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The Future of Health and Wellness Tourism

Introduction

Wellness tourism is currently one of the fastest growing tourism niche markets having experienced exponential growth over the past two decades (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). The attributed reasons for the exponential growth is wellness being an essential factor in shaping people's lives, as well as being increasingly influential in patterns of consumption and production. The wellness industry plays a crucial role as an important driver for future business growth and major innovations (Voigt and Pforr, 2013; Pyke *et al.*, 2016). This chapter defines the relative terms of health, wellness, spa and medical tourism, identifies the current trends in the health and wellness sector, details the various wellness providers and considers the future direction of health and wellness in connection with tourism and destination development. The chapter concludes with a case study discussing the success factors of wellness spa tourism in Thailand.

Defining health, wellness, spa and medical tourism

Health tourism is a broad concept that comprises two major sub-categories of wellness and medical tourism (Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001; Smith and Puczko, 2009; Voigt, Brown and Howat, 2011). Smith and Puczko (2015) believe any definition of health tourism should ideally consider the World Tourism Organisation, which quoted in 1984 that health tourism was the extent to which 'an individual or a group is able to realise aspirations and satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept, emphasising social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities'.

Kaspar (1996, cited in Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001: 7), who also regards wellness tourism as a subcategory of health tourism, defines the term as:

...the sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a change of location and residence by people in order to promote, stabilise and, as appropriate, restore physical, mental and social wellbeing while using health services and for whom the place where they are staying is neither their principle nor permanent place of residence or work.

Smith and Puczko (2015: 206) believe the concept of wellness comprises life domains such as 'physical, mental and spiritual health, self-responsibility, social harmony, environmental sensitivity, intellectual development, and emotional well-being and occupational satisfaction'. These researchers (Smith and Puczko, 2015: 207) propose that wellness tourism extends beyond merely spa tourism (see definition below), with research indicating that wellness tourism also encompasses 'healthy cuisine, specific fitness or body-mind-spirit regimes, active ageing or longevity programmes, learning, adventure, spiritual enlightenment and personal growth, all of which take place in purpose-built centres'. Wellness tourism literature also discusses 'the absence of disease, illness and stress but also the inclusion of purpose of life, joyful relationships, and satisfying work and play through active involvement, presence of happiness, and a healthy body and living environment' (Smith and Puczko, 2015: 206).

The word 'spa' derives from the Latin phrase *sanus per aquam*, which means 'healthy through water' (Puczko and Bachvarov, 2006). A spa is a 'business offering water based treatments practiced by qualified personnel in a professional, relaxing and healing environment' (Lo, Wu and Tsai, 2015: 158). Though 'spa tourism' is the best-known form of health and wellness tourism, Smith and Puczko (2015: 208) argue as an actual tourism activity, that 'spa tourism' does not exist but rather tourists visit spas 'as places devoted to overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit'. There are seven categories of spas including day spa, resort/hotel spa, destination spa, medical spa, mineral spring spa, club spa and cruise ship spa. In particular, the resort/hotel spa has the closest relationship to the tourism sector. Increasing spa visitation in recent years has increased both profitability and consumer awareness (Desseau and Brennan, 2008).

Connell (2006a: 1094) defines medical tourism as that which is 'deliberately linked to direct medical intervention and outcomes that are expected to be substantial and long term', inclusive of dentistry and plastic surgery. Connell (2006a) adds that the emergence of this tourism niche has helped to satisfy the needs of a growing number of people, mainly from developed countries, which has benefitted both themselves and various destinations, predominantly

in developing countries. Laing and Weiler (2007: 381) consider a number of factors influencing the growth of medical tourism, including:

...the high cost of medical procedures, long waiting lists and ageing populations in wealthier countries, greater affordability of flights and travel, and a shift in medical care away from the public sector, such that people are more comfortable with paying for medical services offered by private bodies or companies.

The Internet, inclusive of online consumer forums and social media platforms, has also made retrieval of medical-related information regarding what is available, including comparison of prices and services, more straightforward. Being able to access more affordable medical facilities overseas gives individuals their anonymity, enabling surgery and recuperation to take place in a relatively unfamiliar environment (Connell, 2006b; Laing and Weiler, 2007).

The way wellness and medical tourism providers view health has consequences in regards to the products and services they offer and the kind of workforce employed (Voigt, 2013). Wellness and medical tourism cater to different tourists' needs and therefore different tourism markets. Each offer essentially differing types of services based in locations with very different characteristics and they have staff employing different skill sets (Voigt and Pforr, 2013). Weight loss and fitness camps for example, are aimed at overweight individuals and typically involve an educational programme integrating elements of health, nutrition and physical fitness, often within a specified timeframe (Gately *et al.*, 2000). Medical tourism providers are normally, but not always in the case of cosmetic and plastic surgery, illness-orientated and emphasise a curative approach. The majority of services offered are biomedical procedures including invasive and high-tech diagnostic services with personnel treating medical tourists (or patients), typically certified health professionals, such as doctors and nurses (Voigt, 2013).

Wellness tourism adopts an alternative approach to health that promotes, what Voigt and Pforr (2013: 3) believe is, 'the balance and holistic integration of multiple health dimensions inclusive of body/mind/spirit, environmental and social. Active self-responsibility, healthy lifestyles, subjectivity and actualisation of human potential also have a major role to play in wellness tourism.' Voigt (2013) observes that services offered by wellness tourism providers generally fall outside the realm of biomedicine, which can encompass a range of different services including Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies, which refers to the array of therapies that extend beyond Western medical treatments. The term complementary describes treatments