

HEALTHY SPACES, HEALING PLACES: SHARING EXPERIENCES OF WELLNESS TOURISM IN OREGON, USA

Greg Ringer, Ph.D.
University of Oregon, USA
Fulbright Visiting Professor, Faculty of Tourism & Hotel Management,
Kotor University of Montenegro

Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the evolving trends in spa, health, and medical tourism in Montenegro and the United States and more specifically, the State of Oregon. The language and practices of "wellness tourism" which prevail in Oregon differ significantly from those widely applied in Europe, where the concept is firmly established, both legally and culturally. Consequently, the ideas highlighted in this paper are intended to support further discussion of the critical benefits of health-related tourism for Montenegro. In addition, the visitor experiences and data from Oregon may encourage further consideration of alternative resources and preventive therapeutic treatments that would complement existing curative facilities, and provide meaningful opportunities for small- and medium-sized hotels and tour operators in Crna Gora (Montenegro).

Objectives

Wellness tourism is a relatively new concept in the United States, although the attractiveness of health-related travel is increasingly popular across the country, as evidenced by the varied locations of the top health spas in Palm Desert, California (Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa); Washington state (Wellspring, Ashford); Nevada (Canyon Ranch Spa Club, Las Vegas); Colorado (The Aspen Club & Spa); New York state (Origins Feel-Good Spa, New York City); Wisconsin (Fontana Spa); and in Oregon (Spa Wananpine at the Kah-Nee-Ta Resort in Warm Springs). Consequently, the objective of this paper is to briefly highlight trends in spa, health, and medical tourism in the U.S. and more specifically, the State of Oregon in the Pacific Northwest (Burt and Lechtman, 2001).

It should be noted that the ideas and examples which follow reflect the language and practices that prevail in the U.S., as well as parts of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and selected destinations in East Asia and the Pacific region. As such, they differ significantly from the terminology and meaning of wellness tourism in Europe, where the primary emphasis is curative treatment, rather than preventive therapy as is the norm in Oregon. In addition, it is recognized that health-related facilities in Europe are

more clearly defined, both culturally and legally, whereas the concept is broadly interpreted in Oregon by individual spa operators and health providers in terms of available treatments, and in the design and operation of the spa facilities themselves (Lang Research Inc., 2001; Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001).

The following ideas, therefore, are intended only to highlight current approaches in Oregon and the U.S., in contrast to those which currently prevail in Montenegro. In so doing, the authors hope to stimulate further consideration and discussion of appropriate alternatives for Montenegro that may complement the excellent, internationally-renowned facilities (such as Igalo near the Croatian border) which already exist in the region and have long been popular for both domestic and foreign visitors.

Wellness Tourism in Oregon

The popularity of wellness tourism in Oregon is perhaps best evidenced by the growing number of day spas and destination resort spas throughout the state, as well as the increasing use of geothermal hot springs long enjoyed by recreational visitors who now seek the therapeutic benefits associated with their “healing waters” as well. With more than 126 individual facilities to choose from, a visitor may select an urban spa with full amenities for day or overnight use, or alternatively, a destination resort or hot spring located in the mountainous regions and high desert of central and eastern Oregon, where the volcanic geology provides a steady source of geothermal waters.

Many of the hot springs consist of nothing more than a primitive shelter or hot tub surrounding the water’s source, with primitive campsites available for overnight guests. Several however – such as Breitenbush Hot Springs in the Cascade Mountains – provide rustic cabins, organic meals, and regularly scheduled workshops and conference facilities for their guests. For tourists in search of more luxurious accommodations, the choices include destination resorts offering a broad range of treatments and activities, such as Spa Wananpine at Kah-Nee-Te Resort, owned and operated by the Warm Springs Native American reservation in north-central Oregon. Rated one of the top health spas in the U.S., Spa Wananpine is situated in close proximity to Oregon’s major urban centers, Portland and Salem (the state capital), where a majority of the state’s population resides. Indeed, both Breitenbush and Spa Wananpine benefit from their geographic location, with most visitors living within a 5-hour drive of either spa.

