

THE WELLNESS TOURISM MARKET IN GREECE- AN INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY APPROACH

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Wellness tourism market world wide is experiencing rapid development in terms of size but also in terms of quality of the wellness tourism product. It is a form of tourism which can enhance the competitive advantage of a destination. This paper (which was originally presented at the 4th International Conference of the University of Aegean- "Planning for the Future - Learning from the Past: Contemporary Developments in Tourism, Travel & Hospitality"-2009) presents an interdisciplinary methodological approach in studying the Greek wellness tourism market, as well as a part of the research's findings in an attempt to define the special characteristics of the demand and supply side of this relatively new market, but also the typologies of the wellness tourists.

Keywords: *wellness tourism, Greece, triangulation, qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry the past two decades is increasingly subsuming the identity of an experience industry (Opaschowski, 2001) and this can be marked due to the fact that increasingly more tourists seek for an optimal experience within the time constraints of their holidays (Trauer, 2006) that will offer both material and immaterial qualities as well as an emotional stimuli. The modern tourist is multi- motivated (Tsartas, 1996) and is trying to satisfy increasing and multiple needs during the travel experience. This approach to the tourism experience is connected with the Special Interest Tourism phenomenon. In that sense, the constant reciprocal exchange between the supply and demand side of the tourism market has led to new leisure and tourism experiences, new tourism



products and destinations which are based upon the satisfaction of a special interest / motive that the tourist might have. In addition, the global tourism market is becoming more and more competitive, constantly demanding the tourism product to become more compound in order to satisfy the increasing and differentiated needs of the potential tourists. Douglas et al. (2001) define Special interest tourism as “the provision of customised leisure and recreational experiences driven by the specific interest of individuals and groups”. Additionally it is derived that special interest tourism can be distinguished by the existence of a special and dominating motive - as far as demand side is concerned - and by the development of special infrastructure at a destination - as far as the supply side is concerned. Finally, special interest tourism is often considered as active tourism during which a person engages in a cultural, artisanal or leisure activity or sport in order to develop his/ her personality (WTO, 1985).

The comparative advantage of a tourism market/ destination can be transformed into a competitive advantage by enriching and differentiating the tourism product in ways of offering something new and of high quality. Alternative forms of tourism, their combination in action and their combination with the mass tourism model –when attainable- can form a challenging option especially for the modern tourist. An alternative form of tourism that has recently emerged as a global phenomenon through the convergence of industries, traditions and therapeutic practices is wellness tourism. These practices are now rediscovered, integrated and branded to create a new global industry (Cohen & Bodecker, 2008: 4). Up to an important degree - maybe by definition – wellness tourism industry is also challenged by issues of sustainable tourism development with environmental, social and economic performance.

WELLNESS TOURISM

Wellness tourism is considered to be the sum of all relationships and phenomena resulting a journey and residence of people whose main motive is to preserve and promote their physical, mental and psychological health and their social prosperity. They stay in a specialised resort which provides the appropriate know-how and individual care. In addition they require a comprehensive service package comprising physical fitness, beauty care, healthy nutrition, relaxation, meditation and mental activity/ education and environmental sensitivity and social contacts (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001).

The trends towards wellness tourism imply that the approach towards health and wellbeing is rather in a preventing than a curative way and they are largely influenced by media and popular psychology (Smith-Puczko, 2008). Also wellness tourism is increasingly considered to be a part of a more active lifestyle, therefore spa going is treated by spa-goers as a part of a larger health and wellness lifestyle (ISPA, 2008). According to Smith and Puczko (2008) the nature of demand for spa tourism is changing as important social factors are changing- Kaspar (1990) refers to worsening living conditions in polluted metropolitan areas, unhealthy life styles, stress and the fact that the earth population is getting older. The average age of spa goers world wide is around 44 years old, while the number of younger spa users is increasing due to increasing health consciousness. Furthermore, today's travelers are more sophisticated (Mintel, 2007) due to the fact that they are already more experienced, well informed, independent, more quality conscious and a lot harder to please as they seek for the unique experience. The wellness facilities and services by nature can be easily tailored to meet specific needs of an individual. The global trends lately indicate that the wellness –spa industry is moving beyond luxury and pampering into the area of providing healthcare and raising consciousness (Cohen & Bodecker, 2008) regarding issues such as the balance of mind, soul and physical state.

