

CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS OF HOTEL SUPERSTRUCTURE**Stelina Spassova¹****JEL R30+Z32****Abstract****Keywords:**

Hotel superstructure, balneology, SPA tourism, certification, European SPA Association.

This article discussed the status of systems for certifying the quality of balneology and SPA services in the hotel superstructure in Bulgaria. The analysis was carried out using the method of induction and deduction, critical analysis, method of comparison, benchmarking analysis and based on a survey conducted by the author. As a result of the examination were made conclusions and recommendations in order to comply new regulatory requirements, enhancing the quality and investor interest in the hotel superstructure in balneology and SPA tourism.

Introduction

Current trends in present day economies, including those outlined in Bulgaria are indicative of an increasing growth particularly in view of the shift in economic priorities from commodity production to provision of services. Taking into account the rigorous quality criteria applied not only to goods and services on offer but to all aspects of production and service provision, human development and human emotions, development and implementation of quality certification systems for various balneological and spa services provided by the hotel superstructure in Bulgaria, has become a necessary prerequisite (Paskaleva, 2012).

At a macro level, hotel superstructure encompasses all of the accommodation units in a tourist destination area. At a micro level, it includes the hotel property with its distinctive style, design and architecture, the rooms and functional links among them, hotel equipment, facilities and furniture. (Dabeva et al, 2013).

It is true that up-to-date, comprehensive research and studies in the area of spa and balneology in the hotel superstructure prove to be rather limited. Problem solutions have been offered but there is still a need for a clear methodological basis that can help process development and improvement. This calls for a more extensive study of the hotel superstructure in Bulgaria at a national and regional level by addressing the issue of quality of tourism services.

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Bulgaria has a huge potential for the development of leisure tourism. It is a country rich in natural resources including a wide variety of mineral springs and spa waters, curative mud and a benevolent bio-climate which have been seen as powerful drivers for the development of spa and wellness tourism over the last few years, turning it into a thriving sector.

The the author of the present paper aims to examine the certification systems regulating the hotel superstructure and more specifically, Bulgarian balneohotels and spa hotels. In line with conducted research, the author also aims to make recommendations and outline opportunities for investment in this particular tourism sector.

To this end, the author has set forth the following research tasks:

- Evaluation of quality standards and state of quality of spa and balneological services offered by the hotel superstructure in Bulgaria;
- Review of the legislative and regulatory framework/basis in the area of balneology and spa tourism in Bulgaria;
- Offering recommendations as to the improvement of the quality of services and implementation of certification systems in the hotel superstructure.

The study involves the implementation of various analytical methods such as induction and deduction, critical analysis/review, comparison and benchmarking together with surveys and questionnaires conducted by the author.

For her studies, the author used the evaluation criteria and procedures developed by Dabeva (2013) the first step of which is identifying the types of hotels to be certified. Hotel superstructure is extremely varied, which means that standardization normally follows hotel classification (Dabeva et al., 2013).

1. Systems for certification of service quality in Bulgarian spa and balneo hotels

The growing competition on the tourism market has made many companies place a special emphasis on quality to gain a competitive advantage. (Stamov, St. and Alexieva, Y., 2005).

Individual methods for quality evaluation, management and certification in the area of tourism open up new opportunities for tourism providers to control, maintain and optimize the desired level of service. These aim to improve the overall quality of services provided and to offer high quality tourism products and services that will meet customer expectations.

The introduction of quality assurance systems in tourism contributes to the growth and prosperity of tourism enterprises but it also helps attract more satisfied customers and thus generate higher revenue and profitability in tourism on a long term basis (see fig. 1).



Source: Adapted by the author to Neshkov, M., *Quality management and certification in tourism, BAPX & BTK project, Varna, 2007*

Fig. 1. Evaluation of overall quality in tourism

Quality assurance/certification in tourism allows for:

- increase in safety levels;
- customers to become aware of the actual quality of certified products and services;
- increase in the volume and speed of manufactured goods, hence higher efficiency of tourism activities as a whole;
- higher level of trust between seller and buyer which leads to a purchase decision;
- introducing higher prices and their acceptance by the certified product user;
- higher product or service competitive value and increase in workforce competitive abilities (Neshkov, 2007, p. 49).