The increasing attractiveness – and economic significance – of health and wellness tourism is further apparent in the growth in both domestic and international visitors since 2001. While the total number of tourists from the Pacific Northwest region, Canada, and Europe has rebounded slightly in the past five years, the number of international visitors from Asia and South America remains depressed, with total South

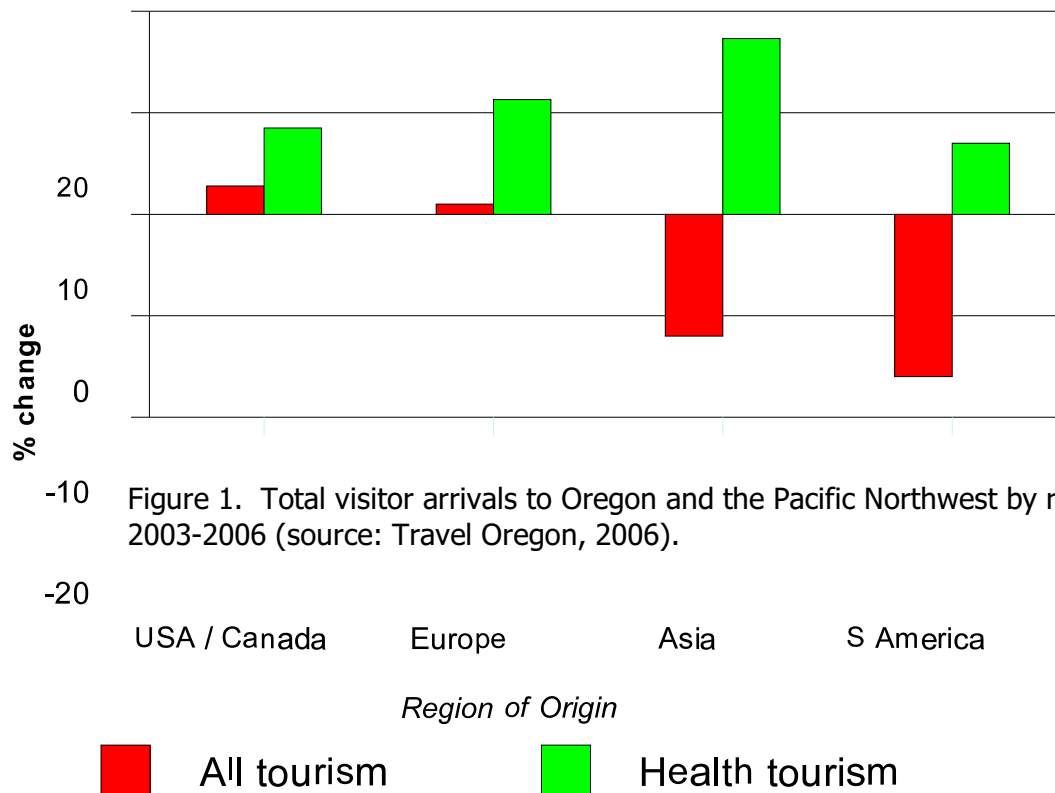


Figure 1. Total visitor arrivals to Oregon and the Pacific Northwest by region, 2003-2006 (source: Travel Oregon, 2006).

American visitation still down nearly 16 percent in that period and 12 percent fewer Asian visitors than previously. Health tourism, in contrast, now draws visitors from every region, with anticipated annual growth ranging from 8 percent in U.S. and Canadian visitors to a yearly increase of almost 20 percent in Asian visitors (figure 1).

While much of this growth in tourism is directly attributable to direct flights recently initiated between Oregon, Japan, Mexico, and Germany, there is no doubt that the increase in the total number and affordable mix of day and destination spas in Oregon, and growing awareness of the state's reputation as a quality destination for health-related travel, are also contributing factors to this trend. As a result, the state tourism marketing agency, Oregon Travel, estimates that tourism will generate nearly US\$ 63 million in 2006 in both direct and indirect spending by tourists on spa and health treatments, and associated recreation, accommodations, and travel (Inouye, 2006).