The spa/ wellness tourism industry has increased exponentially in both volume and value, corresponding with the upward trend for health and wellness products in the last 20 years. Despite the spike in demand, the industry remains highly fragmented (Mintel, 2007). Existing and potential spa-goers and travellers are confronted with a confusing array of brands and formats, each claiming its own distinct positioning and philosophy, and catering to various target markets and budgets.

“Generally, spas and wellness resorts in the USA and Asia-Pacific region tend to focus more on lifestyle counselling, massage, indigenous treatments, and the cosmetic aspect of wellness, whereas the overall trend in Europe remains medicinal” (Mintel, 2007). What is interesting is that spa industry is expanding towards two directions in order to cover a greater part of the wellness tourism market. In the first case it is moving towards luxurious facilities and treatments to attract the elite of the tourist market. On the opposite direction, a new breed of discount spas, spa resorts and spa chains are offering treatments at comparatively lower prices in order to attract middle or lower class tourists or younger ones (teenagers etc.) and why not giving them the opportunity to become loyal customers and repeaters to a significant degree.

The latest trends in the international wellness tourism market indicate that the wellness tourism business is seeking and testing new distribution channels (i.e. through intermediaries such as specialised tour operators, specialised webpages/ portals, consortia or voluntary chains etc.) in order to achieve lower cost, better and quicker access to the target market, increased sales, reduction of the business risk. In some cases though, many tourism destinations and companies choose the direct delivery of their products in order to have a more effective overall control over their product (i.e. through personal contact with the tourist, in the wellness tourism venue) (CTO, 2005).

The Greek market follows the trends of the international wellness tourism market with a certain delay. Even though the international wellness tourism market is positioned in the development stage at the Butler's life cycle model, in Greece it is safe to say that it makes its early steps in the introduction stage. Despite the fact that Greece has a long history in therapeutic tourism (balnearies, spas etc.), with traditional spa towns offering an interesting amalgamation of wellness and healing tourism product, it cannot be considered as a wellness tourism destination. The private initiative in certain Greek destinations (i.e. Chalkidiki, Edipos, Crete, Rodos, Santorini etc.) has proven that when responsible holistic investments are realised, then the market can offer a differentiated, competitive and enriched product. In addition, due to the fact that the state has formed no clear and strict specs for defining a wellness resort, all sorts of hotels and centers can claim that they offer wellness tourism services without following a specific framework of rules and prerequisites. There is no central planning though for this sort of entrepreneurship, so we cannot refer to a well organised or experienced Greek market as a wellness destination but only as wellness resorts. On one hand almost 190 4* and 5* hotels are listed in the catalogue of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (2007) offering wellness services. But, as there is no clear definition of wellness tourism, wellness product and resort it is difficult to describe the nature of the wellness product they offer. On the other hand, new or renovated facilities have invested in offering the wellness tourism product with a holistic approach, following the trends of the international market. In fact, hotel and wellness resorts, in Crete for example, have been awarded as the best world's spa (2005, 2006, 2007). This proves that the first dynamic steps into the Greek wellness tourism market have been achieved.

THE RESEARCH IN THE GREEK WELLNESS TOURISM MARKET

In order to identify the present characteristics and future trends and dynamics of the Greek wellness tourism market from both demand and supply side a research is conducted as part of the on-going doctoral thesis referring to the Greek wellness tourism market. The research being conducted in order to support this thesis has as a primal purpose to explore and present the structure of the wellness tourism market in Greece. More over, this research seeks to analyse the findings and link them with tourism, motivation and consumer theories or tourism development theories.

Prior to the fieldwork concerning wellness tourism in Greece, deskwork preceded in order for the global market characteristics, theories, concepts and statistic data to be identified in a primal conceptual framework. Deskwork prior to the fieldwork included activities of organising, sense making, analysing and interpreting the literature review findings (Schwandt, 1997:30-31). After the fieldwork is completed deskwork will also provide with a report of analysing and interpreting the data gathered on the research field.

Literature review provided an important source of methodological and theoretical ideas concerning wellness and wellness tourism and most importantly it provides a dynamic basis of comparison with the findings on the field. One of the main questions that were set for examination (apart form the characteristics of the market's demand and supply side) was whether the wellness tourism should be placed as an "umbrella concept" that included health tourism, therapeutic tourism and medical tourism (Smith, 2008), or we should continue considering it as a part of health tourism (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001).

