

Hot springs as an alternative for sustainable wellness tourism in Colombia*

Sources chaudes comme une alternative pour le tourisme de bien-être et durable en Colombie

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Abstract

Colombia has recently identified the tourism sector as one of the key strategic areas with the potential to improve the nation's productivity. Health and wellness tourism is an area of particular attention in the country, having increased dramatically during the last few years. However, efforts made for increasing demand of foreign visitors are still very focused around health services, leaving wellness tourism nearly untapped. Although the government has expressed an interest in increasing the importance of wellness tourism as a share of total tourism exports, current knowledge about the tourism management of hot springs is still at a very infant state, and more research on the subject needs to be done. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by analyzing the supply of thermal and medicinal waters as an alternative that may have a potential for sustainable wellness tourism in Colombia. For so doing an exploratory qualitative research methodology was applied, analyzing three Colombian municipalities chosen as case studies.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Wellness, Hot springs, medicinal waters, Latin America

Résumé

La Colombie a récemment identifié le secteur du tourisme comme l'un des domaines stratégiques avec le potentiel pour améliorer la productivité nationale. Tourisme du santé et bien-être est un domaine d'une attention particulière, après avoir augmenté de façon spectaculaire au cours des dernières années. Toutefois, les efforts déployés pour augmenter la demande des visiteurs étrangers sont encore très concentrés autour des services de santé, laissant le tourisme de bien-être près inexploité. Bien que le gouvernement a exprimé un intérêt à accroître l'importance du tourisme de bien-être comme une part des exportations totales du tourisme, les connaissances actuelles au sujet de la gestion du tourisme des sources chaudes est encore à un état très léger, et d'autres recherches sur le sujet doit être fait. Cette étude vise à combler cette lacune de connaissances en analysant l'approvisionnement des eaux thermales et médicinales comme une alternative qui pourrait avoir un potentiel pour le tourisme de bien-être durable en Colombie. Pour ce faire une méthode de recherche qualitative exploratoire a été appliquée, pour analysant de trois municipalités colombiennes choisis comme études de cas.

Mots-clés: Tourisme durable, Bien-être, Sources chaudes, Eaux médicinales, Amérique Latine

1 Introduction

Colombia has recently identified the tourism sector as one of the key strategic areas with the potential to improve the nation's productivity. As a consequence various initiatives have arisen joining efforts from both, public and private sector, to strengthen the development of tourism in the country. One of these initiatives is the label called "Colombia is health, exporting health and wellness tourism", which is supported by the Ministry of Commerce, The National Agency for the Promotion of Exports (ProColombia) and the Colombian Business Association (ANDI).

According to the latest statistics, health tourism in Colombia has increased dramatically during the last few years. During 2013 alone it is calculated that more than fifty thousand foreign patients visited the country, a number that represents a 60% increase with respect to the previous year (Portafolio, 2014). However, the efforts made for increasing demand of foreign visitors are still very focused around health services, leaving wellness tourism nearly untapped. Although the government has expressed an interest in increasing the importance of wellness tourism as a share of total tourism exports -planning to invest more than USD\$640 million by 2030 (Programa de Transformación Productiva, 2013) current knowledge about the tourism management of hot springs is still at a very infant state, and more research on the subject needs to be done.

This study aims to address this knowledge gap by analyzing the supply of thermal and medicinal waters as an alternative that may have a potential for sustainable wellness tourism in Colombia. For so doing an exploratory qualitative research methodology was applied, analyzing three Colombian municipalities chosen as case studies (i.e. the municipalities of Nuquí, Aguascalientes and Machetá). The research allows a comparison of the environments explored and as a result the authors offer recommendations and propose avenues for future research.

The article is organized as follows. The second section presents the research methodology that was implemented for this study. Then, the paper continues with a brief theoretical framework based on the analysis of wellness tourism in general and the practice of thermal baths in particular. The fourth section of the article introduces the Colombian hot springs' context, and presents and discusses each case study in detail. Finally the article presents the main conclusions and future research proposals.

2 Methodology

The study applied an exploratory qualitative research methodology to analyze the supply of thermal and medicinal waters that may have potential for wellness tourism in Colombia, comparing three Colombian municipalities chosen as case studies. Qualitative research was preferred due to been considered as the most expeditious technique for social researchers. Qualitative research allows for information seeking in a socio-academic context, studying reality in its natural context and interpreting phenomena "according to the meanings they have for people involved" (Rodríguez, Gil Flores, & García, 1996).