Oregon Visitor Profile

The total market for health and wellness tourism in Oregon is estimated to be approximately 156 million visits per year, a significant market for a state whose total population is only three million persons. In large part, this is attributable to the popularity of wellness tourism among Oregon residents, who may visit day spas in their

communities several times a week. It is also due to the state's central location in the region, and the proximity of many of the more popular hot springs and spas to the major urban centers of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

As noted above, most of Oregon's spas draw their visitors from within a 5-hour drive, including the cities of Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, British Columbia. In addition, San Francisco is only a nine-hour drive and easily accessible by Interstate highway, and direct flights connect these urban centers, as well as Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Denver, and Calgary, Alberta, as well as the nonstop flights from Frankfurt operated by Lufthansa Airlines and Tokyo on Northwest Airlines. Consequently, the ease of affordable access by road and airplane makes Oregon a popular attraction, as does its national and international reputation for health lifestyles and the quality of its organic agricultural products (Travel Oregon, 2005; Inouye, 2006).

The overwhelming majority of spa users are women, though day spas report a higher frequency of female visitors (91%), in contrast to resort spas (75%). The average age is also somewhat similar in both types of facilities, though day spas tend to attract younger guests as well, reporting a range of 25-55 years in age, while resort spas draw older adults (47-55 years old on average). These variances are most likely due to the higher costs associated with the destination resorts, where the average annual household income exceeds US\$ 35,000 (and nearly half report income exceeding US\$ 80,000 per year).

It is also most certainly due to the work and family commitments of younger women and men, who report comparable income levels, but who find the day spas more convenient and affordable for frequent use as a supplement to their regular exercise regime and membership in gyms and other venues for physical activity. As might be expected, the benefits of regular exercise and preventive therapy are well-known by guests of both types of facilities, who tend to be well educated, with 40-47 percent of the users having earned an undergraduate university degree. Thus, many are knowledgeable about the diversity of treatments offered, and eager to take advantage of them when available. In addition, Oregon spa users are predominantly married (more than 50%) and tend to visit alone or with other adults, as data provided by Oregon spas indicate that only 29 percent of their guests are families, and then typically only 1-2 children at most.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Oregon and European spas concerns the emphasis placed on preventive treatment in the U.S., rather than curative medical relief. Thus, when asked why they visited an Oregon spa, the majority of tourists indicated that their primary goals were rest and relaxation, stress reduction, and weight loss. Consequently, the most popular activities included massage and yoga, healthy eating (most frequently, organic vegetarian and vegan meals), and outdoor adventure and recreation. Indeed, almost 42 percent of Oregon wellness tourists indicated a

desire for outdoor adventure activities – such as hiking, biking, and horseback riding – to complement their spa treatment, while 11 percent sought cultural heritage programs in addition to their spa therapy. Both the preference for, and availability of, day spas and interconnected outdoor or cultural activities are reportedly rare among wellness visitors to Montenegro.

In terms of marketing, the influence of family and friends, and the use of the Internet cannot be overstated. Both are extremely critical to Oregon spas in attracting and retaining visitors, with most facilities operating their own websites on which they post information and the opportunity to make direct reservations and inquiries. In contrast, the influence of advertising in the local and national media and in travel guidebooks, as

