

HEALTH TOURISM AND ITS DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN LATVIA

VESELĪBAS TŪRISMS UN TĀ ATTĪSTĪBAS IESPĒJAS LATVIJĀ

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Abstract. Nowadays health tourism became very popular among the tourists and locals because people started to pay more attention to their health condition and take care more about themselves.

This article is about health tourism and its development opportunities in Latvia. The author analyses the health tourism theoretical aspects and classification using scientific articles, literature resources and Internet resources. The author makes the theoretical research about health tourism development and provided services in Latvia and introduces the recommendations and innovative solutions to develop health tourism in Latvia.

Research problem: many locals choose to go to health tourism destinations abroad instead of use Latvian health tourism enterprises' provided services.

Novelty of the research: analysis of health tourism provided services in Latvia; accomplished practical research of health tourism and its development opportunities in Latvia; suggestions and recommendations in health tourism development opportunities in Latvia.

Keywords: health tourism; health tourism development opportunities in Latvia; medical tourism; wellness tourism.

Introduction

Nowadays health tourism became very popular among the tourists and locals because people started to pay more attention to their health condition and take care more about themselves.

Latvia has long been a popular SPA and medical tourism destination. The country's territory is rich in natural resources and healing mineral water sources, which have been used in popular medicine for centuries, also attracting the attention of foreigners. By the end of the 18th century, an extensive network of sanatoriums had been established in Latvia, while the Baltic Sea coast was renowned as a popular health tourism destination (*Latvian Health Tourism Cluster, 2019*).

This article includes theoretical part about term 'health tourism' and health tourism's classification. The article's practical research includes analysis of health tourism's provided services in Latvia. The author introduces the recommendations and innovative solutions to develop health tourism in Latvia.

The research problem is that many locals choose to go to health tourism destinations abroad instead of use Latvian health tourism enterprises' provided services; necessity to attract not only locals, but also foreign guests to use health's tourism services in Latvia.

Research object: health tourism.

Research subject: Latvian health tourism.

The article aim: to research and analyse the health tourism and its development opportunities in Latvia.

The article goal: to prove that Latvia has good health tourism's destinations, the opportunities to develop health tourism and attract not only locals but also foreign tourists.

Tasks:

- 1) analyse the theoretical aspects of health tourism;
- 2) analyse the development of health tourism in Latvia;
- 3) make the practical research about health tourism development opportunities in Latvia.

Hypothesis: Latvia can be sustainable health tourism destination and it has good opportunities for development.

Research methods: analysis of the theoretical aspects, literature resources; document analysis.

Novelty of the research: analysis of health tourism provided services in Latvia; accomplished practical research of health tourism and its development opportunities in Latvia; suggestions and recommendations in health tourism development opportunities in Latvia.

The basis of the research: development of health tourism in Latvia.

The empirical basis of the research: The indicators characterizing the health tourism sector of Latvia, internet resources were used.

Research period: year 2017 - 2020

1. Theoretical aspects of health tourism

Health tourism's popularity increases very fast because of the people's interest to improve their health condition and people's necessity to take care of themselves satisfying their wellbeing needs. Interest of health tourism grows up very fast not only in foreign countries but also in Latvia. The author analyses the theoretical aspects of health tourism.

Health tourism is a form of tourism that consists of patients traveling to other countries to get medical treatment or assistance. It comprises of all the services associated with tourism like transport, accommodation, and hospitality. Health tourism consists of medical tourism, wellness tourism (to enhance health) and spa tourism (spas that combine medical and health components). The three components are different but also overlap (*Fink, 2018*).

In the figure 1 is shown "health tourism" as the 'umbrella' term for the two types of health tourism: wellness tourism and medical tourism.

