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TOURISM PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT IN AN EMERGING DESTINATION – COVASNA (ROMANIA)

Covasna (Transylvania) is a place with a very valuable natural environment and a wide range of natural healing assets. However, the lack of awareness, and shortage in infrastructure and tourism services results challenges when developing tourism in the destination. The Off to Spas project is a valuable tool for this emerging destination to find the already attractive assets and services, and to develop tourism packages that can be a motivation for visiting the surroundings. In the case of Covasna, the project provided an excellent know-how and network to build on. The result is a new health tourism product that can support the reputation of the place, and induce further developments in the area.

Keywords: health tourism, product development, emerging destination, Covasna

Introduction

Szeklerland, in central Romania, was serving as a buffer zone, protecting Europe from Turkish invasion in the middle ages. Nowadays it is one of Europe's most preserved natural environments. People here still know how to bake in beehive-ovens, craftsmanship is passed on from father to son and nature is genuinely untouched. The turmoiled past gave birth to a multitude of historical sites (manors, fortified churches, fortifications) that presently serve as tourism attraction all over the county.

Due to the volcanic activities that took place 50–20 thousand years ago one can find highly mineralized water alongside the Eastern range of the Carpathian Mountains. These sources are used both for internal and external cures in various spa hotels and are recommended for people suffering from cardiovascular affections and arterial hypertension, rheumatic affections and associated affections (metabolic and nutrition affections, asthenic neurosis).

The presence of natural therapeutic factors gave birth to the *Covasna method* that relies on the highly negative ionized air, mofetta gas and mineral water sources found in Covasna. The mofetta is an uprush of CO₂ that is captured in pits and used for healing purposes. Patients are taking a mofetta whilst standing or sitting. A cure lasts approx. 15–20 minutes, while the CO₂ takes its effect through the skin causing vasodilation. Due to this the patients' blood circulation is enhanced and blood pressure is lowered. Indicated in cases of vasoconstriction and high blood pressure.

Tourism attractions

Covasna is considered to be a spa resort that targets medical services (rehabilitation after surgery, treatment of circulatory disorders, arterial hypertension and rheumatic affections). The approximately 60,000 tourist arrivals are produced mainly of inbound traffic. The present main target group of Covasna is senior Romanian citizen with medical problems.

Attraction of international travellers lacks some image and accessibility problems. Covasna is less known tourism destination among international travellers, however Transylvania is attractive and has a positive reputation, it has been listed among the TOP destinations (regions) for 2016 by Lonely Planet.

The destination's main attraction is its natural environment, and unique attractions (like volcanic formations) linked to it. With reference to health tourism assets, the mofetta and the mineral water are the most significant and unique value. The mineral water is appropriate both for internal and for external usage – drinking cure, bath treatments. Visitors seeking recovery and healing find here mineral water fountains of various composition, heated mineral water baths and carbon-dioxide gas-baths (mofettas), which are effective in the treatment of cardiovascular diseases, locomotory and gynaecological complaints, as well as metabolic and nervous system disorders. Hydrotherapy, electrotherapy, kinetic therapy, and climatic therapy are also used as complementary treatments.

Among the non-health tourism services we should highlight active tourism activities, and cultural monuments (manors, fortified churches) that are valuable also on the international markets. Main attractions:

- CO₂ uprush (Mofetta);
- mineral water (for internal and external usage);
- manors;
- fortified churches;
- natural environment;
- volcanic formations.

The city of Covasna is known for its mineral water springs and for the Covasna-method of treatment. The settlement gained the rank of town in 1952, and since 1968 had lent its name to Covasna county. Its healing factors have been researched already since the second half of the nineteenth century, which resulted in the rapid flourishing of spa culture. In 1882 and in 1887 the Covasna mineral water won golden medal at the Trieste Mineral Water Exhibition. One of the greatest cardiological centres of the country operates in Covasna, where 450–500 mofetta-therapies are performed daily.