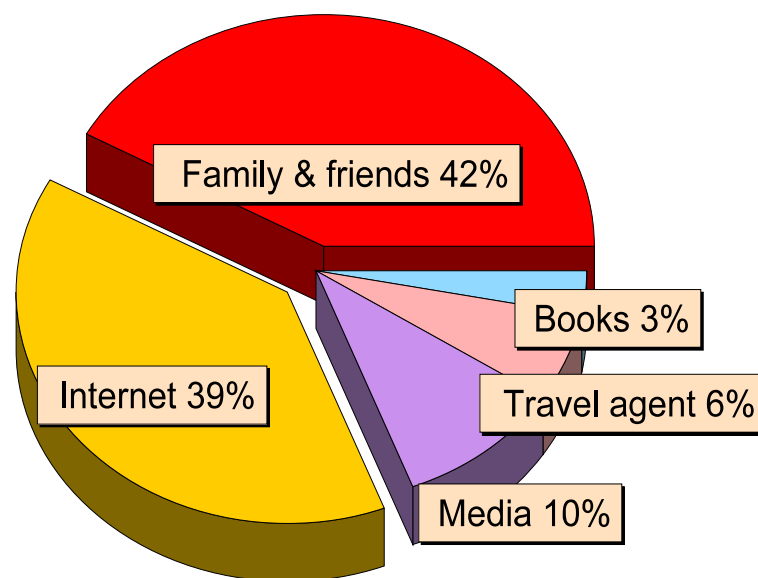


Figure 2. Primary course of information about health spas in Oregon (source: visitor survey to Oregon day and destination spas, 2005).

well as the reliance of wellness tourists on travel agents, were minimal, with 19 percent of all tourists reporting these as a primary source of information (figure 2).

Finally, it is worth noting that a majority of those spa tourists in Oregon who found the experience positive, were willing to travel nearly anywhere in the world for a similar activity if it were easily accessed and affordable. This is certainly good news for Montenegrin health providers and spa owners who have expressed a desire to position Montenegro as a regional and international destination for wellness travel, and in attracting more visitors from North America.

Global Opportunities for Wellness Tourism

The growth in wellness tourism is certainly not restricted to Oregon. Instead, the number of users worldwide is increasing 18 percent per year, while the estimated new demand exceeds 10 percent annually. As a result, the number of new spas opening each year is now nearly double (36 percent) the rate of growth in wellness and health tourists, with the greatest expansion among small to medium-sized business operators in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

In addition, the number of “[t]ravel agencies specializing in wellness travel [has] increased from an estimated 300 to over 500 in the last two years” (Hawaii Wellness Tourism Association, 2006: 2). Consequently, Montenegro’s desire to become the primary destination in the Mediterranean for health and wellness travel appears to be well-positioned should these global trends continue (Verschuren, 2004).

The growing interest in this travel niche should also prove especially beneficial for the owners of 2-3 star hotels in Montenegro. Though these businessowners may lack the required financial capital for major investments in infrastructure development and marketing, they can provide a limited combination of recreational and therapeutic activities, such as those which prevail in Oregon, to capitalize on the growing number of international tourists who seek alternative destinations along the Adriatic coast as more popular cities, such as Dubrovnik in Croatia, are increasingly perceived as overcrowded.

Certainly, there is tremendous opportunity for hotel owners in Montenegro to collaborate with Igalo and the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management in Kotor to construct travel itineraries which combine wellness and health tourism with cultural heritage tours, culinary tourism, and outdoor adventure in some of Montenegro’s most significant ecological sites and National Parks (such as mountain bicycling around Skadar Lake, whitewater rafting in the Tara Canyon, and trekking or snow skiing in Durmitor National Park). In this manner, they may attract both current visitors as well as those who would normally travel elsewhere for health and wellness tourism.

Challenges for Wellness Tourism in Oregon and Montenegro

At the same time, there can be no denying the challenges presented by the growing number of spas and resort destinations, and the competition they represent both regionally and internationally. Already, annual visits to some spas have declined by 13.8 percent as tourists seek out facilities that offer a greater range of amenities and desirable treatments at less cost, or are more easily accessed by both domestic and foreign visitors.

The different practices and meanings ascribed to health and wellness tourism in the

U.S., Asia, the Pacific, and Europe have also compounded the difficulty of attracting the “right” tourist. As a result of the limited awareness among some consumers regarding the definition and meaning of wellness tourism prevalent in each region and country, some visitors have expressed dissatisfaction with unrealized or unrealistic expectations, resulting in a loss of repeat business in some areas.