Tourism superstructure forms an integral part of tourism amenities and facilities. Its development and functioning is a major factor in creating the right image and competitive advantage of the tourist destination. Hotel superstructure plays an overriding role for the capacity, quality and image/reputation of the superstructure in general. It embraces all accommodation units in terms of category, capacity, furnishing and facilities. Category and capacity of hotel superstructure can be seen as the scale and limit according to which other superstructure components are being built i.e. restaurants and places for entertainment, transport means, retail outlets and sport facilities, etc. (Neshkov et al., 2013).

For the purpose of this study, we shall use the classification of hotel types covered by the Ordinance on accommodation units, catering and entertainment establishments and procedures regulating the category, annulment, downgrading and termination of category (see table 1).

Table 1

Classification of hotel types

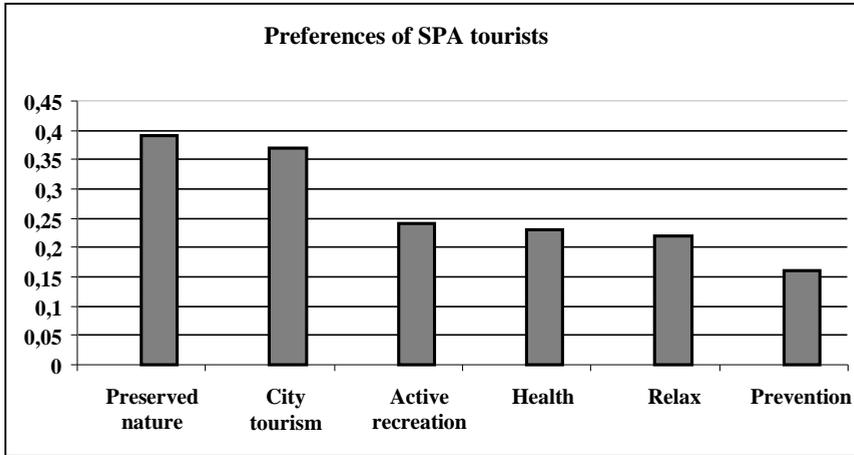
Criterion	Based on period of operation	Based on geographical coverage, location	Based on purpose and function
Hotel types	All year round	sea	Apartment hotel
	Seasonal	mountain	Residence hotel
		city	Business hotel
			Balneo hotel
			Spa hotel
			Wellness hotel

Source: Ordinance on categorization of accommodation units, catering and entertainment places and procedures regulating the category, annulment, downgrading and termination of category.

As balneo and spa hotels are placed in the focus of the present study we shall only discuss the quality assurance standards that apply to the services provided by this type of hotels.

Rapid growth in the area of balneological and spa tourism has encouraged investments which can help renovate existing properties or build new hotels.

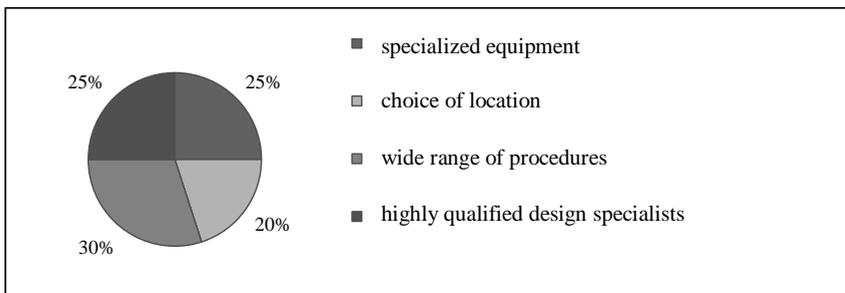
There are several factors which determine the success of a given balneohotel or spa hotel (see fig. 2).



Source: National strategy for sustainable development of tourism in Bulgaria 2014-2030, Sofia, May 2014.

