Chapter 2
Health and Wellness Tourism: A Strategic Plan for Tourism and Thermalism Valorization of São Pedro do Sul

Carlos Costa, Joana Quintela, and José Mendes

Abstract  Wellness tourism has become an emerging market segment directed not only for those who pursue solely thermal treatments but also for those seeking illness prevention, physical improvement and spiritual balance or even for those eager of cultural and relaxation programs. In this sense, wellness tourism has become more complex and creative, demanding high quality equipments and infrastructures, providing a wide range of products and services related not only with the diversity of spa treatments but also with complementary recreational activities regarding the connection to nature and to cultural patrimony as well as to other regional resources, creating effective links to the territory and becoming a significant force that will shape the regional development, by creating a positive pressure on local economic bases with spillover effects on the territory. This research presents a case-study based on the creation of a strategic plan for tourism and thermalism valorization of São Pedro do Sul, the largest thermal health complex in Portugal. It relies on three main aspects – products, space promotion and governance – and it will unveil how classic spa tourism may evolve towards modern structures by capturing emerging and modern tourism demands.

2.1  Introduction

The beginning of the twenty-first century has been characterized by massive changes that are determining the future of the tourism sector (Costa 2006).
According with the research of Ramos and Costa (2010), the sensitivity of the spa offer in its entirely was highlighted as well as its position in the face of an emerging paradigm – that of the assertion of inland destinations. Health and wellness is nowadays one of the most recognized tourism products, as one of the most important economic and social phenomenon of our days (Antunes et al. 2010).

Tourism based on health and wellness spa facilities is not one-dimensional, passive or unsophisticated: it contains within itself multiple ideas of landscape and building appreciation, environmental and touristic sustainability, health improvement, self-involvement, active learning, facility-client relationships and the importance of the involvement of host communities that transcend the passive tourist ‘gaze’ experience (Smith and Kelly 2006).

Thermal centres constitute development poles in a local and regional scale, generating a spillover effect in the economic and social tissue, contributing also for the enrichment of the quality of life of the local population as well as for regional asymmetries (Antunes 2012) as well as its position in the face of an emerging paradigm – that of the assertion of inland destinations (Ramos and Costa 2010).

In this sense, each health and wellness centre is inductor of touristic development according with its high strategic potential, so each health and wellness unit must be an anchor project and ought to be insert in a complex with different kind of activities that may increase the destination attractiveness and the customer loyalty (Sarmento and Portela 2010).

2.1.1 Thermalism and Wellness Tourism: Origins and Evolution

Reflecting upon thermalism within the sphere of tourism is closely associated to an intellectual activity connected to multiple historical, political and social fields. These are generally characterized by being permanently linked to activities based on leisure, well-being and evasion (Ramos 2008). Thermal tourism was defined by IOUTO (International Union of Official Travel Organizations) as “the provision of health facilities utilizing the natural resources of the country, in particularly mineral water and climate” (IUOTO 1973).

The history of hot springs and their use as thermal spas has worldwide origins and dates back to the earliest civilizations (Erfurt-Cooper 2009). The very earliest forms of tourism were directly aimed at increased health and well-being. The greco-roman tradition makes of water a reference to health and wellness. The first recorded instance of medical tourism dates back more than 2,000 years when visitors, perhaps the first pilgrims, travelled from around the Mediterranean to Epidaurus in the Peloponnese, said to be the birthplace and sanctuary of the god of healing, Asklepios, the son of Apollo.

In roman times taking the waters was popular and spas date back more than 2,000 years, and health cures linked to water were common to many regions. The numerous spas and sacred sites that remain in many parts of Europe and elsewhere, in some places represented the effective start of local tourism, as people travelled to gain
physical benefits. From then onwards particular therapeutic places and landscapes, from springs and mountains to temples and cathedrals, have played significant roles in most cultures and regions. Health tourism, in a relatively gentle form, has a long and unbroken history (Connel 2011). In Middle Ages, thermalism was forbidden because of the epidemic diseases and religious rigor. This tendency appeared once again in the XIX, revitalized and with strength and glamour and even associated to other kind of activities that were capable of keep the tourist such as casinos, theaters, opera rooms frequented by a powerful aristocracy. At that time thermal spaces associate cure by mineral waters to touristic comfort and leisure.