The research was carried out in two complementary phases. The first phase corresponded to a literature review exploring the concepts of sustainable tourism and wellness tourism. At this point the sustainable model for wellness tourism proposed by Sheldon & Park (2008) is addressed with particular attention and is used as the conceptual framework of the research.

The second phase corresponded to the implementation of field research for primary data collection. Participant observation was used recognizing that this method facilitates the development of observations that help the researcher to "get a better understanding of the context and the phenomenon under study"(Kawulich, 2006). Following the approach of Gold (1958), the researchers adopted a position as a participant observer, considered the most ethical approach to sociological observation. In this position the studied group is aware of the activities of observation, and the researcher prioritizes data collection while being entitled to participate in the activities observed, which allows for the implementation of better observation.

3 The concepts of health tourism and wellness tourism

Trans-boundary movements of people performed for health purposes are called health tourism. According to Dr. Mary Tabacchi, although there is no unified definition for the term, health tourism can be understood as any kind of travel that is practiced with the intention that any one individual or a family member feels healthier (Ross, 2001). This type of tourism is considered as an alternative to mass tourism, and is estimated to be practiced by visitors with a growing concern for quality of life and an appreciation for innovative alternatives that generate more satisfaction and welfare (Brenner, 2005).

After analyzing the contributions of various authors to the existing literature on health tourism, Bonfada, Bonfada, Alén-Gonzalez, and Goncalves, (2011) identified the existence of two postures or perspectives. On the one hand there is the therapeutic perspective of health tourism, which directly relates to medicine. Therefore, the visit to institutions providing medical services constitutes the central motivation for the realization of the trip. On the other hand, there is the tourist posture, in which the tourism component is prioritized and trips are made to locations such as spas, wellness resorts or thalassotherapy centers (San Jose Arango, 2003), in order to find a combination of leisure and natural therapies that provide wellness.

Given the particular interest to explore three case studies in Colombia that offer medicinal waters as alternatives for wellness tourism, this work is placed within this second tourist perspective.

The Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism at the University of Berne define wellness tourism as the "sum of all relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey and residence by people whose main motivation is to preserve or promote their health" (cited by Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009).

3.1 Wellness tourism and hot springs

According with Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper (2009), the wellness concept has existed for centuries, with its origins dating back even further than the existence of Greek and Roman cultures, to the Native North and South American tribes, as well as the Asian region. The authors also provide a contemporary wellness concept, that is multidimensional and they define as that “aimed to the prevention of illness not just through the mineral content and use of thermal waters, but also through informed health promotion, education and encouragement of a holistic approach to nutrition, and achieving mental and spiritual balance”.

In this research, therefore, we study hot springs as an alternative for wellness tourism, under the understanding that the use of mineral waters for health and relaxation is only part of a greater compound of activities and sensations that, together, provide a state of wellness and well being.

In his analysis of the management and operation of hotels, Robert Mill (2011) defines spas as those facilities where water, marine flora, mud, peat and others, constitute the primary resource exploited for health tourism. Alternatively, San Jose Arango (2003) defines spas as centers that use crenotherapy, which refers to the therapeutic use of mud, mineral waters and steam.

A form of crenotherapy is the use of hot springs for thermal baths (Thermalisme). Thermal baths are understood as the set of administrative, touristic, health, social and medical products that are put into operation in order to generate a therapeutic use of medicinal mineral water, hot gases and sludge (Ramos & Santos, 2008).