The study consists of a cluster of four different researches. The first one (quantitative) addresses to the managers of 186 4*, 5* and Luxurious Hotels in Greece that offer wellness services, the second one (qualitative) addresses to 20 key informants that specialize in tourism development in general and in wellness tourism in particular, the third one (quantitative) addresses to wellness tourists in 3 areas in Greece, and the fourth one (also quantitative) concerns the visitors of thermal springs in 3 traditional spa towns in Greece.

The capturing of the data concerning the 1st part of the research is realised through the completion of a close- ended questionnaire sent to the wellness hotels managers of hotels around Greece (Rodos, Crete, Athens, Cyclades etc.) via email. The questionnaire includes questions concerning

demographic characteristics of the tourists visiting wellness hotels, the characteristics of the supply side of the Greek wellness market, facilities' characteristics, treatments and activities preferred by the tourists, company strategies issues and the interaction with other special interest tourism activities. The 3rd and 4th part of the study (wellness tourists in hotels and visitors of thermal springs) is realised by conducting personal interviews on the field (at hotels in the areas of Edipsos, Rodos, Chalkidiki, Loutraki, Athens, Crete) which have as a backbone a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire includes questions concerning demographic characteristics, motivation and reasons for visiting the facilities, the reasons for seeking wellness in their trip, the preferred wellness therapies of the tourists, the combination of wellness tourism activities with other ones from special forms of tourism, the level of satisfaction from the wellness tourism/ hydrotherapy product in Greece etc.

A pilot test prior to the official research procedure (related to the 1st, 3rd and 4th of the research cluster) was conducted in the traditional spa town of Edipsos, in order to identify any mistakes relative to the questionnaire design and the sample planned to be used, the wording of the questionnaire, the question sequencing, to test analysis procedures and to estimate interview time (Veal, 2006:276). The area was chosen as it can be described as a miniature of the Greek wellness tourism market (combination of traditional and renovated facilities, existence of all groups of wellness tourists etc.). Some questions had to be amended in order to be more understandable and 3 of them had to be removed as the answers had no real use or connection with the Greek wellness tourism market. The pilot test for the key informants' research involved 4 in depth interviews which led to the amendment of 5 questions. In general, the value of this pilot survey was extended to ensure the accuracy of the sampling framework and data capturing techniques (Christou, 1999).

Because of the topic of wellness being complex, multidisciplinary and new for tourism, this phd study is a combination of three types of research. (Veal, 2006). It is descriptive because it investigates the size and the frequencies of the variables (demographic variables, the travel characteristics, the number of the respondents etc.). It is also a causal (explanatory) research because it investigates the causalities, the correlation between the independent and dependent variables (i.e. the total satisfaction from the wellness services- dependent variable- and the consumption of specific wellness services – independent variable). Finally, at a degree it is an exploratory (and rather evaluative) research because it tries to depict information concerning the typology of the

tourists and the way the wellness tourism market and policy is organized in Greece.

Scientists have stated the incompatibility of qualitative and quantitative methods (Kallas et al, 2008:98-108). From the positivists point of view experience theoretically can be detached and objective. Theory can be validated empirically and be empirically objective (detached- neutral). This approach has offered the social sciences the justification for the development of quantitative methodology for empirical research based on the observation of populations. On the other hand the hermeneutical approach (which supported qualitative research) acknowledges that physical sciences and social one cannot share common methods as they deal with different phenomena. Most importantly, the social reality is structured by the subjects through the meanings they give to the human behavior. So, the external world is conceptualised through the common formulism systems that the members of a society accept. In social sciences/ facts (and not only them) there is the need to combine the two methodological approaches in order to avoid duality of scientific descriptions.

The study is using both approaches of research such as the quantitative one and the qualitative research. Quantitative research is supported by the qualitative one for better understanding and documentation of the findings as the market of wellness tourism in Greece needs to be defined in economic, social and tourism development terms. Quantitative research is important for quantifying aspects of social life by assigning numbers which are representative of a range of possible responses (Veal, 2006- Kallas, 2008:156). More over, quantitative methodology describes phenomena through statistic ontology (Kallas, 2008: 99- Brown, 1993) without taking into consideration the special characteristics of phenomena. It only analyses them in terms of comparing the prices the variables take in analysis. It can provide tools for measurement, causality between variables and phenomena, generalisation, and in some cases replication of findings. Exactly at this point it is important to use a methodology that will allow the researcher to describe the social phenomena by forming ontologies and relationships between them. The tools for this can be supplied by qualitative research. The essence of qualitative research is primarily diagnostic as it tries to reveal the factors affecting and forming specific kinds of behavior (i.e. the loyalty of customers in a specific spa brand). In other words it provides a diagnostic approach for the motives and deeper reasons of any type of behavior (human behavior, system's behavior etc.). In this research

qualitative methods are used as a decisive tool for the approach of behaviors, beliefs and opinions.