Nowadays, health and wellness tourism is a rapidly growing sector of today’s thriving tourism industry and it has increased its activity worldwide. The growth of tourism directed not only for those who pursue solely thermal treatments but also for those seeking illness prevention, physical improvement and spiritual balance or even for those eager of cultural and relaxation programs. The main demand factors that influence the development of wellness tourism and wellness services are concerned with the ageing of the European population, an increasing desire to live longer and better, growing awareness of world health threats, and an increase search for new and different leisure experiences (Smith and Puzckó 2009). Health travel segment fast growth is also driven by: shifts in demographic structures as well as lifestyles, the need for stress reduction among the working population, a shift in the medical paradigm towards prevention and alternative practices, increased interaction between the shifts from mass tourism towards customized forms of travel (Laesser 2011).

Portugal has a great tradition of thermalism and actually these establishments in their process of adaptation to demand have acquired a broader approach; customers come to the thermal baths, either to treat or prevent ailments or to take a break and spend a few days off enjoying a real health holiday (Del Río et al. 2014). Nowadays, health and wellness tourism is considered by National Tourist Strategic Plan or PENT (2006–2015) as one of the most important markets for the future development of tourism in the country (PENT 2006), and recognizing the increase of the number of people interested in having leisure times with quality, becomes evident and necessary give special attention this touristic product, as an answer to the needs and wishes of consumers, as well as the fulfillment of their satisfaction levels (Quintela et al. 2011).

Academically, medical and health tourism have included emerged as one of the fastest growing areas of research interest in both tourism and health studies (Hall 2011).

2.2 The Strategic Plan for Tourism and Thermalism Valorization of São Pedro do Sul: A Case-Study

During 2014 the “Strategic Plan for Tourism and Thermalism valorization of São Pedro do Sul” was designed. This region has registered a growth of 12.3 % in the number of guests between 2005 and 2012, representing 1/3 of the total volume
of income of classical tourism. Although, in the point of view of the economic development of the region, SPS is still far from being developed, because there are lodgment units, but we still can’t gather to tourism sector the landscape, culture, patrimony and wellness dimensions.

Relying on three main aspects, products, space promotion and governance, the project intended to study, in a first moment, the relation between offer and demand in SPS. This market is stronger in what concerns to classical thermalists and not to wellness users, but one of the goals of this project is to promote, develop and structure the touristic offer. In the first line of development is health and wellness tourism, on the second line is cultural and patrimonial tourism and in the third line is tourism of nature. Each one of these components will be analyzed in the next pages.

2.2.1 **The Region of São Pedro do Sul (Dão-Lafões)**

São Pedro do Sul (SPS) is located in a Centre Northern region of Portugal called Dão-Lafões, situated in the edges of the Vouga’s River and it is well-known for its thermal centre, one of the biggest in the country.

The history of the Thermal Centre of SPS is old in time and remains to the year of 1884. Located, the historical registers of this thermal centre are lost in time. However, the construction of the thermal complex bases, is attributed to the Romans, which is proved by the existence of important ruins and archaeological remains (Gustavo 2009). From the roman period we can identify some parts and elements of the ancient *balneum*, such as ionic columns, capitals, Latin inscriptions, interior swimming-pools and other spaces.

Nowadays, this thermal centre is composed by two complementary thermal buildings for the health segment called “D. Afonso Henriques” and other for the wellness segment called “Rainha D.ª Amélia”. The first building has the name of the first king of Portugal that in the year of 1169 cured a problem in his leg after falling from his horse in the Badajoz’s battle by using these waters. This building has a great cultural, architectonical and archeological value and been classified has National Monument in 1938.

This thermal centre is a leader of the Health and Wellness market in Portugal and it is open during the whole year and it is specialized in the cure of respiratory and rheumatological diseases, according with the mineralogical properties of the waters (classified as minero-medical and hyperthermal waters with the temperature of 68.7 °C) and also offers a range of spa treatments. Because of its tradition but also because of its popularity among the visitants, the SPS Thermal Centre occupies a singular position in the history of thermalism and shows great possibilities for sector and regional development of in the future.