3.2 The sustainable model for wellness tourism

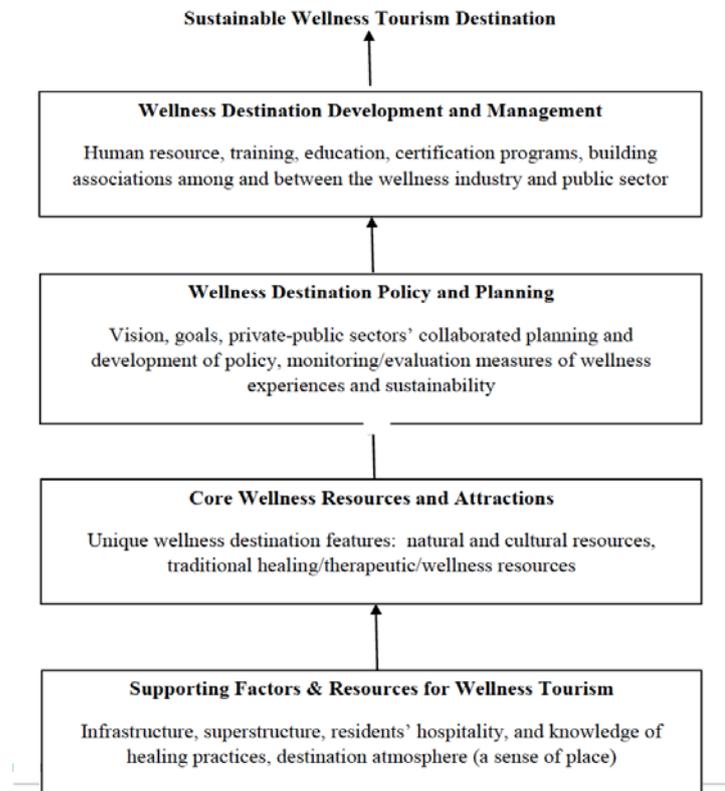
In a 2008 Conference Paper titled with “Sustainable and wellness tourism: governance and entrepreneurship issues”, Sheldon & Park (2008) present a non-exhaustive list of modalities for the offering of wellness tourism, including:

- Fitness and sports
- Complementary treatments (e.g. alternative healing modalities such as acupuncture and Ayurveda)
- Indigenous cultures
- Healing accommodations
- Lifestyle modifications
- Nature experience
- Relaxation and rejuvenation
- Inner pilgrimage
- Travel for the purpose of serving others

The use of hot springs for thermal baths would correspond to one of the alternatives for relaxation and rejuvenation. As it will be presented in the discussion of findings, hot springs

in Colombia have the potential to combine relaxation and rejuvenation with alternatives for nature experience, and even healing accommodations.

Based on Ritchie & Crouch, 2002; Sheldon & Park (2008) propose a “model of sustainable wellness destination”, as illustrated in the following figure:



Source: Sheldon & Park (2008, pag 163)

4 Discussion of findings

4.1 Contextualizing wellness tourism in Colombia

The National Council for Economic and Social Policy (CONPES from its acronym in Spanish) has published the document 3678 of year 2010, which details the National policy known as the “Policy of structural transformation”. This policy corresponds to a sector development model for Colombia, concentrating both general and sectoral policies. Tourism is included as part of sectoral policy that seeks to develop Colombia as a world class destination for health and wellness tourism.

The Colombian government has also recently adopted the Law No.219 of 2013 "through which dictate norms that promote, regulate, guide and monitor the therapeutic and touristic development of thermal spas and the use of thermal waters" (Senado de la República, 2013). This Law defines hot springs as "those natural waters emerging from underground layers of the earth's surface with a temperature greater than 5 ° C and below 80 ° C. They are rich in mineral components that allow its use in therapeutics."

4.2 Case studies

Among the places considered is Nuqui, in the department of Chocó, which mixes jungle, beach and hot springs as an alternative for rest and relaxation. Its waters are considered medicinal. These characteristics provide a singular combination for visitors, whom can enjoy the beauty of its scenery and the wellness of its medicinal waters.

Two additional cases located in the department of Cundinamarca were selected for comparison. The second case study corresponds to the “Aguascalientes” (Spanish for hot waters) hot springs. This hot springs are located to the South-East of Bogota, very close to the Eastern valleys of Colombia and the department of Meta. This location gives them a particular landscape in terms of biodiversity and ecosystems present in the territory. The case of Aguascalientes makes evident how mineral waters are an option to mix health tourism with recreational tourism.

The third case study are the “Volcanoes” hot springs, located northern of Bogota, on the road leading to Macheta. Scenically this hot springs provide a space for recreation and relaxation that allows responding to the interests of different family members while making use of its mineral waters (containing calcium, iron and iodine), and a natural volcanic steam camera generating health benefits.