The triangulation (interdisciplinary) method (mixing qualitative with quantitative methods) is being used as convergent validation was necessary. It is a procedure of establishing the fact that the “criterion of validity is met” and there is integrity as far as the drawn inferences are concerned (Schwandt, 1997:163). Examining a phenomenon or activity from more than one vantage points can limit up to an important degree any personal or methodological biases and enhance a study generalisability (Decrop, 1999). According to Denzin (1978) and Decrop (1999) there are four basic types of triangulation: Combining data sources, methods, investigators and theories. In the present phd research data sources (information from hotel managers, wellness tourists and key informants concerning the characteristics of the tourists’ motivation and typology will be compared as well as the wellness tourism development issues), research methods (qualitative and quantitative methods and tools will be used such as in depth interviews and close ended questionnaires) and maybe theory combination will be adopted (concerning the examination of tourist characteristics from sociological, marketing and economic disciplinary angles).

What triangulation is trying to do is to give a new model of combined methodological approach to research and analysis which will be based upon discovering – describing patterns of data- information (qualitative approach) and justifying (validating) them (quantitative approach) (Kallas et al., 2008:101). The convergence of qualitative and quantitative methods can happen through the use of tools of aggregated management and production of data (i.e. the categorisation in qualitative research and description of phenomena in quantitative research) (Kallas et al, 2008). Finally qualitative and quantitative research is well founded by a series of proofs from text and data groups. In this way empirical research is changing its methodological model from the uni- phase model (organisation of the research into distinctive autonomous research projects) to bi-phase one (more in the form of an integrated research project that includes and shares concepts, terms, data etc.) allowing the combination and interaction of qualitative and quantitative methods (Kallas et al, 2008:103-104).

Finally, one of the ambitions of this PhD thesis is to provide all the necessary information for a complete and integrated S.W.O.T. analysis concerning the characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Greek Wellness tourism market which could support further

planning and rendering of this challenging, promising but still unmapped special interest tourism market.

RESULTS FROM KEY INFORMANTS' RESEARCH

In this paper the justification of the research methodology selected and the results rising from the key informant research will be presented. The objectives of realizing a qualitative research among key informants of the Greek tourism market are as follows:

- To identify the way wellness and wellness tourism is perceived by the key informants
- To identify the demographic, social and economic characteristics of the tourists visiting hotels in Greece that offer wellness services (forming a typology of tourists- tourist clusters)
- To identify the consumer behavior of the wellness tourists
- To identify the niche market that concerns the wellness tourism market in Greece
- To identify the trends of the Greek wellness tourism market
- To identify the characteristics of the supply side of the Greek wellness tourism market concerning the quality of the wellness product, the level of education of the human resources involved in this market as well as the synergies developed with the state and other complementary or competitor companies
- To identify the possible relation/ combinations of wellness tourism with other special interest tourism types that could support the development of a complex of special interest tourism activities in a Greek destination
- To investigate strengths and weaknesses of the Greek wellness tourism market which could be taken into consideration for the future planning and development of wellness tourism in Greece.

The 20 key informants were selected due to their special relationship with the fieldwork and the Greek tourism market. They are professors of Greek national public educational foundations (universities and technological institutions) and they specialize in tourism issues. They are knowledgeable, articulate insiders, possessing a unique perspective on social, economic and development action in the site of special interest tourism where the fieldwork is unfolding (Schwandt, 1997:78). In addition their knowledge, education and experience allow them to be confident and trusted advisors. In the key informants' group sociologists, specialists in tourism development, marketing experts, information technology experts, geographers and law experts are included.

The qualitative research with interviewing key informants was chosen despite the fact that in Greece the wellness tourism market and product are an unmapped area. The reason for this is that Greece has a great tradition in the early forms of wellness tourism such as spa / curative tourism thanks to the numerous historical spa towns and thermes that exist. In any case the market may be different and reforming but some basic knowledge and experience exists and if combined with the general special interest tourism characteristics and issues, the results are expected to be interesting and useful for creating a clearer image of the Greek wellness tourism market.