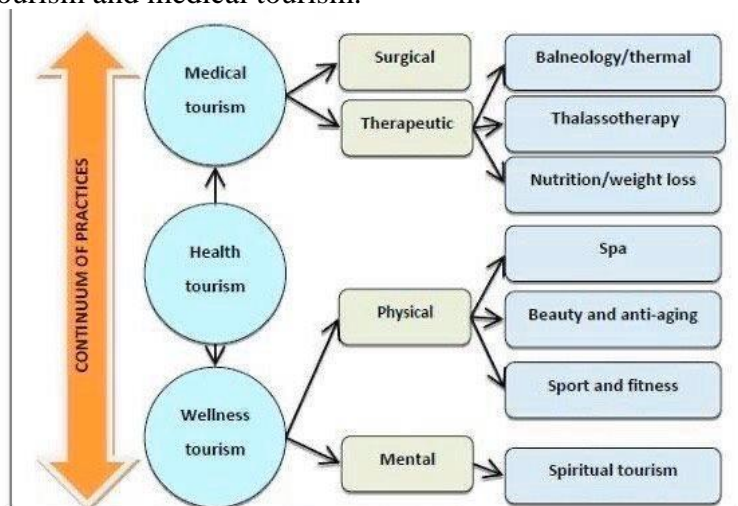


Figure 1. Proposed simplified framework for term "health tourism"
(Padilla-Meléndez, Del-Águila-Obra, 2016)

According to the figure 1. the author understands that health tourism divides in two types of tourism: medical tourism and wellness tourism. Each of the tourism's type also divides in two parts by the provided services.

Medical tourism divides in surgical and therapeutic. The term "therapeutic" includes balneology/thermal, thalassotherapy, nutrition/weight loss associated services.

Wellness tourism divides in physical and mental. The term "physical" includes spa, beauty and anti-aging, sport and fitness associated services. The term "mental" includes spiritual tourism.

The main types of health tourism are medical tourism and wellness tourism. The author analyses these types more detailed further.

Medical tourism can be defined as the process of traveling outside the country of residence for the purpose of receiving medical care. Originally, the term referred to the travel of patients from less-developed countries to developed nations in pursuit of the treatments not available in their homeland (*Meštrović, 2018*).

D. Prakapienė and G. Valukonienė mention in “Hospitality Business Organization” book that Bookman and Bookman (2007) identify three forms of medical tourism: invasive, diagnostic and lifestyle. Invasive treatments involve high-tech procedures performed by a specialist; diagnostic procedures encompass several types of tests such as blood screenings and electrocardiogram; and lifestyle includes wellness or recuperation treatments. Most common treatments: dental care, cosmetic surgery, elective surgery, art fertility treatment, etc. (*Prakapienė, Valukonienė, 2015*).

Today are experiencing both qualitative and quantitative shifts in patient mobility, as people travel from richer to less-developed countries in order to access health services. Such shift is mostly driven by the relative low-cost of treatments in less developed nations, the availability of inexpensive flights and increased marketing and online consumer information about the availability of medical services (*Meštrović, 2018*).

The most common types of procedures that patients pursue during medical tourism trips are elective cosmetic surgery, dentistry, organ transplantation, cardiac surgery and orthopedic surgery (*Meštrović, 2018*).

The second type of tourism ‘under’ the ‘umbrella’ term of health tourism is wellness tourism.

Wellness tourism includes consumers who travel to maintain their well-being and life satisfaction through the experiences of healthy treatments. Wellness has to do with quality of life. In a holistic approach to health (Chinese ayurvedic and integrative medicines) wellness treatments and therapies restore the vital balance among bodies mind and spirit toward equilibrium and health harmony. This harmony re-balances and restores the energy flow bringing about overall well-being (*Fernandes, Fernandes, 2013*).

The Global Wellness Institute splits the wellness tourism market into two types of travellers:

- Primary wellness travellers – those who are primarily motivated by wellness to take a trip. Their destination is based on its wellness offerings. An example would be someone going to a yoga retreat of wellness resort.
- Secondary wellness travellers – those who want to maintain wellness or participate in wellness activities during any kind of travel. An example would be someone who visits the gym while they are on a trip (*Market Business News, 2020*).

Wellness tourism should not be confused with medical tourism. Wellness tourists travel to improve or maintain their health and quality of life, whereas medical tourists travel to receive treatment for a diagnosed condition.

Wellness tourism trips include a variety of activities such as thermal springs, day spa and hotel spa, thalassotherapy, exercise.

The wellness tourism industry has grown at a fast rate because of a boom in global interest in fitness, health, wellbeing, and consumer having more disposable income (*Market Business News, 2020*).

The author finds the difference between wellness tourism and medical tourism in that each type of tourism has own purpose: medical tourists are motivated to travel to receive medical

treatment for a diagnosed disease by lower cost than at homeland; wellness tourists are motivated to travel to maintain health, wellbeing and improve quality of life to promote healthy living.