Fig. 2. Preferences of SPA tourists

On the one hand, proper zoning and selection of facilities and their flowchart arrangement is important, but there are other features that matter, among which the distinctive interior design which gives an important first impression to tourists visiting the spa area of the hotel, from the point of view of spa facilities and quality of service. Indeed, a good advertising strategy can attract visitors but it is the quality of service and degree of customer satisfaction that generates the return customer. (see fig. 3).



Source: Author's own studies.

Fig. 3. Answer to the question: What was in the focus of your attention when designing and building your SPA centre?

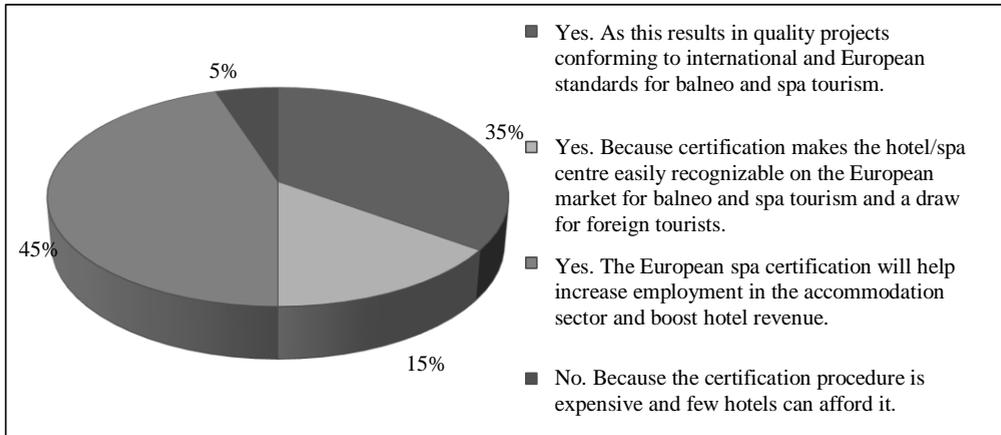
The SPA quality assurance in turn is to certify that all conditions for the success of the SPA centre are at hand and this serves as a quality guarantee.

To ensure better international transparency and fairness of competition, the European Spas Association (ESPA) in collaboration with leading experts introduced EuropeSpa Med and EuropeSpa Wellness as international quality certificates. The above certificates ensure quality services and amenities at balneo and spa hotels and they are presented to the attention of visitors, tour operators and health insurance companies across Europe via the official website of the organization www.europespas.eu which lists all certified sites.

On the strength of its European Spa Certificate, the hotel becomes part of the European Spa network. The benefits of being awarded the above certificate are as follows: (https://www.spa-consult.eu/Bg/Услуги/СПА_одит_и_сертифициране/14/):

- opportunities to be advertised in a website offering spa services to international visitors/guests;
- opportunities to showcase hotels holding an EuropeSpa certificate – slideshow, photos, online booking facilities;
- option for cooperation and direct bookings with the leading German tour operator FIT Reisen, through the official website of the organization www.europespas.eu;
- improving hotel capacity;
- growth in tourist receipts and generating revenue for hotel owners.

According to expert opinion (using data from a survey conducted by the author with tourism professionals), certification of balneo and spa hotels in Bulgaria will increase their market share and create a shortcut to the health funds in Germany (see fig. 4).



Source: Author's own studies.

Fig. 4. Answer to the question: Is certification of hotels/spa centres in the area of balneology and spa tourism in Bulgaria a necessary condition?

Introduction of certification systems in Bulgaria will give a chance to draw a clear differentiation of quality services provided by balneo and spa hotels. Quality assurance grading schemes will help attract more visitors who are seeking the benefits of spa facilities. The certificate will be seen as a hallmark for a guaranteed high quality and professionalism.

Certification aims to increase quality standards in balneo and spa hotels, becoming a necessary prerequisite for their development. Empirical studies show (Neshkov, 2007, p. 51) that the awarded certificate and improved company image make up for the energy and costs incurred during the preparation for the audit preceding the certificate awarding.