In the next pages a part of the qualitative research findings is presented giving answers to a part of the research objectives.

Defining wellness and wellness tourism. All of the interviewees agreed to the fact that wellness is a state of balance between the body, the mind and the soul. It is also considered by all as an on going process that makes a person feel content and complete, depending always on one's way of life and criteria for evaluating the wellness state. An important number of interviewees (6 out of 20) related wellness with the active role and responsibility a person should have towards life, especially as resistance to the problems of the post industrial societies (stress, detachment from the natural environment, crisis in the human relationships etc.). The way wellness is perceived by the key informants is in the same ground with the definitions given by Dunn (1959) "special state of health comprising an overall sense of well-being which sees man as consisting of body, spirit and mind and being dependent on his environment" or Ardell (1986) "state of health featuring the harmony of body, mind and spirit, with self-responsibility, physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation (need for distressing) /meditation, mental activity/ education and environmental sensitivity/social contacts as fundamental elements".

Defining wellness tourism on the other hand was not as unanimous as defining wellness. The majority (more than 10 out of 20) of the interviewees stated that wellness tourism is a broad concept that includes the concepts of health/ medical tourism and curative tourism (i.e. balnearies, thermes). Following this approach, wellness tourism is a special interest tourism form that involves activities, facilities and products that aim to the fulfillment of balance between body, mind and soul. Half of them were specific and mentioned activities of socialising, convalescing or prevention for good health, pampering, healthy nutrition, aesthetic treatments, exercising, educational programmes, alternative treatments and getting in touch with the natural environment, approaching

the definition given by Mueller & Kaufmann (see p.2). Half of the interviewees comment that motivation for wellness tourism primarily is connected with psychological reasons.

On the other hand, 6 out of 20 of the key informants stated that wellness tourism should be located under the broader concept of health tourism, as it was mentioned until recently (i.e. Mueller & Kaufmann, 2000). They recognise a difference in the motives for wellness or health tourism and more particularly, they connect wellness tourism with luxury and spas, while health tourism with a health problem (which needs medical attention or balnearies).

One of the interviewees mentioned that every form of tourism should be considered as wellness tourism, as the motives and need of each person that define wellness are always subjective.

One key informant suggested that wellness tourism should be considered as an autonomous special interest tourism form that is not connected with health tourism.

The fact that everyone stated the importance of providing specialised facilities combined with outdoor activities in the natural environment makes it clear that wellness tourism activities must be pursued in a controlled environment but the integration with the nature can enrich and complete the wellness experience.

Wellness tourists' Characteristics. The majority of the interviewees (18 out of 20) agreed that the dominant age group of the wellness tourists refers to the ages between 40-60 years old, followed by the elder groups. Following the international trends, 12 key informants out of 20 estimate that younger ages, especially the ones belonging to the age group of 30-40 years old will soon become an important player of wellness tourism demand.

What is interesting is that one of the interviewees consider that all the age groups carry equal importance in the wellness tourism market, due to the fact that the wellness tourism product is complicated, interdisciplinary and can cover a wide range of interests, following the age group preferences.

The remaining one key informant mentioned that the dominant age group of the wellness tourist is 60 years old and elder people due to their health conditions.

Wellness tourists' Sex. An impressive number of the key informants (18 out of 20) stated that at least for the last 5 years there is no worth - mentioning difference between the numbers of men and women visiting wellness resorts. Almost equally, men and women dare to seek for their

wellness experience – even though there are differences in some of the activities they choose.

Despite this international notion of the tourism market, two of the interviewees stated that women are clearly more than men in the wellness resorts, and they recognised that the number of men visiting these facilities is increasing impressively.

Wellness tourists' Occupation. 12 people of the Key informants suggested that the dominant group of wellness tourists is occupied in managerial or bureaucratic positions which are related to the modern post industrial society and stressful conditions. Additionally, 3 key informants stated that women dealing with household activities indicate a significant part of the wellness tourist niche market.

One fourth of the key informants stated that they had no clear image of the occupational status of the wellness tourists.

Wellness tourists' Economic Status. The majority of the key informants (16 out of 20) recognised that the income level of the wellness tourists classified them to the middle and mostly upper class ranking as they stated that the vast majority of the wellness resorts offer their services in prices that address to a narrow part of the tourist market.