Image No. 1 location of the three case studies in Colombia



Source: Own elaboration via Google maps. 2015

4.2.1 Hot springs in the Colombian Pacific coast: The case of Nuqui

For those looking for space away from the ordinary, to escape from the city noise and get in contact with nature while mixing tropical jungle and sea, are the hot springs located at the district that bears the same name (i.e. district hot springs). This natural spring water pool is at sea level and reaches average temperatures of 30 °.

The establishment is rustically organized and is only reachable by foot. The majority of visitors are local inhabitants. The second largest group of visitors is Colombian tourists coming from nearby cities, mainly from the adjacent department of Antioquia. Thirdly, a minority group is comprised by foreigners (Western Europeans mainly Germans) that come to Chocó looking for an exotic and eco-touristic destination.

This thermal bath offers the possibility of enjoying a hot spring pool next to a stream of cold water. Thus, one of the main attractions of this thermal spa is the chance to contrast thermal shocks generating a bodily sensation that provides a state of relaxation, and complement it with the ecologic landscape of the region.

The infrastructure corresponds to a community-based project that is run by inhabitants of the area. The members of the community have received some basic training on wellness tourism, including for instance courses for massages. This training has been provided by NGOs and international aid organizations. Although the premises are clean and kept in good state there's still a lot of work to be done because unfortunately the lack of awareness to manage social spaces mitigates the impact.

Image No. 2. Hot springs in Nuqui, department of Choco, Colombia



Picture by Paola Liliana Falla Villa, 2014

Moreover, in spite of the natural richness of the site, its proposal of services remains still very limited. The lack of regulation and surveillance to moderate the behavior from visitors may occasionally turn the establishment not the ideal place for resting and relaxation. This deficiency constitutes an opportunity for community organizations and private companies to invest in increased training for managers and employees and the enhancement of installed capacity.

This destination is known for its medicinal waters that are rich in mineral contents. Their further development requires more support from the vice ministry of tourism. Due to its geographical location it has all the potential to become a place that receives a greater number of tourists who come to the region in the context of whale watching, diving, and surf-tournaments.

If the hot springs of Nuqui are organized better, they could have the advantage to blend eco-tourism with wellness tourism, which would offer packages of interest for families to include activities for all ages.

4.2.2 Hot springs in the eastern planes: The case of Aguascalientes

Going through the Department of Meta, passing by the municipalities of Paratebuena and Maya, one finds a great destination that is well known amongst *llaneros* (i.e. demonym for natives of the Department of Meta) but vastly unknown to the inhabitants of Cundinamarca, the Colombian Department to which this hot springs actually belong.

The Aguascalientes hot springs are located at the municipality that bears the same name, and are 10km away from the main highway, reachable by car through an unpaved yet easily accessible road. This thermal baths enchants visitors by the installed capacity, organization, cleanliness and knowledge of their operators.

Their infrastructure does not aim to mass tourism or to the massive marketing of its services with costly campaigns. For them the word of mouth allows tourists arriving daily – reaching 150 approximately during weekends, Saturday and Sunday – Thus they guarantee not only the financial stability of their operation but their conservation aims.

With an indicated signaling and assistance from guides –all of whom are dully trained and in full dress uniform- people can start the tour with a walk of about 450 meters. This easy hike is done along a natural alley, in which species are labelled for their identification. All along the corridor is also possible to find multiple awareness raising messages that encourage visitors to actively engage with the preservation of the environment.

Image No. 3. Entrance to the “Aguascalientes” hot springs



Picture by Paola Liliana Falla Villa, 2014

These springs come from a telluric formation and are the hottest in Cundinamarca, reaching temperatures above 70°. Such heat has allowed for these waters to not only be used as thermal baths, but their operators have found an innovative and complementary use from its high temperatures: the Turkish baths.

The magic of these Turkish baths relies in their natural and rustic character. Without the need of a thermostat, herbs or stones to which water is slowly poured to generate steam, these baths become a space where to rest and move away from concerns and material consumption, diving into a complete state of pure relaxation and detachment. The water temperature and infrastructure made from wood and plastic generate steam that cleans the skin, reduces respiratory problems, increases blood flow, and relaxes the nervous system, among others.