Members of the European Spas Association (ESPA) are 21 member countries with 14 000 sites/units offering spa, wellness and balneological services. ESPA has adopted rules and criteria (Quality Standards for European SPA's), which aim to signal out *the best* SPA hotels on the basis of the independent certification mechanism. Compliance with the above rules and the actual meeting of said criteria will result in awarding certificates for SPA hotel, SPA village and SPA destination. *EuropeSpa* is the quality stamp/sign of the European SPA Association. It is based on a quality assurance system developed by experts of branch associations in collaboration with a research committee embracing more than 30 international and national laws and standards. „*Unsurpassed quality at the highest level all over Europe*“ –

these are the principles of the European Spas Association. The organizations awarded the EuropeSpa certificate need to demonstrate a minimum of 80% compliance with all criteria, including the minimum KO (knock-out) – criteria which automatically ranks them among the quality leaders in Europe. The following are embraced under the umbrella of the quality stamp:

The EuropeSpa Med certificate – a quality stamp for spa centres in the area of health treatment and wellness, which can be awarded to:

- balneohotels, clinics, public health institutions and hotels offering health and spa services;
- certifies the quality of treatment resources, infrastructure, hygiene conditions and guests safety;
- offers a catalogue with more than 1000 criteria;
- gives a quality guarantee for services on offer to customers, travel agencies, tour operators and health funds;
- guarantees guests safety, through a range of high quality health and medical services.

The EuropeSpa Wellness certificate – a quality sign awarded to wellness hotels:

- it is designed specifically for hotels with health and wellness orientated philosophy;
- certifies quality in the area of safety, wellness infrastructure and appropriate service;
- it is based on a catalogue with nearly 1300 criteria;
- it gives a quality guarantee of services offered to clients, travel agencies and tour operators;
- guarantees visitors safety during their stay at the wellness facility.

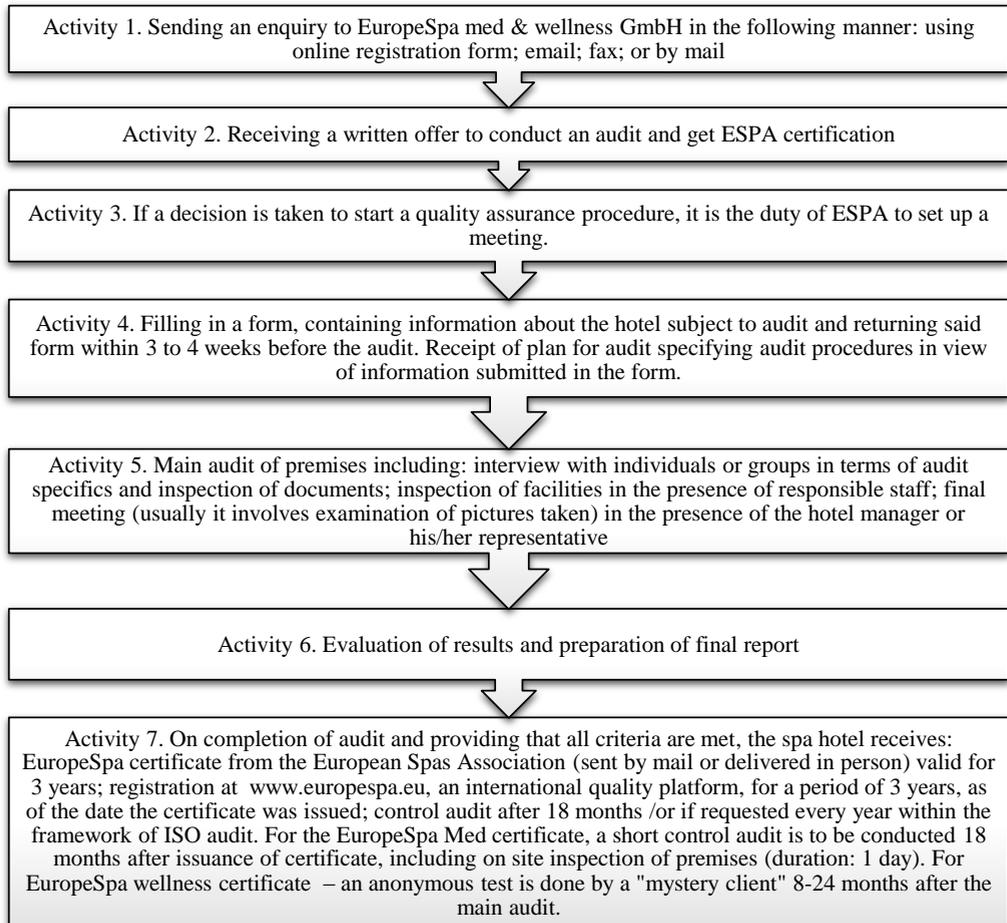
The EuropeSpa Hotel Spa certificate – is a quality stamp for SPA hotels providing spa services:

- it guarantees safety and evaluates infrastructure in the most delicate spa sector from hygienic point of view;
- offers a catalogue with more than 500 criteria;
- emphasizes hotel staff professional attitude to quality in the SPA sector;
- gives a quality guarantee for the services offered to guests, travel agencies and tour operators;
- helps customers recognize those hotels which offer a quality service and fully serviced spa centre.

Many of the requirements on which ESPA standards are based, incorporate ISO and HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) standards. On showing

compliance with ESPA standards the hotel can easily meet the rest of the criteria, too (<http://www.alphaquality.org/>).

Quality assurance procedures involve the following scope of activities (<http://www.eurospas.eu/>) (see fig. 5):



Source: Own research by the author

Fig. 5. ESPA Certification Procedure

Certification covers the following fields of audit (Paskaleva, 2012):

Audit field 1. Management and compliance system

- Basic performance characteristics and requirements for balneohotels;

- Compliance with local regulatory acts governing drugs, remedies and environmental protection;
- Medical and therapeutic organization of structure and development;
- managing quality and safety;
- analytical quality assurance.

Audit field 2. Collecting, producing and administering local remedies

- protection of medicinal springs and peloid;
- production of local remedies and processing/treatment;
- curative waters /bathing water and peloid treatment;
- storage of remedies.

Audit field 3. Medical and therapeutic divisions, sectors and procedures

- medical ward;
- use of remedies;
- ward for treatment and rest;
- bathrooms, shower rooms and saunas.

Audit field 4. Shelter

- guest rooms (patients);
- room for disabled people.

Audit field 5. Culinary facilities – dining areas and kitchen

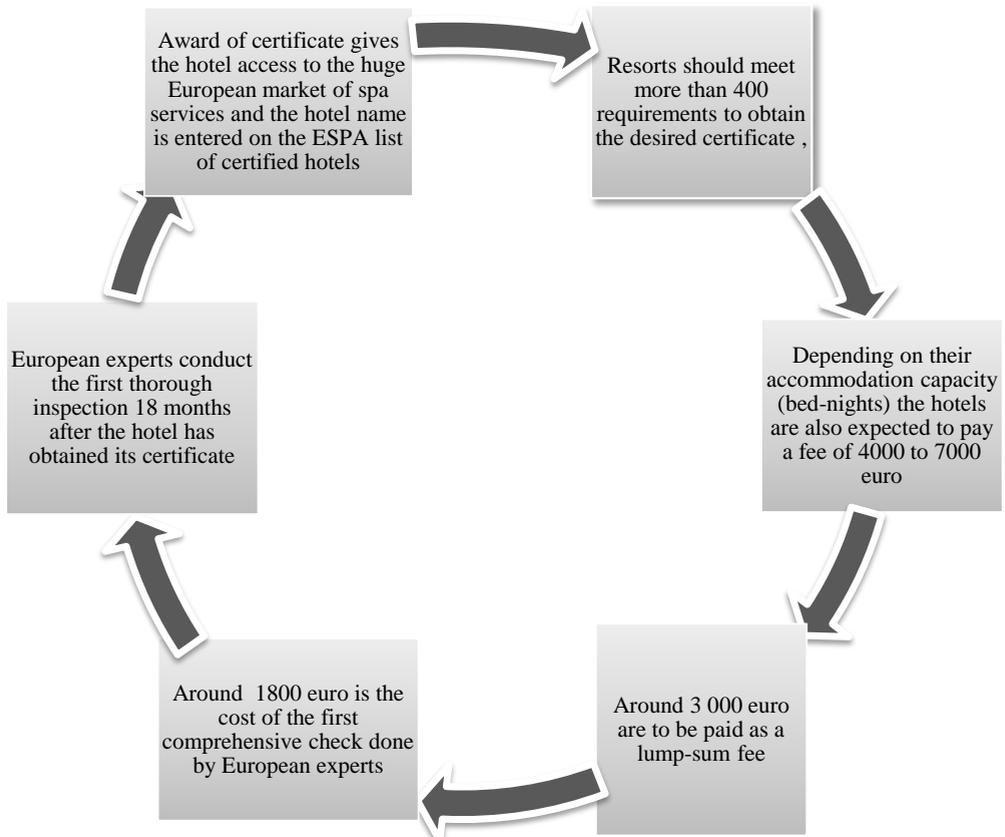
- dining area/restaurants, kitchen, storage room.