Although outrange of the nature protected areas is not that high in the region (e.g. St. Anna Lake), there is a significant volume of so called ‘natural healing assets’, climatic resorts, those smaller areas (e.g. around Covasna) can be developed to be successful tourism destinations.

THE ‘COVASNA METHOD’

The ‘Covasna method’ invented by Géza Benedek blends the traditional healing procedures used for heart problems with the beneficial effects provided by natural resources found in Covasna (mineral waters, mofetta). Natural procedures do not make use any medicines. They are based on the use of

- mineral waters, mofettas,
- low-fat and low-salt diet,
- regular exercises and
- active relaxation.

The aim is to overcome classical risk – factors by regularization blood pressure, encouraging patients to give up smoking and taking regular rigorous exercise.

Source: www.info-covasna.ro

General and tourism infrastructure

The general infrastructure (transportation, telecommunication, communal services) of the destination is highly influenced by the national/country level infrastructure. Although the region is not a well-developed area from this point of view, there are ‘hotspots’ (e.g. Covasna or Sfantu Gheorghe) with good accessibility and infrastructure, so they can be a realistic, accessible and affordable tourism destination.

The hotel supply of Covasna is rather mid-upper quality. Some four star hotels – among them the newly opened Mercur – offer a complex service portfolio to the guests. Because of the destination’s natural assets, the surroundings is a very important part of the travel experience. This underlines the importance of cooperation between tourism service providers, stakeholders, in order to communicate a complex message for the potential tourists.

Hotels in Covasna:

Bradul Hotel

Social media: Facebook

Language: Rumanian

Category: **

Number of rooms: 94

Capacity: 174

Services: mofetta, physiotherapy, massage, kinetotherapy, laser

*Hefaistos Hotel*Webpage: www.hotel-hefaistos.ro

Social media: Facebook, Booking.com, Tripadvisor.com, Agoda.com

Language: Rumanian, English

Category: **

Number of rooms: 148

Capacity: 288

Services: mofetta, physiotherapy, massage, kinetotherapy, laser natural steam treatment, hot bath with mineral water, physiotherapy, electrotherapy, paraffin, massage, gymnastics

*Turist Hotel*Webpage: www.hotel-turist-covasna.ro

Social media: Facebook, Booking.com, Agoda.com

Language: Rumanian

Category: **

*Cerbul Hotel (SC Tourism Covasna SA)*Webpage: www.turismcovasna.ro

Social media: Facebook

Language: Rumanian, English, Israeli, Russian, German)

Category: **

Number of rooms: 129

Capacity: 258

Services: modern bar, conference room

*Covasna Hotel (SC Tourism Covasna SA)*Webpage: www.turismcovasna.ro

Social media: Booking.com, Tripadvisor.com, Trivago.com

Language: Rumanian, English, Israeli, Russian, German)

Category: **/**

Number of rooms: 78/50

Capacity: 156/100

Services: cosmetics, sauna, restaurant, tours

Caprioara Hotel (SC Tourism Covasna SA)

Webpage: www.turismcovasna.ro

Social media: [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com)

Language: Rumanian, English, Israeli, Russian, German

Category: ***

Number of rooms: 144

Capacity: 264

Services: lift, restaurant, accessible facilities

Valea Zanelor Camping (SC Tourism Covasna SA)

Webpage: www.turismcovasna.ro

Language: Rumanian, English, Israeli, Russian, German

Services: music and dancing, fishing opportunities, mountain climbing, football, table tennis and field, darts, slot machines

Hotel Montana

Webpage: www.sindtour.ro

Social media: Facebook, [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com)

Language: Rumanian

Category: **/**

Number of rooms: 244

Capacity: 496

Services: 40-seat conference room, wireless internet at the reception desk, club, reading room

Clermont Hotel

Webpage: www.clermonthotel.ro

Social media: Facebook, [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com), [Tripadvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com), [Agoda.com](https://www.agoda.com)

Language: Rumanian

Category: ****

Number of rooms: 106

Capacity: 218

Services: health and beauty centre, wifi, bowling

Mercur Hotel

opening in Autumn 2016

Category: ****

Besides the basic tourism infrastructure (accommodation and catering facilities), health tourism and active tourism are in the forefront of the destination's supply. Covasna is a registered resort with national attractions. Tourism attractions include:

- narrow gauge railway;
- spa facilities;
- treatment facilities;
- adventure park;
- ski slope;
- nature trail;
- hiking trails.