The remaining 4 key informants did not have any information on this subject.

Wellness tourists' Educational level. More than half of the key informants (12 out of 20) argued that the dominant group of the wellness tourists has a higher level of education and this might come in accordance with their income level. The following group has an average level of education.

Wellness tourists' Consumer behavior. The key informants' arguments concerning the wellness tourists' consumer behavior were very interesting. 15 of them refer to this type of tourists as being experienced tourists and familiarised with the wellness product which they might use in their place of origin. They tend to spend important amounts of money in wellness services and treatments additionally to their general tourism experience. This choice is not only a matter of the nature of the wellness tourism product, but it is a matter of the wellness tourists' mentality and idiosyncrasy. They tend to be loyal tourists of specific wellness resorts and treatments but due to the fact that the competition is very hard they are tempted and willing to try new facilities and treatments that could add to their wellness experience or social image/ status. Some of the interviewees stated that in the modern society an important part of the tourists is “money rich and time poor”, which means that the average length of holidays is shortened. As a result, the tourism experience should

be enhanced and intensified in order to offer satisfaction and help the tourist reach the desirable mental, psychological and physical condition- and he/she is willing to pay for it no matter the cost. That is exactly the role of wellness tourism activities for the self realised part of wellness tourists. One key informant argued that wellness tourists are often representative of the package tourists (they visit most famous destinations and consume whatever is included in their package deal). Interestingly, only 4 key informants mentioned that wellness tourists have a special approach towards life and health seeking for a superior experience for their body and mind and they are willing to try alternative treatments that might improve their quality of life. A few of the interviewees (6) also mentioned that a significant part of the wellness tourist market have an elitist approach to the wellness tourism product and experience and they could try anything that could add to their social status either consciously or instinctively.

Moreover, it was mentioned that wellness tourists have high consumer expenditure with high qualitative expectations for their experience.

A fifth of the key informants' group stated that they had limited knowledge of the wellness tourists' consumer behavior and could only mention the fact they tend to spend more money than the average tourist, while one of them stated that they had no knowledge on the consumer behavior of wellness tourists.

Wellness Tourism Trends. All of the interviewees recognised the increasing tendency for developing the wellness tourism market in Greece, following the global trends. Despite these tendencies 14 of them recognise the fact that in Greece wellness is still considered to be a luxury and not an established everyday need- in contrast to other countries (esp. in Europe) where wellness services are a part of the everyday life. In the majority of the wellness resorts the wellness tourism product is not the dominant one but a part of a complex tourism package and experience. Also most of them agree that new wellness treatments and activities start to be integrated in the Greek wellness tourism market. 8 key informants mention that wellness resorts start to offer signature treatments, couple treatments and alternative treatments in order to expand the wellness experience and keep the tourist in the wellness center, which gradually is not limited in a small area of the resort but it occupies an open, wide and expensive space. They mention that Greek wellness resorts (usually 5*) offer a cosmopolitan product, which combines the multicultural dimensions of the treatments with the destinations' character (i.e.

Edipsos, Elounda etc.) by integrating local products such as oil or thermal water in the treatments.

Finally, 6 of the interviewees argued that the wellness experience is gradually moving outside the walls of a spa center and develops through outdoor activities, in the natural environment. The competition within the wellness tourism market and the special tourism market in general is increasing, so the Greek hotels are trying to find ways of enriching their product and competitive advantage.

Wellness tourism market in Greece- position on the tourism life cycle model. The majority of the key informants (15 of them) argue that the wellness tourism market in Greece is in the exploration-implementation stage according to Butler's tourism life cycle model. Some areas (like in Crete, Chalkidiki, etc.) where private initiative made competitive investments can claim that they are in the early stages of the development stage. On the other hand, traditional spa towns find themselves in the stagnation stage or even declining stage with few cases like Edipsos, Kaiafas etc. that try to rejuvenate with new investments and by combining special interest tourism activities.