The Project unveil that the numbers of regional and local touristic development between 2005 and 2012 demonstrate an evolution of the annual growth tax relatively to the number of guests in hotels, showing there has s been a decrease in the of 0.9 % in the region, but specifically SPS showed and increasing of 12.3 % in
2012. This tendency is also verified in the evolution number of nights in the regional hotel establishments during the same period, showing a decrease of 1.1 % in Dão-Lafões region and a growth of 27.6 % in SPS in 2012. SPS also shows in the same year a positive evolution in the average stay in hotel establishments with a growth of 4.9 %, as well as an increase of 24.3 % in the rate of bed occupancy in hotel establishments. Specifically, in what respects to thermalism the actual tendency in Portugal shows a decrease of 8.1 % in the number of the users of classical thermalism between 2005 and 2013, but SPS shows an inverse tendency, registering a growth of 30 %. In terms of leisure and wellness visitants, Portugal has registered a great evolution of 14.0 % but SPS registered only an increase of 3.4 % in the number of this kind of visitants.

In what concerns to financial return or income the tendency in both wellness tourism and classical tourism is the same. There is a decrease of 5.6 % in the classical thermalism income between 2005 and 2013, but in the same period and in the same segment SPS shows an income of 31.3 %. Specifically in the last 2 years of 2012 and 2013, there’s been an increase of the income of the wellness and leisure segment of 5.4 % in Portugal and a growth in SPS of 7.7 %.

2.2.2 The Touristic Offer

In the region of Dão-Lafões there are several touristic resources that can become anchor touristic resources of different kinds, like the natural patrimony with S. Macário mountain, Arada and Gralheira, Vouga, Paiva, Sul and Teixeira Rivers, the lagoon of Ribeiradio dam and a variety of pedestrian trails.

The region is also rich for its cultural patrimony that we can divide in monumental patrimony (the balneum ruins, monasteries, chapels and churches, typical villages of Fujaco); the artistic patrimony (rural Museum of Carvalhais) and the ethnographic patrimony (popular dances and local handicraft). It also has solid equipments (thermal centres, bioparque de Carvalhais and touristic and lodging services). Although, restaurants have a limited offer, as well as the nocturne animation and touristic animation. For that reason is necessary to encourage the modernization of the companies that act in the sector of health and wellness tourism, through the innovation of products that enlarge the touristic offer and satisfy, simultaneously, strategic development goals and promote the destination nationally and internationally (Ramos and Santos 2008). In this sense is urgent to organize and structure the touristic offer for thermal centres spread all over the national territory.

2.2.3 The Touristic Potential Demand

The qualitative analysis intended to characterize the local tourist profile and identify the potential touristic demand. Customer oriented product development has become increasingly necessary for gaining a competitive advantage in the tourism industry.
In order to develop customer oriented products, companies need to recognize customers whose needs they can fulfill based on their own resources. Customer segmentation divides customers or potential touristic demand into homogenous groups which differ from each other based on some given factor. It is possible to create well targeted products and services by using detailed customer and segment information (Konu 2010).

2.3 Methodology: Sample and Data Collection

According to the established goals of the strategic plan for tourism and thermalism valorization of São Pedro do Sul region the project intended to study, in a first moment, the relation between offer and demand in SPS.

A questionnaire managed by Idtour-unique solutions (a spin-off company that has emerged under the umbrella of the University of Aveiro), was designed to characterize the demand in what concerns to its demographic characteristics, the motivation for visiting the region, the fidelization levels and also the preferences for the different aspects of the region. The questionnaire was applied to the visitants of the region of São Pedro do Sul, collecting a total of 262 valid surveys.

2.3.1 Results and Analysis

According with the results of the research for 77.5 % of the inquired is not the first time that visits this region. In what concerns to loyalty to the destination we found that most of the sample shows a fidelization between 5 and 10 years (26.6 %) and between 2 and 4 years (23.2 %) and only 1.0 % of the sample shows a fidelization with less than 1 year.

In what concerns to the image, characteristics and resources of the region, most of the visitants associate it to nature and landscape (42.7 %) followed by thermal and treatments (23.7 %). Almost in the same proportion, the empiric research showed that the principal motivation to visit this region is related with thermal treatments (72.5 %), rest (58.4 %), health (40.1 %), nature (30.5 %) and wellness / well-being (27.9 %).