Due to the shortage in general infrastructure, bicycle rental and rent-a-car services are important among the supporting services. Furthermore we should highlight hunting activities, animal watching and tourist guide that can strongly support visitors' satisfaction, and result a 'memorable experience' after visiting the destination.

Characteristics of the tourism demand in Covasna region

Due to the lack of available data, the mountain areas' tourism performance can indicate some conclusions for Covasna. The mountain areas of Romania registered 127 thousands foreign arrivals in 2013, the main source markets are Israel (16 thousands arrivals) and Germany (15 thousands arrivals). Sweden (750 arrivals) and Norway (548 arrivals) belong to the smaller markets.

Taking into account the supply side, there is a significant demand for travel assistance when staying in Covasna and in the surroundings. This includes tourist guide (preferably speaking the language of tourist or English), shuttle service.

Although the region has excellent gastronomic treasures, and healthy cuisine, there is a need for international cuisine. Programme packages can be a good option for exploring the destination, furthermore local shopping facilities (handicrafts, gastronomy, and small shops) are important.

Off to Spas – new health tourism product in Covasna

Covasna is a less-known tourism destination. This results a great challenge in order to build a positive image, but on the other side, the discovery of new places is also a motivation for the open-minded seniors. Here we have to underline, that Transylvania (and so Covasna) has a more positive image than Romania (the county is often associated with low quality services, lack of attractions). Therefore it is very important to provide good and reliable information about the destination's assets, the

natural healing assets etc. The mofetta as being the most important healing asset of Covasna is unknown among the target group. The tourism infrastructure in Covasna and in its surroundings is quite mosaic, so in order to have a wonderful travel experience, a guide and organized transportation could be very useful and valuable.

In the case of Covasna, a one-week trip would be attractive for the target group. Transportation should be organized from home to the destination (flight + bus, including a stop). The accommodation will be provided in a four-star facility, two facilities can be combined during the stay. One option can be 'traditional' wellness stay, the other could include special boutique (smaller facility with a special character/ambience) accommodation (e.g. Mikes Castle). Because of the less developed infrastructure, full board will be offered, this is more convenient for seniors.

From the health tourism services, wellness facilities will be the base – at this moment the mofetta is not a great 'experience'. Traditional treatments, rather focusing on wellness could be the most attractive for the target group (seniors in general, and seniors with cardiovascular problems). From the well-being point of view, the natural treasures of the destination are undoubtedly the number one attraction, so future development can take advantage of this (e.g. cleanest air in Europe, St. Anna Lake). Even then the mountain itself is similar landscape to Northern Europe, Covasna and its surroundings is unique. Natural attractions – known and appreciated – could lead the promotional messages, and support raising awareness and reputation as a health tourism destination.

Among the non-health tourism attractions, natural and activities linked to nature (e.g. trekking, walking) could be the most attractive. The smaller towns in the neighbourhood (e.g. Brassov, castles), including shopping facilities, are good options also during the off-season period. Furthermore, seniors are interested in wine and gastronomy, the gastronomy was really highly valued – and healthy at the same time.

The package price would be ideally about 800 euro, excluding transportation. Good flight connection and cheaper prices can be a competitive advantage.

Senior groups book their holidays 6 months in advance (next season). In the case a longer trip this should be taken into account, so packages for the next off-season period (Autumn 2016) could be marketed earlier. If individuals are more flexible, in this case we can talk about 2–3 months in advance. In both cases (individual and organized) travel agency support can be important.