Thus, the biggest challenge for spa, health, medical, and wellness providers may be to determine how best to address these needs in a sustainable manner. At a minimum, it will require 1) that they provide a unique and satisfying, long-term experience for their visitors – one that will attract new users while retaining repeat customers, and 2) will ensure a satisfactory financial profit for the business owners and operators, so that they may continue to provide quality services for their clientele and the growing market in wellness tourism.

Requirements for Successful Wellness Tourism

While there are a number of specific actions that can be taken at the local and national level to remedy these challenges, they may be generalized as follows:

1. Visitors must be better educated about the differing practices associated with spas, medical and wellness tourism. This is especially true for wellness tourism, as this is primarily a European and Asian concept, and only recently been marketed more widely in North America (and even then, it is a term still limited to individual states, such as Hawai’i and Oregon, and the Canadian province of British Columbia).
2. Government at all levels must unite with private business and educational institutions, such as the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management in Kotor, if Montenegro is to compete successfully with similar attractions in the Mediterranean. Among the ideas which may prove most useful are the development of “spa clusters,” in which health, medical, and wellness facilities are located near outdoor and adventure tour operators, so that they may provide complementary package tours, rather than compete for the same visitors. This may require legislation by local governments to enact restricted land use zones in which only certain kinds of activities are permitted, and thereby ensure protection of the natural and geothermal resources upon which they all depend.
3. Efforts must also be taken to create a distinct product from the exercise rooms, yoga, and massage common at most 3-5 star hotels. This will require a critical emphasis on quality in site design, management, and marketing.

Summary – the Oregon Experience

While the steps undertaken in Montenegro will obviously differ from those in Oregon – for reasons that are political, social, legal, and economic – it may be worth reiterating select actions undertaken by state and local governments, universities, and businessowners in Oregon to attract and maintain its growing reputation as a health and wellness destination. Perhaps the most basic, but certainly the most significant, is the clear preference for “high end” visitors in Montenegro who seek only curative treatments. There is also a stated disdain for day spas, which are nonexistent in the country at the present time. In contrast, both the private and public sectors in Oregon have fully embraced both “high” and “low end” tourists, a choice reflected in the number of self-described wellness and health facilities.

Rather than cater to only one visitor demographic, the operators of day spas, destination resorts, and hot springs in Oregon have consciously targeted the broadest possible visitor market by providing a diverse range of facilities, treatments, and activities for their tourists – from “primitive” hot springs encompassing nothing more than a retaining wall for privacy to resorts which offer a full spectrum of amenities. The mix of accommodations is equally varied, with guests able to choose from 5-star lodges and hotels, to rustic cabins, campsites, and yurts (a tent like structure adapted from the Mongolian nomads and now widely employed by Oregon’s State Park system as well, where they are immensely popular).

Included in the mix of activities offered by Oregon’s day and destination spas are personal therapies, such as herbal baths, Onsen tubs, and traditional massage. Most facilities also emphasize preventive health education, especially women’s workshops and specialized conferences, and some – such as Breitenbush – report that half of their annual income is derived from these events. Of equal interest to many visitors are interrelated wellness offerings, such as culinary tourism centered around organic vegetarian and vegan meals, and “fitness adventures,” including yoga, meditation, and active outdoor recreation, such as hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding (Robinson, 2006).

Since almost 57 percent of Oregon’s lands are publicly owned, many of the facilities are dependent on partnerships with the Federal government, particularly the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, to lease and maintain their geothermal resources and surrounding environment. Consequently, both agencies and their partners are actively engaged in comprehensive land use planning to assure strong natural and cultural resource management policies, appropriate regulations, and the necessary transportation networks and infrastructure.

The State of Oregon also provides joint funding through its marketing agency, Travel Oregon, in cooperation with private businesses and hotels. A one percent tax levied on

all hotel guests statewide now provides approximately 6,7 million Euros each year for direct marketing to establish the Oregon "brand." Much of the promotional material is available on the Internet, where it is intended to enable the visitor to obtain information, make reservations, and communicate with businesses, in hopes that it will facilitate those who seek to go from "idea to purchase" online.