Wellness tourism marketing in Greece. The majority of the key informants had a vague image of the wellness tourism marketing strategies adopted in the tourism market. This is not something that cannot be explained as wellness tourism follows the pattern of every other special interest tourism form marketing strategy in Greece: weak presence of central planning with some daring private initiatives. 6 key informants suggested that the marketing and promotional campaign should be targeted primarily in the local market and secondarily in the international one as still it is difficult to compete with other traditional wellness tourism destinations such as Italy, N. Europe in terms of pricing, networking etc. Additionally the resorts in Greece should focus in the quality of the services and most importantly in the differentiation of the product. They also argue that synergies between local entrepreneurs and local authorities could support a stronger marketing strategy that could limit the power of international tour operators in some destinations. Moreover, Greece should not forget the traditional spa towns and try to make them islets of wellness tourism activities or combined special interest tourism activities.

Connection of Wellness tourism with other special interest tourism forms. Key informants agree that by developing one kind of tourism activity (such as wellness tourism) a destination cannot support sustainable development mostly because the competition is so intense (in a national and international level) that the tourist needs to have a variety

of stimuli that could enrich his/ her tourism activity. They all suggest the development of wellness tourism in several destinations following the philosophy of development in form of a grid where other special interest tourism activities can be combined and interact, depending on the resources each destination might have (see also Kokkosis & Tsartas, 2001:85). This integrated and sustainable development can support the local society as well and increase the diffusion of benefit throughout the community. 16 Key informants stated that wellness tourism can be combined with the majority of alternative forms of tourism, while the remaining 4 pinpointed specifically some of them, such as cultural, sports, religious, ecotourism, health tourism, conference tourism etc.

CONCLUSIONS- IMPLICATIONS

As far as any conclusions concerning the findings of the key informants part of research are concerned, some first arguments could be safe to be presented. In particular, it has to be noticed that key informants – even though they are experts in tourism development and special interest tourism issues- have limited opinion upon issues concerning the conceptual demarcation and the characteristics of Wellness tourism. This fact, without being odd, it surely proves the need and importance of further in depth interdisciplinary study of wellness tourism's special features and parameters. Moreover, this appears to be the only way to define also the different types of the wellness tourism product which make the supply side of the market so fragmented. After all it is necessary to have a sound definition of the wellness tourism product in order to be able to define its development strategies. Under the scope of further research, it would be useful to collect information that could enable clustering special interest tourism activities with wellness tourism activities in a way that they could create a competitive tourism product under the broader spectrum of sustainable development. In any case, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the complicated nature of the wellness tourism product makes it difficult to firmly define its special identity unless it is related to some special characteristics depending on the type of the destination (i.e. a historic spa town- balnearies), the activities combined (i.e. ecotouristic and wellness tourism activities), the type of facilities supporting wellness tourism (i.e. holistic wellness centers, resorts, city spas etc.) or the products used for the treatments and diet (i.e. mastic oil, olive oil, chocolate etc.).

Special reference should be made to the importance of the remarks and propositions the key informants made as they present a holistic,

responsible, systemic and specific approach to the fact that wellness tourism is directly connected with issues of sustainable development at a local level, while following the scientific dialogue rising the last few years and concerning the role of special interest tourism in sustainable development in the Greek and international market. This thesis tries to pinpoint the necessity of the development of synergies among the stakeholders of a destination which relate to the development of special interest tourism in terms of sustainable tourism development. Following the key informants' suggestions it is necessary to underline the need for developing a complex, differentiated and interesting tourism product which could have as a core the wellness tourism activities but should be enriched with other special interest tourism activities. And in order to achieve that well planned synergies should take place to support the local special character of each destination and make sure that tourism development is integrated within the local economy.

In addition, marketing strategy issues raise at a national and local level that need to be defined and managed in order to support the desirable wellness tourism development model in Greece based upon the demographic characteristics of the tourists, their expenditure patterns, and motivation and of course the limitations of sustainable tourism development.

The need for validity of findings led to the adoption of the triangulation approach of collecting data, analysing information and combining research methodologies. Indisputably, this approach for studying the new and unmapped Greek wellness tourism market is considered to be the most appropriate one in order to achieve more credible and dependable information which will limit the biases of each independent methodology and offer the chance for crosschecks and complementary information at different levels (Hartmann, 1988).

The wellness tourism market in Greece is an unmapped area which presents significant potentials for future growth but also has some structural issues to solve. This ongoing research aims to present the characteristics of the demand and supply side, the possibilities of a niche market and the formulation of typologies of tourists in a way that can ensure the validity of the findings and provide credible information which can support a future wellness tourism development plan at a national level.

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SUBMITTED: JULY 2009

REVISION SUBMITTED: SEPTEMBER 2009

ACCEPTED: OCTOBER 2009

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