Image No. 4. Turkish bath at “Aguascalientes” hot springs



Picture by Paola Liliana Falla Villa, 2014

This scenario is part of the Natural Reserve Aguas Calientes hot springs. This reserve belongs to “the Network of Natural Reserves from civil society Node Orinoco since January 24, 2004 and whose recognition is required under Law 99 of 1993. Its mission is to contribute knowledge, consolidation and positioning of the conservation initiatives of civil society through processes of sustainable use and management of biodiversity, to build the social fabric, alternative modes of development, with ethnic, gender and generational equity criteria.” (Alcaldía de Paratebuena, 2014).

Its mineral chlorinated waters, record temperatures between 37 and 74 °. This heat creates vapor that these novel Turkish baths use to generate a mandatory stop for tourists seeking innovative places that combine wellness and ecological tourism.

4.2.3 Hot springs on the outskirts of Bogota: The case of Macheta

One more alternative for Colombians and foreigners visiting the country in search of wellness tourism is Machetá. This town is reached by the exit of Bogota to the north towards the Department of Boyacá, and is found 75 kilometers away from the capital city. This are very well organized thermal baths known as The Volcanoes.

Their premises include hotel infrastructure, which facilitates planning longer visits to the hot springs that might include a stay-over. This alternative differentiates the Volcanoes hot springs from the other two locations studied in this research, as neither Nuqui nor Aguascalientes offers the possibility for spending the night at their premises, but rather constitute a day-visit destination.

The offer is targeted towards mid to high range tourist, and combines the thermal baths with hiking in ecological corridors and one steam chamber with natural volcanic steam.

The average weather temperature at this municipality is 13°. This allows for the body to benefit from heat differentials when using the thermal baths. The waters from this hot springs are acknowledge to have medicinal properties coming from their mineral content including more than 230 different solids such as calcium, iron, potassium, iodine, amongst others.

These properties are between curative and preventive health. Through crenotherapy blood oxygenation is achieved, the skin is cleaned, physical, muscle and bone relief is generated. In addition, the visit to these thermal baths provides a stress-relief feeling much sought for on proposals from city spas and beauty centers as a tool to harmonize body and soul.

5 Conclusion

The comparison of the observed environments allows for the formulation of various conclusions and recommendations for future research. Hot springs can be a pillar of sustainable wellness tourism in Colombia but for this to happen several improvements and strategic steps need to be taken, in order to strengthen the capacity of the industry and its stakeholders.

Firstly, it is necessary to verify and improve the quality of the facilities and to provide specialized training to the communities and operators. More professional and technical education is required for all actors engaged with the products and services that are generated along the thermal tourism value chain. In this same line, further investigation about the qualities and properties of waters is required for better guidance on therapeutic and medicinal treatments.

There is an evident need to monitor and better regulate tourist operators having thermal waters as part of their service portfolio. The use of signaling for enhanced security, on the one hand, and the promotion of environmental conservation and care on the other, are key for a greater autonomy for visitors in natural settings. The creation of internal routes for hiking along the natural surroundings might result in an interesting value added for hot spring visitors. The operation of these supplementary services, though, needs to be properly planned for the safety of visitors. Including stationary guides at the sights to meet any requirement, necessity or emergency that may arise along the alternate paths, is crucial.

In addition, it is necessary to have punishable regulations for visitors making an improper use of the thermal facilities that goes against the respect for the other. This would create a kind of co-responsibility to generate awareness of its use, as well as of the conservation and sustainability that thermal territories require.

It is also advisable to work based on biodiversity to complement the model of thermal tourism with other alternatives that allow spas to generate alternatives for the whole family and all ages. At this point, is worth considering the fact that Colombia has a prevailing position amongst the limited number of countries considered as mega-diverse. Hence, the existing work to date, which has been developing and progressing, should be further promoted so that Colombia has more to show for locals and foreigners with an interest in eco-tourism, an option that is increasing its number of followers in the world.

Lastly, the characterization of services that can be generated with and around thermal tourism is a proposal that although not innovative, is the beginning of a transformation for the Colombian tourism. The analysis of economic earnings versus environmental and social costs and gains, must also be the subject of future studies as the cost / benefit ratio may be high if wellness tourism at hot springs is massively promoted without awareness of conservation and sustainability. For this reason, it is crucial that all stakeholders involved work together for ensuring outcomes that are profitable while being community and environment friendly.

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