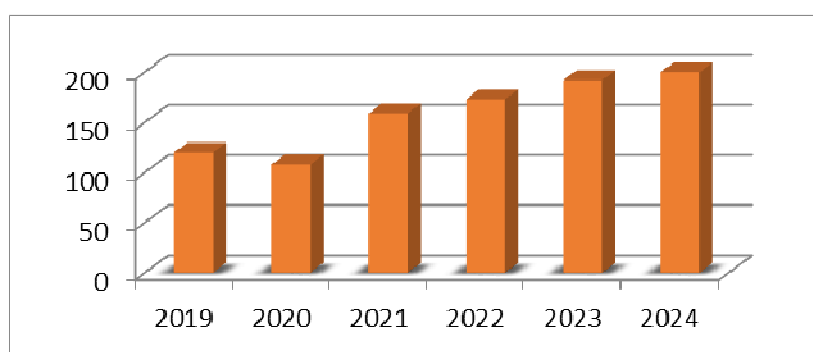


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of accommodation units at the level of spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians (Source: INS data processing)

Regarding accommodation capacity (number of places in accommodation units) the situation is the same with progressive increases, except for 2020 (Figure 3).

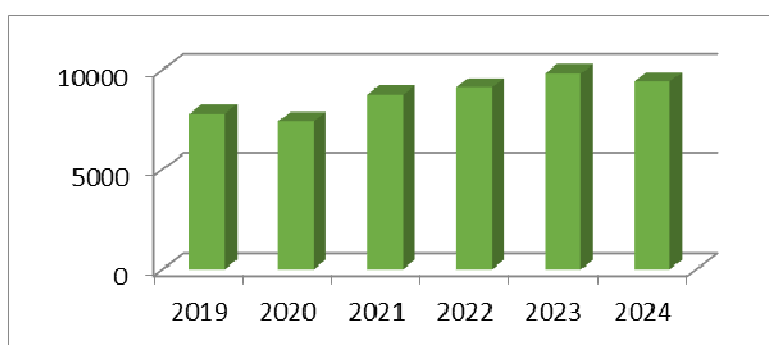


Figure 3. Evolution of accommodation capacity at the level of spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians (Source: INS data processing)

The evolution of the number of arrivals was the most affected. Although the curve is increasing overall, the year 2020 marked the tourism industry at the area level. The drastic measures materialized in the decrease in the number of arrivals and overnight stays (Figures 4 and 5), due to the limitation of access to tourist activities, the decrease in the number of accessible places, and even the closure of some of the small accommodation units (which could not cope financially).

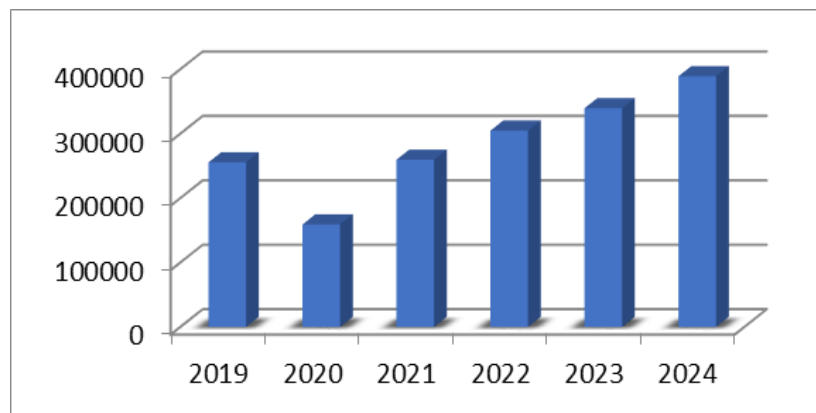


Figure 4. Evolution of the number of arrivals at the spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians
(Source: INS data processing)

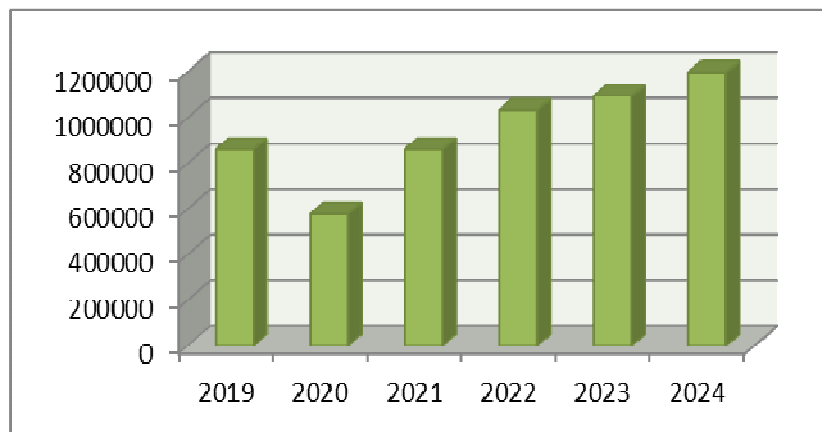


Figure 5. Evolution of the number of overnight stays at the spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians
(Source: INS data processing)

4.2. Tourist satisfaction level

The research was conducted on a sample of 120 respondents, tourists staying in the spa resorts in Vâlcea County (e.g. Băile Olănești, Călimănești-Căciulata, Govora). The sample was selected by simple random method, respecting the criteria of demographic diversity (age, gender, geographical origin).

