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Mineral/thermal springs, spa hotels and balneotherapy

Mineral spring spas are to be found situated over natural spring sources or wells and are located in all continents across the world.

China and Japan together account for 54% of global revenues and 73% of all establishments. Japan alone, with its estimated 20,972 *onsen* (thermal baths), is home to nearly two-thirds of all thermal/mineral springs establishments in the world. The remainder of the top markets include a large number of European countries with a long history of using thermal/mineral waters for curative and therapeutic purposes. (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). European thermal/mineral spas, in terms of revenue generated and their influence on the spa product as a whole, play an important role internationally in the spa industry, therefore anyone working in this field should have an understanding of what they are and how they work.

Thermal/mineral springs, thalasso and spa hotels

A mineral springs spa is defined as: “A spa offering an on-site source of natural mineral, thermal or seawater used in hydrotherapy treatments”. (ISPA, 2019).

Sea water spas can also be incorporated into this definition, as similarly to mineral springs, they use seawater instead of thermal/mineral water in their treatments. Historically, Brittany in France is seen as the most famous, traditional Thalassotherapy resort destination.

Thalassotherapy is “the use of seawater in cosmetic and health treatment” (Oxford English Dictionary 2009). The word comes from the Greek ‘*thalasso*’ (meaning the ‘sea’). Normally in a thalasso facility there will be a heated seawater pool and a number of related treatments, such as hydrotherapy also using seawater and sea mud or algae packs. Similar in concept to thermal spas, thalasso spas, whilst they may offer beauty and relaxation services, are more focused on longer term stays for the treatment of muscular skeletal/mobility conditions and so can also come under the ‘balneotherapy’ umbrella. Certain treatments will be administered by

qualified physiotherapists (i.e. massage and physiotherapy both in and out of the pool, hydrotherapy treatments such as baths, showers and wraps).

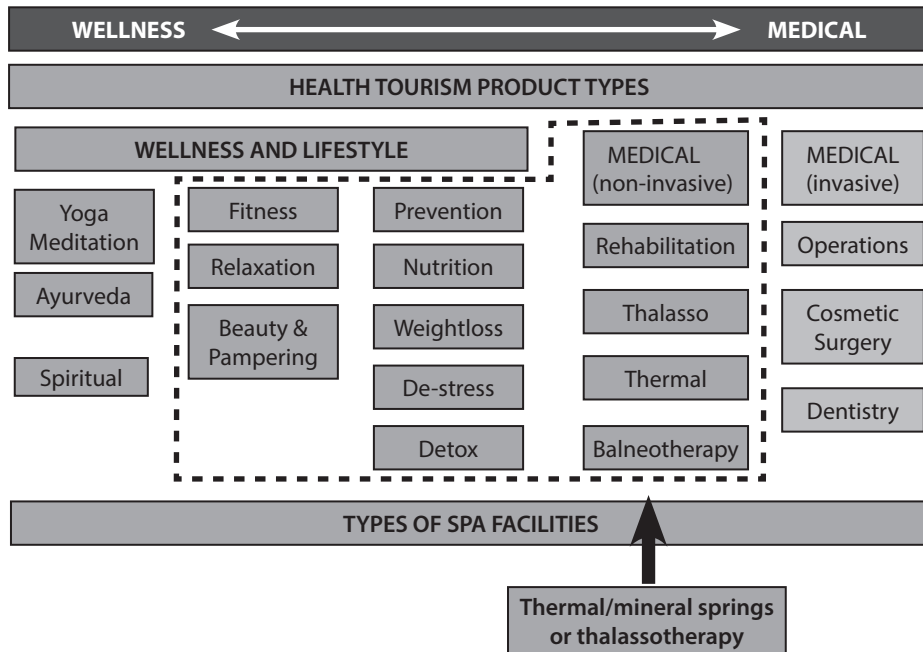


Figure 11.1: Products and services offered by thermal/mineral springs or thalassotherapy spas. Services will vary depending on whether the spa is leisure or medical. (Adapted from Smith and Puczkó, 2009).

■ Types of thermal/mineral and thalasso spas

Thermal/mineral leisure day spas

Thermal/mineral day spas can be found across the world in places where there is geothermal activity, particularly in Central Europe. These are either operated privately or by local municipalities. Many historical baths like the onsens in Japan or the thermal Ottoman baths in Turkey and Central Europe still run today in much the same way as they did in the past. Newer, extensive thermal day complexes, such as the Blue Lagoon in Iceland, or the large outdoor thermal aqua parks prevalent in Central Europe (most notably in Austria, Slovakia and Hungary), are growing in number. In these a single spa can boast over 40 pools, aqua and spa experiences and many hectares of spa gardens! They are predominantly leisure and relaxation facilities for the mass market, although many have day clinics specializing in rheumatology for patients on subsidized local insurance schemes.

- **Challenges:** because these types of spas can be high in volume, attracting sometimes several thousand visitors a day, they can be demanding to operate. There is also in parts of the world, particularly in Central Europe, an oversupply of these types of spas. The challenge for many may just be to break even

financially, many are subsidized and run at a loss. These types of spas also tend to offer a similar product for a similar target market (i.e. leisure/families), resulting in little differentiation. If they are to be sustainable in the future, they will need to diversify and to offer unique experiences to be competitive. They are also highly reliant on the image and attractions of the destination they are situated in.

- **Management:** to operate one of these spas, several years of management experience in the leisure, spa or hospitality sectors would be a pre-requisite. Such spas require strong leadership skills, strategic planning and detailed knowledge of both the financial and technical aspects of large leisure facilities.

Thermal/mineral spa medical centers (sometimes called medical spas)

Incorporated into some of these types of public day spas are clinics or medical centers operated normally as part of the national health service. Patients on state insurance schemes are prescribed rehabilitation-based treatments and bathing in thermal water, alongside physiotherapy-based and balneotherapy treatment. In historical European spa towns, these clinics will often be housed in the original spa treatment buildings.

- **Challenges:** with state insurance being cut, many of these spa medical centers often show signs of a lack of investment and are in a run-down state. Hydrotherapy treatments in the UK were phased out decades ago (due to a lack of evidence regarding their effectiveness). Whilst many countries in Europe still support balneotherapy and hydrotherapy (either in day spa medical centers or in private thermal spa hotels), with more pressure on government health spending budgets, gradually support for these types of spas is being cut.
- **Management:** these thermal facilities are run in the same way as clinics, normally with a head doctor responsible for the day to day management. A medical qualification (such as a degree in medicine and specialization in rheumatology) would be required to manage this type of facility. The day to day operations are supervised by a head nurse who reports to the doctor.

■ **Traditional European 'spa hotel'**

A spa hotel or resort is a hotel where the key purpose for guests visiting is the healing effects of a natural resource (such as thermal water, seawater, natural carbon dioxide gas, salt water, radon gas or healthy climate). The spa and spa treatments offered are based on this natural resource and will normally offer physical rehabilitation therapies as its core product. Spa hotels/resorts differ from a resort/hotel spa where guests might or might not choose to visit the spa. In a spa hotel all the guests will be receiving treatment and using the spa. Up to 70% of the guests in these types of spas are repeat guests, coming on stays for between two and three weeks.

Historically spa hotels were built next to the thermal/mineral spa medical centers or thalassotherapy centers. Guests would stay in the hotel and visit the