2. Health tourism development and provided services in Latvia

Latvia's healthcare sector has recently undergone restructuring and budget cuts aimed at increasing efficiency and facilitating the introduction of additional private healthcare options. The potential of the sector lies in the combination of highly qualified personnel, low costs, and first-rate facilities. **Medical tourism** is an emerging sector, building on Latvia's reputation as a spa destination, its convenient location, and the availability of high-standard health services at a low cost (*Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2020*).

Key advantages:

- Recent efforts to improve efficiency.
- Highly qualified workforce at competitive prices.
- High standard of health services.
- Promising new business opportunity: medical tourism.
- Government support for an efficient and innovative healthcare sector (*Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2020*).

In Europe, Latvia is the country that is most dependent on European Union aid and investment. The country needs international investors to build new private healthcare facilities. Most hospitals are public ones. It has no money to upgrade existing facilities or build new ones (*International Medical Travel Journal, 2019*).

Every year, tens of thousands of medical tourists arrive in Latvia. Collating the statistical data for 2017, the Top 10 countries, whose patients have received treatment in Latvia are: Russia, Belarus, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, the USA, Sweden, Lithuania, Norway and Estonia. To receive treatment in Latvia, patients also arrive from Canada, Ireland, Finland, Israel, France, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, India, Italy, Kazakhstan, China, Denmark and other countries around the world (*Latvian Health Tourism cluster, 2020*).

Latvia has long been a popular medical tourism destination. The country has a rich array of natural healing resources including healing mud including mineral water springs, which have been used in medical treatment and preventive healthcare for over 200 years (*Latvian Health Tourism cluster, 2020*).

Latvian hospitals' and clinics' provided services are: Weight loss surgery; Dermatology; Diagnostics; Childbirth; Aesthetic medicine; Gastroenterology; Gynaecology and urology; Internal medicine; Cardiology; Medical products; IVF and Fertility; Cancer; Orthopedic; Otorhinolaryngology; Pediatrics; Plastic surgery; Psychiatry; Vision; Rehabilitation; Reconstructive surgery; Vein treatment; SPA; Dentistry (*Latvian Health Tourism cluster, 2020*).

According to the above-mentioned information, the author defines that Latvia has many good provided medical services by the best Latvian clinics. The medical services are provided by high-qualified specialists, by developed new technologies for low prices than in other high-developed countries.

Latvia does not pretend to be a leader in medical treatment or diagnostics, but it is quietly becoming popular for health and **wellness**. Specialist centres and spas offer treatment courses for those recovering from chronic diseases with a variety of methods of treatment – gymnastics, massage, water procedures and diet that improve immunity and help to work all systems correctly. Pine trees on sand dune beaches, a beautiful sea endlessly throwing foaming waves onto the flat sandy shore, that is a calling card from the Baltic resorts. Contemporary Baltic health resorts and

spa complexes are replacing traditional sanatorium-type health resorts, coupled with contemporary treatment methods (*International Medical Travel Journal, 2010*).

The **sauna or bathhouse** tradition in Latvia is deeply seated – already in the 19th century there was a bathhouse on every farmstead. Although nowadays sauna is no longer the only place to wash oneself, as every household has hot running water, the bathhouse traditions still remain. The purpose of bathhouses extends beyond simply washing the body. By observing the wisdom of the bath ritual of our ancestors, you can escape the cares and troubles of everyday life, free yourself of stress, and revive the spirit (*Magnetic Latvia Travel, 2018*).

It is possible to experience an authentic bath ritual in **any of the hundreds of guesthouses** of Latvia. A guesthouse with a sauna can be rented for a family or a small company of friends, as well as for hosting various events with a large number of guests (*Magnetic Latvia Travel, 2018*).

According to the above-mentioned information, the author states that Latvia has few good wellness tourism destinations, where to enjoy spa procedures, beautiful nature and experience an authentic bath rituals and sauna culture in many Latvian guesthouses. Latvia is a country rich of mineral resources, green nature and clean waters. Latvia also has a good geographical location which allows to provide for wellness tourists to spend good vacation at sanatoriums and SPA resorts located at Baltic sea coast among pine trees.

The author does research to find out the amount of registered SPA and wellness enterprises with accommodation facilities of every Latvian region using the data of 2020 in booking.com (Table 1.).