It was observed how the outline of the specific activities of balneary tourism products are perceived by consumers, but also the relationship they have with the quality of services.

To interpret the data, we conducted a descriptive analysis based on destination preferences, the motivation for choosing it or the degree of satisfaction. We found that 45% of respondents indicated Băile Olănești as their preferred destination, followed by Călimănești-Căciulata (35%) and Govora (20%). Also, regarding the motivation for choice, 60% mentioned spa treatments, 25% relaxation, and 15% the natural landscape, resulting in a 72% satisfaction rate with the services received in 2022, compared to 52% in 2024 (Figure 6).

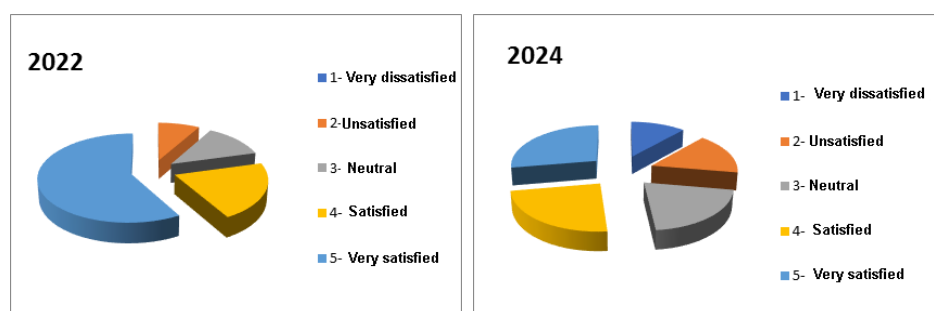


Figure 6. Tourists' perceptions regarding the degree of satisfaction with the quality of services in the balneary resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians
(Source: questionnaire data processing)

In a comparative analysis of 2024 compared to 2022 (when the national state of alert ended), a change in the purpose of the trip can be observed, the cause being clearly the Covid 19 pandemic. Thus, the majority of respondents who visited the analysed area had as their purpose in 2022

recovery from an illness (37.6%), while in 2024 they focused on prevention (37.5%). The lowest values appear in the case of indicators focused on relaxation (6.7% in 2024) and only 5.8% rest (Figure 7).

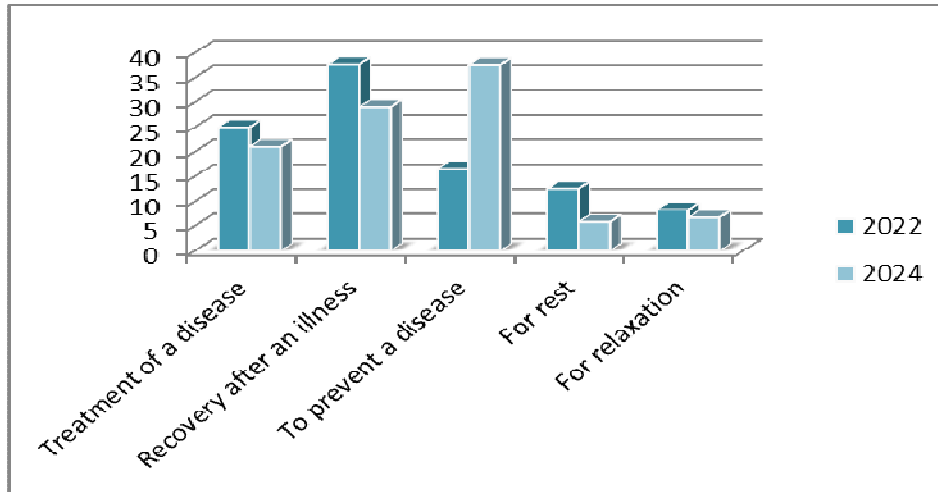


Figure 7. Reasons for visiting the spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians
(Source: questionnaire data processing)

The spa resorts in Vâlcea Subcarpathians allow stays in all seasons (4 out of 6 resorts), most of them being permanent resorts. This is important on the one hand for establishing the main quantitative and qualitative indicators (see Subchapter 4.1.), and on the other hand for establishing their degree of satisfaction with accommodation, food and treatment services.

The results show an important role in combining the 3 aspects, treatment, accommodation and food. Since in 2024, 41% of respondents consider that the food in the spa resorts in Vâlcea County is ordinary, 23% tasteless and only 12% of quality (Figure 8) special attention is required from the economic agents involved.