Audit field 6. Organization of leisure time

- information on resort attractions, side trips and other options to spend leisure time.

Audit field 7. Medical and therapeutic environment

- the medical and therapeutic environment in general (see fig. 6).



Source: Individual research by the author.

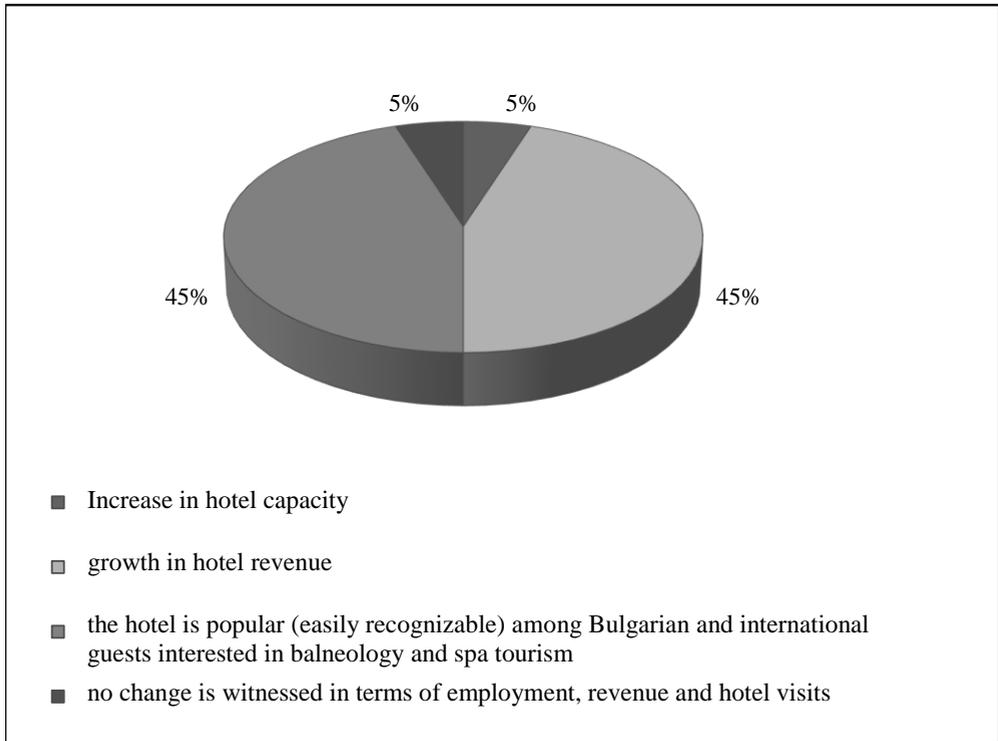
Fig. 6. Process of obtaining ESPA certificate

2. Evaluation of quality of services offered by balneo and spa hotels

There are 260 spa hotels in Bulgaria, 36 of which are members of the Bulgarian Association of Balneology and Spa Hotels. Eight of them are certified by ESPA and there are eight more hotels being in a process of certification (see fig. 7).