In the case of Covasna, further difficulties can be the communication (at least English) and the weather (during the off-season period, the daylight is not so long, so September-October and spring could be appropriate for such a trip) (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Service package portfolio in Covasna
(Source: Off to Spas project)

Characteristics	Option 1	Option 2
Season	September, October	Spring or Autumn
Length of trip	1 week (7 nights)	1 week (7 nights)
Transportation	Air + Bus (stop included, e.g. Castle)	Air + Bus (stop included, e.g. Castle)
Accommodation	Covasna + Bálványos	Mikes Castle + Bálványos
Meals	Full board	Full board
Health tourism services	Mofetta – lack of awareness Massage, water treatments	Diagnostics, spa services
Leisure services, visits	Nature, activities, town/villages (Brassov), shopping (local)	Nature, activities, trekking, cycling, shopping (local)
Other	Guide, information	Guide, information
Price	7500 SEK (excluding flight)/ 800 EUR	7500 SEK (excluding flight)/ 800 EUR

Main challenges of tourism product development

Although the Covasna region is very rich in natural and cultural-historical assets that could be attractive for tourists, the realization of this potential faces some fundamental challenges. The entrepreneurs of the destination have a lot of limitations (e.g. resources, management, problems with human resources). The lack of general infrastructure does affect the accessibility of the area. The destination needs attractions and services developments (e.g. spa facilities), in order to fulfil visitors' needs.

In the framework of the Off to Spas project, the destination has taken important steps in order to put Covasna on the map of potential senior travellers. The know-how shared and developed during the project period supported the segmentation of Covasna's market, and the selected actors has established a good network of stakeholders, in order to provide visitors a memorable and high quality experience.

References

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Zoltán Albert has been working on generating new products aiming foreign markets within the Off to Spas project. Being part of both an NGO and owning a private tourism business, he perceives himself as a link between the public and the private sector. His goal is to enable the development of sustainable tourism in Eastern Transylvania through setting a benchmark and opening niches that can be capitalized by followers. This can be the premises of raising general living standards in the area. In the past 10 years the tourism market experienced quite a large shift that constantly stimulates stakeholders to look for new markets. Finding the mouse-hole into these markets and making ends meet is the real challenge of every promoter.

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Márta Giliga represented Covasna County Council in the Off to spa project. She is working as a civil servant at County Council in the foreign relations office. Covasna County Council defines the strategies and politics of development. The council contributes to tourism as a rising economic sector with several infrastructural investments and projects. A good example of this is the project called The Mineral Water Trail, that includes a number of 5 stations, indoor spas on various locations with mineral water springs. Among others the council also promotes the natural values and built heritage and is keen on establishing public-private ventures on developing the tourism sector.

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Covasna County has the second-greatest percentage of Hungarian population in Romania, just behind the neighboring county of Harghita. The Hungarians of Covasna are primarily Székelys/Szeklers. The total area of the county is 3.710 km² and the population is 206,261 inhabitants. The county seat is Sfintu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), where Covasna County Council has its residence.

Covasna County Council represents the local government authority in the region, coordinating the activity of commune and town councils, with a view to carrying out the public services of county interest (economic, social, cultural, environmental and healthcare, managing the patrimony of the county, the subordinated public services etc.). Covasna County Council – as an administrative body – has its own institutional and professional apparatus. The county council have rule making functions and they are deliberative authorities on local level. It has an elected body, consisting of 29 elected councilors, lead by the elected president of the council, as an executive authority and two vice-presidents. Covasna County Council has 13 subordinated institutions of public interest on the field of culture, social assistance and healthcare, vocational training, nature protection and community services).

The *Covasna County Tourism Association* was founded in 2007 with the aim to link tourism actors from the private and public sector, to enhance a dialogue between them to promote Covasna County as a tourism destination. In order to do this, the Association is editing promotional brochures discussing many topics (active, cultural and religious tourism, health and balneo tourism, gastronomy, etc.), is participating at regional, national and international tourism fairs, takes part at projects that enhances tourism development.

Participating at the Off to Spas project gave us the opportunity to analyze wellness and balneotourism in Covasna County, to 'test' our offer on international market, as well as to develop new packages according to the results of the market research and needs.