Referring to lodgment, hotels are the main preference for the visitants of the region representing 62.3 %. Most of the visitants stay for medium/long stays, around 2 weeks, representing 48.9 % of the total.

Concerning the global image destination, visitants classified it in a very positive way. 57.3 % of visitants has classified it as excellent and 27.1 % as good.

The visitants also evaluate a several the positive aspects of the region that goes from landscape (45.4 %), to hospitality (22.9 %), tranquillity (21.8 %), thermal centre and treatments (17.9 %), lodging (12.2 %), gastronomy (11.1 %) and urban space (10.3 %).
Region evaluation in its negative aspects, such as environmental hygiene (15.3 %), river pollution (9.9 %), roads and accessibilities (8.8 %), lack of cultural and nocturne animation (7.6 %), services (attendance) (6.1 %), price of the treatments (4.6 %), lack of signalization (2.3 %) and touristic information (1.5 %).

The most used services in the SPS complex are thermal treatments (79.5 %), medical consults (64.7 %) and thermal baths (38.1 %), massages (26.0 %), animation programs (24.7 %).

The main reasons for choose SPS is related with the quality of thermal waters (41.2 %), the recommendation from friends and relatives (29.8 %), medical suggestion (28.6 %) against 7.3 % for medical prescription. Exactly the same percentage of visitants comes only for curiosity.

The demographic data showed that most of the SPS visitors’ show a balance between the affluence of man (45.0 %) and women (50.8 %), most of them in a senior with ages has between 66 and 85 years old (48.9 %), and 54.2 % are retired from their professional life, they have superior education (43.5 %) and a monthly income between 1,000 and 2,000 Euros (32.4 %). The senior market is stronger in what concerns to classical thermalists and not to wellness users, but one of the goals of this project is to promote, develop and structure the touristic offer. In the first line of development is health and wellness tourism, on the second line is cultural and patrimonial tourism and in the third line is tourism of nature.

Most of the SPS visitants come from Portugal (92.4 %), just 6.1 % comes from foreign countries. The main national regions are Lisbon (37.2 %), Central region (33.0 %) and Northern region (22.0 %). In total of the sample, only 13.4 % had a kind of financial support, mostly from the national health system (57.1 %).

This is another important question to look at is the governmental co-participation of these treatments. This is an area that can be helpful to reflect in the near future because payments through National Health Service in Portugal have been lower and that could influence the evolution and development of thermalism, but this is not happening. Demand still visits this destination, use tourism services having long stays in hotels and pay directly and independently their thermal treatments.

### 2.4 The Development Strategy

To create a development strategy is important to know the region in its multiples aspects, designing a SWOT analysis (Table 2.1).

In this development strategy we focus on strategic resources, defining objective contents, creative and innovative actions to achieve orientation to the markets, the connection with the communication channels and with distribution agents. The final goals we intend to achieve with these three directions – products, promotion and governance – is to increase the number of visitants in 5.0 %, to increase the income in 7.5 %, and get lower the seasonality phenomenon in 3.0 % less.

To finally create high impact on markets, increase the efficiency and the efficacy of the promotion, to increase the notoriety, stimulate the business concretization.
2.4.1 Action Plan: The Anchor Projects

The action plan is essential to define a lot of different anchor projects that will improve the development of the region and also promote the development of health and wellness tourism as a composed product.

We define three main segments of development. For which one of these three segments, we define a lot of different actions, creating an action plan for the development of tourism in SPS region there are different strategic actions to apply in the