This ease of access and referral also aids in establishing a long-term relationship with repeat customers, who are able to communicate directly with spa owners and provide immediate feedback about their experiences. Funding is also available through the state's community college system for business training for micro-enterprises and entrepreneurial opportunities in sustainable health tourism, and for operators who seek to expand their programs to provide lifestyle education, nutrition counseling, stress management and depression, and naturopathic, alternative, or Eastern medicinal practices (Travel Oregon, 2005).

By supporting such a broad range of activities, facilities, and partnerships for existing and potential business operators, Oregon affords its potential tourists a full menu of options, based upon individual preferences in desired comfort, length of stay, favored treatment, and available budget. In this manner, it makes clear the desire to encourage sustainable businesses, communities, and tourism and in doing so, to create a relationship that is economically and ecologically healthy for the residents of Oregon, and those who visit!

Acknowledgments

Dr. Ringer wishes to express appreciation to the U.S. Fulbright program for funding his lecture and research grant in Montenegro. In addition, he is extremely grateful to his colleagues in Oregon and New Zealand – particularly Dr. Alexander Murphy, Dr. Mike Hibbard, and Dr. Simon Milne for their continued encouragement – and to the Dean and Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management in Kotor, most especially Dr. Andriela Vitic and Dr. Alexsa Vucetic, whose generosity and friendship enabled him to share in Montenegro's hospitality, and to better understand the benefits of wellness tourism in their country as well as his. Equal gratitude goes to Teresa Weaver, whose understanding and unfailing support was critical to the success of this work.

References

Burt, Bernard and Pamela Price Lechtman (2001) 100 Best Spas in the World, New York, NY: Spa Association Relais santé.

Canadian Tourism Commission (2000) Travel activities and motivation survey: Interest

in health spas. Ottawa: CTC.

Hawaii Wellness Tourism Association (2006) "Wellness travel: What is it and how can it effect your life?" (www.hwta.net, accessed 3 March).

Inouye, Natalie (2006) Marketing Director, Convention and Visitors Association of Lane County, Oregon. Personal communication, 28 February.

Lang Research, Inc. (2001) Travel activities & motivation survey: Interest in health spas profile report. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Tourism Commission.

Mair, Heather (2005) "Tourism, health and the pharmacy: Towards a critical understanding of health and wellness tourism," *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 53(4): 335-346.

Ministry of Tourism (2005) Tourist season 2005: Facts and figures. Podgorica: Government of the Republic of Montenegro.

Mintel International Group Ltd. (2004) Health and Wellness Tourism - Global, New York: MarketResearch.com

Mueller, Hansruedi and Eveline Lanz Kaufmann (2001) "Wellness tourism: Market analysis of a special health tourism segment and implications for the hotel industry," *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 7 (1): 5-17.

Robinson, Tom (2006) Events and Marketing Director, Breitenbush Hot Springs. Personal communication, 2 March.

Scott, Ken (2004) New trends in niche products: spa and wellness tourism, Pacific Asia Travel Conference, Sri Lanka.

Travel Oregon (2005) Travel Oregon Strategic Marketing Plan and Budget, 2005-2007. Salem, Oregon: Travel Oregon.

Verschuren, Frank (2004) Spa health and wellness tourism: A new product portfolio at the Canadian Tourism Commission, Ottawa: Canadian Tourism Commission.

Victoria's Spa and Wellness Tourism Action Plan, 2005-2010, Victoria, New South Wales, Australia: City of Victoria.

Weaver, Anna (2002) "Wellness tourism segment finds promotional outlet in guidebook," *Pacific Business News* (Honolulu), 5 July, p. A3.

Wolf, Erik (2006) What is culinary tourism? Lake Oswego, Oregon: Oregon Culinary Tourism Task Force and Agri-Business Council of Oregon.