In view of European standards, the number of certified hotels in Bulgaria is very low but we have the right to doubt the opinion. The main reason for the small number of certified hotels is the fact that ESPA started introducing certification for SPA hotels in 2009.

The Association has long experience with spa hotels for which it has drawn up around 35 international quality standards. (http://www.spabusiness.com/pdf/SB_issue1_2016.pdf).



Source: Individual research by the author.

Fig. 7. Answer to the question: What has changed since your hotel was certified?

The above figures are also true for MED European countries where the number of certified SPA hotels is not so big. What is more, the process demands considerable investment and during periods of crisis, many of the hotel proprietors cannot afford such certification.

Table 2

Statistical data showing the number of categorized hotels in Bulgaria

Criterion	Hotels, total 2011	Hotels, total 2012	Hotels, total 2013	Hotels, total 2014
Total number of categorized hotels	3 776	2 758	2 953	3 163
Number of rooms	141 625	150 570	151 120	157 128
Number of beds in use	283 251	301 140	302 433	314 257
Total room capacity	58 885 218	56 211 341	58 739 766	61 396 232
Number of bed nights	18 855 331	20 252 038	21 617 474	21 698 391
Average room occupancy	32. 04 %	36 %	36. 4 %	35 . 3%

Source: NSI and HAOT.

Perspectives for quality assurance of balneo and spa hotel services in Bulgaria are related to the recent regulatory changes. New, stricter rules in the provision of spa services and certification of hotels have been introduced. The current Law on Tourism states very clearly who has the right to put the label ‘SPA’ on their hotel and offer wellness, medical and thalassotherapy services.

As of January 29, 2016, Special Ordinance №2 was adopted, regulating the terms and conditions for certification of *balneological (medical SPA) centre, SPA centre, wellness centre* and *centre for thalassotherapy*. Under Ordinance Nr.2, within a six month period of its coming into effect, all persons operating in centers with balneo and spa services should bring them in line with the new requirements and apply for quality assurance.

In line with the long awaited changes by the tourism sector, the right to use the SPA abbreviation in their name, respectively the designations ‘balneological’ (medical SPA), ‘wellness’ and ‘thalassotherapy’ or provide services under the common name ‘balneology’ or ‘SPA/Wellness’ is given only to service providers who hold a certificate for such type of hotel. The hotels will receive the appropriate certificate if they meet a number of mandatory requirements – for building, furniture and equipment, service, language skills of staff and other.

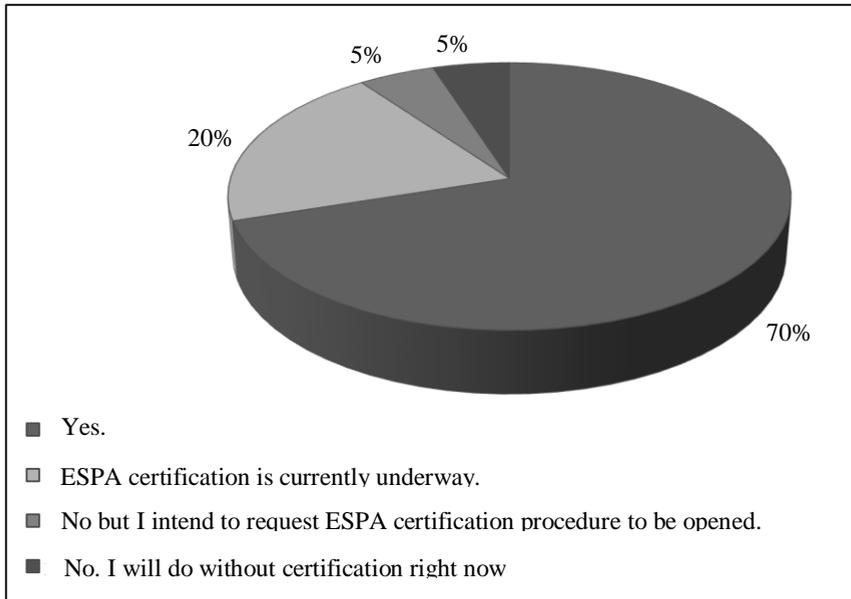
The certificate is valid for a period of 5 years as of the date of issuance. Certified centres will be entered into a special register which will be public and part of the National Tourism Register. The certification aims to establish the suitability of the centre for balneological and spa services. This will help increase the quality of services and increase safety for guests using the above services.