Table 1

The amount of SPA and wellness enterprises with accommodation in every region of Latvia
(*Booking.com, 2020*)

No.	Region	Amount of SPA and wellness enterprises with accommodation
1.	Kurzeme	15
2.	Zemgale	7
3.	Vidzeme (included Riga)	93
4.	Latgale	12
Total:		127

According to the above-mentioned information, the author states that Latvia has 127 SPA and wellness enterprises providing accommodation facilities, which are registered in booking.com official website in 2020.

3. Health tourism development opportunities in Latvia

According to the information of theoretical part about the health tourism development in Latvia, Latvia is the country that is most dependent on European Union aid and investment. The country needs international investors to build new private healthcare facilities (*International Medical Travel Journal, 2019*).

The author states that any improvement of health tourism development in Latvia needs additional money investments, which can be received from investors, because Latvia is not so developed country in health care (*International Medical Travel Journal, 2019*). Received new investments for healthcare development in Latvia from European Union funds, the country has opportunities for health tourism development.

On March 6, 2019 (Order No. 109), the Latvian Government approved an “Export Development Plan of Health Care Services for 2019-2023“ (*Irish Latvian Chamber of Commerce, 2019*). Latvian Health Export Action Plan consists of such actions:

- Improvement of legislation (tourism law, medical tourists statistics etc.);
- Improvement of strategical medical tourism countries;
- Creation of common image of medical tourism;
- Development of service quality and hospitality standards for medical institutions;
- Annual Medical tourism marketing plan;
- Development of websites coordinated by State Health Agencies;
- Support actions for development cooperation with foreign health insurance companies;
- Support actions for development medical innovative products and technologies;
- Support actions for solving different kind of problems (*Ušpele, 2019*).

Latvian Health Export Action Plan identifies priority sectors and export markets in the world and shows plan’s action in promoting Latvian health tourism to attract medical and health care customers from abroad (*Irish Latvian Chamber of Commerce, 2019*).

Related to information of “Export Development Plan of Health Care Services for 2019-2023” the author claims that creation of common image of health tourism in Latvia is very important action for health tourism development in country. It is very necessary in attraction of new tourists to come to Latvia, in attraction of new foreign partners and new investors for health tourism enterprises development, in promotion of qualitative product and health care services. Latvia has to present provided health care services and facilities for foreign market to earn the recognition and to develop health tourism in Latvia.

Development of service quality and hospitality standards for medical institutions is also very important, because not only service quality, but also good customer service also builds the image of full medical institution. To solve such situation, the personnel’s trainings should be introduced. Every enterprise’s personnel should know how to treat the guests right to receive good feedback.

The author considers that using of marketing tools has the biggest role in product promotion. To develop health tourism is necessary to know how to promote health care products and services provided by Latvian health tourism enterprises. Nowadays, using internet environment is the best place where to use modern marketing tools to promote the product not only in local market but also in foreign market. The author considers that the official website or official account in popular social networks and applications of any health tourism enterprise can give the first impression for customers about the full enterprise before visiting it in real life.

In author’s opinion, to develop health tourism enterprise productivity, profitability, recognition and sustainability, should be provided more workplaces for new medical specialists who can attract new customers by providing new health care services experiences by recently received education, being creative, being smart in modern technologies, innovations and new trends in health care industry, being smart in using of new marketing tools to promote the product and services and attract new customers.

The economic situation in Latvia also takes a big role in health tourism development opportunities in Latvia. Economic growth is strong and income convergence continues, even though at a slower pace than before 2008. The labour market is tight, as unemployment falls to its lowest rate in ten years and vacancies are rising fast. Wage growth has been a strong supporting household purchasing power. Despite increasing labour costs, Latvian exporters have remained competitive and gained market shares. The macroeconomy appears balanced overall with inflation,

public debt and the deficit under control. Financial markets look stable, sustained by sound macroprudential policy (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019*).

According to the above-mentioned information about economic situation, the author states that economic growth of Latvia is strong, unemployment falls, wages grow, that means that health tourism development opportunities exist and health tourism can be sustainable.

Latvia is becoming a more and more beloved tourism destination for those who are looking for nature and eco-tourism, fresh air, delicious & GMO free food and those who want to improve their health whether in several SPAs and relaxation centres or having more serious medical procedures like weight-loss surgery, orthopaedics, eye or dental treatment and other (*Medical Travel Latvia, 2020*)

In author's opinion, Latvian nature has a very big role in Latvian health tourism development and its opportunities, because natural resources make Latvian health tourism to be sustainable. Latvian nature is full of useful values – fresh air, clean water, green plants - for health improving and wellbeing maintaining. Rich natural resources give new opportunities for new health tourism's enterprises development. Nature also gives useful natural resources for medical treatments, health condition maintaining.