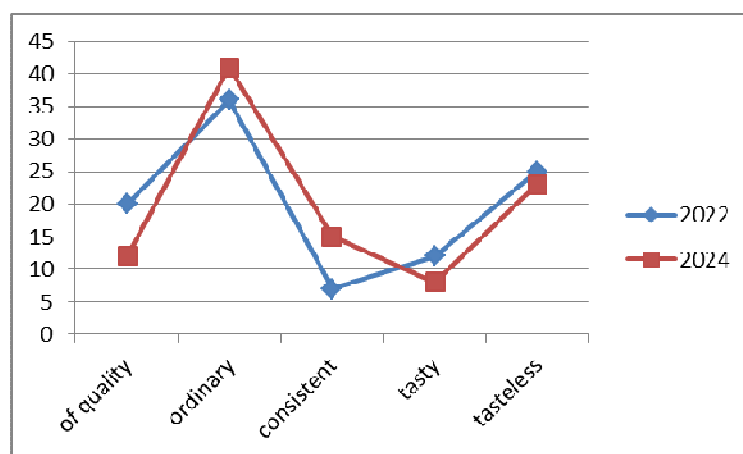


Figure 8. Tourists' perceptions of food services in the spa resorts of the Subcarpathian Valley (Source: questionnaire data processing)

The appearance and quality of food services, along with accommodation, play a significant role in the analysis of consumer perception. Thus, the Vâlcea spa resorts are considered largely outdated (over 70% of respondents) rather than modern (26%). According to the results, the respondents classified the Ocnele Mari resort between outdated and modern, both in terms of accommodation and treatment facilities. The justification is based on the high degree of obsolescence of the furniture, as well as partially modernized services or treatment facilities. An analysis of the same indicator could classify the resorts according to the modernization of the accommodation and treatment facilities (Table 2).

Table 2

The degree of modernization of the accommodation and treatment base in the spa resorts of the Vâlcea Subcarpathians

Resort	Accommodation base		Treatment base	
	Outdated	Modern	Outdated	Modern
Călimănești Căciulata		X		
Băile Olănești		X		X
Băile Govora	X			X
Ocnele Mari	X	X	X	X
Costești	X		X	

Source: questionnaire data processing

In addition to accommodation facilities, treatment facilities are important elements of the spa services package. The range of spa services related to the resorts analysed is rich, patients can benefit from therapy and recovery assistance, depending on the need and the range of conditions that can be treated at the level of each resort (see Subchapter 2.1.).

At the same time, the balneary resorts in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians have treatment facilities equipped with balneotherapy facilities, crenotherapy pools, climatic therapy facilities, hydro- and thermotherapy facilities, etc. (Roangheș-Mureanu, 2012, p. 175).

These treatment facilities operate under the supervision of specialized medical personnel, with modernized equipment, and are dedicated to performing recovery, therapy or prevention treatments. The treatments are based on mineral waters, with a diverse chemical composition: sulphurous, bicarbonate, sulphated, sodium, calcium, magnesium, chlorinated, iodized, etc. (Pricăjan, 1985; Teleki *et al.*, 2004).

During the pandemic, CNPP suspended the activities of issuing spa treatment tickets, as well as the stay of pensioners already undergoing treatment, but also for the entire period of the state of emergency. For the uncovered/unused period, the respective amounts of money were refunded.

Subsequently, the activities gradually resumed, covering the maximum accommodation and treatment capacity.

5. Conclusions

In a society in which there is a continuous evolution and where there is always pressure on citizens, special attention is required to the health aspects of the population. Regardless of the aspect from which the balneal treatment is viewed (recuperative or preventive), a promotion of this economic branch is necessary, but also a series of concrete actions that directly and indirectly influence the tourist activity, while supporting this economic side.

The spa resorts of Vâlcea County are perceived positively, especially for the therapeutic benefits offered by the natural resources (mineral waters, clean air, mud). The results of the analysis highlight the perception of tourists towards the spa resorts of Vâlcea as being attractive especially

for treatments and relaxation, less for fun and leisure. This is also due to the purpose of the trip. Tourists over 60 preferred destinations with a therapeutic profile in a proportion of 80%, while those under 40 were more attracted by the relaxation and wellness component.

Given the situation during the pandemic, many structures have sought viable solutions that would satisfy legislative requirements, but also those of tourists. These solutions referred to: reducing access to certain treatment facilities, establishing the maximum number of visitors, creating a traffic lane to food or treatment facilities, limiting the duration of stay or limiting the duration of parking. These measures were applied in order to reduce the impact generated by the pandemic, an impact that had strong effects both on the local economy and especially on the population (thus avoiding major layoffs or even the closure of the respective units).

However, the pandemic period has demonstrated that in a period of crisis, at the national level there is no strategic plan to stand by or support tourists, especially since there is the possibility of medical consequences resulting from a pandemic.

It is also recommended to modernize the spa infrastructure in all resorts, to promote the resorts both online and at international fairs, to create thematic tourist packages (which combine treatments with cultural activities and ecotourism), etc.

Following the research conducted in the spa resorts in Vâlcea County, the following conclusions can be drawn: consumer behaviour has adapted to the health context, with differences in perception depending on age, education and tourist experience, but the Covid 19 pandemic has generated a reassessment of the value of local spa tourism, as a sustainable alternative for recreation and prevention.

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