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<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Is a market leader in thermalism segment in Portugal;</td>
<td>Image associated to health segment;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality and characteristics of thermal waters;</td>
<td>Touristic animation (including nocturne);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great and solid attendance capacity;</td>
<td>Weak involvement, collaboration and connection to health sector;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity and complementarity of the existing offer (2 buildings for classical thermalism and for wellness treatments);</td>
<td>Eccentric location to circuits and traditional destinations of the national tourism;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse and quality of the lodgment offer;</td>
<td>Decreasing of the number of visitants in SPS Thermal Centre;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The historical richness, cultural and patrimonial, with strong connections with rural environment;</td>
<td>Distance of the main national airports;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental quality and greatness of natural territory;</td>
<td>Financial capacity to develop more and better promotion actions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good relation price-quality;</td>
<td>Lack of an annual calendar of events (animation);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safe region, a hospitable and relaxing environment.</td>
<td>Territorial signalization of the territory and the main touristic resources.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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<td>Growth of the wellbeing / wellness market;</td>
<td>Massified development of SPAs (associated to hotels);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incentive systems and financial support (until 2020);</td>
<td>Increasing of medical tourism in other regions of Portugal;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Availability of evolvement of the private agents;</td>
<td>Increasing of competitiveness of other destinations, mainly international;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oldness of national and European population;</td>
<td>The global economic and financial crisis;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoption of preventive health actions;</td>
<td>Austerity measures applied in Portugal (reduction of the income);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth of international tourism (1.8 thousand millions of tourists in 2030);</td>
<td>Decreasing of the duration of the stay and of the average of expenses of the visitants of the region;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity of Spanish market;</td>
<td>Visitants more dependent from technologies;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing of the senior market segment.</td>
<td>Introduction and payment of high-way taxes.</td>
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**Table 2.1 SWOT analysis for SPS (Dão-Lafões) region**
short and in the long term, created with anchor projects, promoting simultaneously the health sector and the tourism sector as follows:

- **Products** – Concerning to products, we intend to valorize the existing patrimony, to improve the territorial ordinance: natural, rural and urban territory, improve the attraction of new projects and the diversity of the offer and invest in offer qualification.

- **Promotion** – Related to promotion, we intend to consolidate the national market, increase the intervention in health sector, reinforce the investments on promotion tourism sector, increase promotion actions. Promote the thermal complex in tourism sector (touristic operators and travel agents and regional tourism organizations), innovative actions in high potential markets, participate in promotional events nationally and internationally, create a branding communication original and strong, create a regional website with technical characteristics and promotions, thermal promotion specifically in health sector (doctors, health centres, hospitals and associations).

- **Governance** – In what concerns to Governance, we pretend to increase the involvement of the regional partners and monitorize the touristic activity. Polarization of the three main vectors: Thermal Centre, Nature and Culture, Define anchor projects (Romain Thermal Ruins, Vouga’s River), involvement reinforce the ordinance and organization of the touristic territory. Promote the creation and the implementation of development strategies, the population involvement and of economic agents, involvement of scientific community (Health and Tourism), design an instrument of monitorization and observation (Observatory).

### 2.5 Conclusions

The future of the tourism industry will emerge as a result of the evolution that is already taking place on the consumer’s side, as customers are becoming more knowledgeable, informed, sophisticated and demanding. This requires new innovative products and alters both the operational and strategic management of tourism organizations as well as the structure of tourism itself.

It is evident that change is inevitable and it is influenced by a number of forces and factors in the external environment of tourism as well as the global competition emerging. With low barriers to entry, thousands of innovative businesses appear daily to capture market share, effectively enhancing the consumer bargaining power. Innovative tourism organizations and destinations should explore consumer trends and design suitable offerings and experiences to entice consumers.

They should modernize their management, practices and processes and develop links with compatible organizations to take advantage of the emerging opportunities. Consumer transformation is one of the most critical factors in this process. Tourism demand is changing dramatically in terms of volume, characteristics,
location, preferences and consumer behavior. It is demonstrated that, in accordance 
with the 2020 WTO Tourism Forecasts, the world tourism market will more than 
double in two decades, reaching 1.6 billion consumers by 2020. Perhaps most 
importantly, transformation of tourism demand and consumer behavior will gradu-
ally place customers in the driving seat of the industry and will require customer-
centric strategies where consumers are empowered to build their experiences. (Buhalis and Costa 2006).

Actually, personal health influences all patterns of consumer behavior – including 
travel. However, and to put those claims into perspective, health travel is (still) a 
niche and special interest market, but is significantly and increasingly contributing 
to the economy within a number of countries and is thus enjoying increasing 
research interest from both scholars and the tourism industry (Laesser 2011).

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