According to the theoretical part's information about health tourism development in Latvia, country has high standards of health services and highly qualified workforce at competitive prices of health care enterprises (*Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, 2020*). The authors states, that Latvian health tourism development opportunities exist also because of the competitive prices on provided qualitative health services by highly qualified specialists. Good prices can attract many foreign tourists who are interested in receiving health care services.

Conclusions and suggestions

1. Health tourism is a form of tourism that consists of patients traveling to other countries to get medical treatment or assistance.
2. Medical tourism can be defined as the process of traveling outside the country of residence for the purpose of receiving medical care. The most common types of procedures that patients pursue during medical tourism trips are elective cosmetic surgery, dentistry, organ transplantation, cardiac surgery and orthopedic surgery.
3. Wellness tourism includes consumers who travel to maintain their well-being and life satisfaction through the experiences of healthy treatments. Wellness tourism trips include a variety of activities such as thermal springs, day spa and hotel spa, thalassotherapy, exercise.
4. Latvian wellness tourism destinations' provided services basically are specialist centres and spas offer treatment courses– gymnastics, massage, saunas, water procedures, diets, etc.
5. Latvia has 127 SPA and wellness enterprises with accommodation facilities registered in booking.com official website in 2020.
6. The author states that the main health tourism development opportunities in Latvia could be: additional money investments, marketing plan, improvement of services quality, sustainability of natural resources.
7. The author claims that creation of common image of health tourism in Latvia is very important action for health tourism development in country. It is very necessary in attraction of new tourists to come to Latvia, in attraction of new foreign partners and new investors for health tourism enterprises development, in promotion of qualitative product and health care services.
8. The author suggests to develop service quality and hospitality standards for medical institutions, it is also very important, because not only service quality, but also good customer service also builds the image of full medical institution.

9. Latvian health tourism development opportunities exist also because of the competitive prices on provided qualitative health services by highly qualified specialists. Good prices can attract many foreign tourists who are interested in receiving health care services. The author suggests that health care institutions should not raise the prices, because prices that match the offers attract patients.
10. The author states that economic growth of Latvia is strong, unemployment falls, wages grow, that means that health tourism development opportunities exist and health tourism can be sustainable. The author suggests that Latvian government should keep to support and invest in new health tourism enterprises to develop an efficient and innovative healthcare sector.
11. The author suggests that Latvian health tourism enterprises should keep using sustainable natural resources in health care treatments, because it can give opportunity for health tourism's enterprises development to attract foreign tourists to experience something new, what they cannot experience in their homeland.
12. Hypothesis of the research that Latvia can be sustainable health tourism destination and it has good opportunities for development is approved.

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Kopsavilkums

Mūsdienās veselības tūrisms ir kļuvis ļoti populārs tūristu un vietējo iedzīvotāju vidū, jo cilvēki sāka pievērst lielāku uzmanību savam veselības stāvoklim un vairāk rūpēties par sevi.

Veselības tūrisms iedalās divos veidos: medicīniskais tūrisms – kad cilvēki ceļo uz noteikto galamērķi saņemt medicīnisko pakalpojumu; labsajūtas tūrisms – kad cilvēki ceļo labsajūtas stāvokļa uzlabošanas nolūkos.

Latvija ir konkurētspējīgs veselības tūrisma galamērķis, pateicoties augsti kvalificētiem speciālistiem, konkurētspējīgām cenām uz to pakalpojumiem, labam valsts ģeogrāfiskam novietojumam un dabas bagātībām. Taču, lai veselības tūrisma attīstītu un piesaistītu ne tikai vairāk vietējo cilvēku izmantot valsts sniegtos veselības tūrisma pakalpojumu, bet arī ārzemju viesus, rakstā ir apskatītas vairākas veselības tūrisma attīstības iespējas Latvijā.

Galvenās veselības tūrisma attīstības iespējas Latvijā ir: papildus investīcijas, izdevīgs mārketinga plāns, pakalpojumu kvalitātes uzlabošana un dabas resursu ilgtspējība.