The certified centres should hold a category symbol depending on their type, including a certificate and plaque placed on site in a prominent position. The law explicitly states that inscriptions of the type, name and category of tourism establishments (tourist sites) should not mislead tourists. This should put a stop to bad practices such as units with one Jacuzzi and a single masseuse boasting SPA in their name thus tarnishing the image of the country as a tourist destination of somewhat poor quality. For centres which fail to conform to this requirement, the certifying body should change the hotel type categorized as balneohotel or spa hotel and issue a new category symbol corresponding to the actual type 'hotel'. The normative document provides for minimum mandatory requirements which are to be met by balneological and spa centres, in terms of construction, equipment, furniture, maintenance and range of services provided. There are also specific requirements for staff qualifications, skills and language competence.

According to data submitted by the Bulgarian Association of Balneology and Spa Tourism, there are 3775 hotels in Bulgaria, 260 of which are being promoted as balneological and spa hotels. According to the institute, only 60 hotel properties will be able to meet the strict requirements/criteria introduced by the state.

After the 18th ESPA congress which was held on 15-17 May, 2013 at Grand Hotel Pomorie, Bulgaria has gained its foothold on the map of Europe as a year-round tourist destination. Despite the crisis in recent years, the sector has exhibited growth rates both in tourist revenue and in the number of overseas guests.

Currently, revenues from spa tourism vary between 4% and 6% of the total segment, according to various sources, but these can get as high as 10%, according to people working in this sector. Bulgaria is a country with long-standing traditions in balneology and hotel superstructure with over 2 billion euro of investments in this sector for the last couple of years. More importantly, this type of tourism can be operated all-year-round. (see fig. 8).



Source: Independent research by the author

Fig. 8. Answer to the question: Is your hotel certified according to ESPA quality standards?

According to the European Spas Association, Bulgaria has the capacity of becoming the *public health station of Europe* owing to its natural resources but the Bulgarian government should also help. It cost a lot to position Bulgaria on the European spa map. Therefore, from now on, the country needs to invest in marketing and hotel superstructure identified as its weak points.

A major concern for the sector are those hotels which put SPA on their logo but fail to offer a quality service. The Bulgarian Association of Balneo and Spa tourism upholds the opinion that certification of Bulgarian balneo and spa hotels will help improve their quality of services and increase their competitiveness.

Conclusion

The survey aims to examine quality assurance systems of balneo and spa services provided by the hotel superstructure in Bulgaria. In the focus of study is the current state of service quality in balneo and spa hotels through a sample survey of tourism professionals active in this area.

In summary of the above, we can draw conclusions and make recommendations, as follows:

- hotel superstructure requires implementation of quality assurance systems to certify the quality of services provided by balneo and spa hotels;
- certification of balneo and spa hotels can be realized in accordance with ESPA certificates ;
- the process of acquiring an ESPA certificate requires considerable investments and is carried out for specific audit fields;
- specific requirements should be raised for investment projects for renovation and construction of balneo and spa hotels, based on international quality assurance certificates, i.e. EuropeSpa Med, EuropeSpa Hotel Spa and EuropeSpa Wellness;
- specify measures and action to be taken by hotel proprietors, investors, local authorities and the state to improve marketing initiatives and infrastructure;
- information campaign to be launched by respective local authorities and the state in order to address the new requirements of the regulatory basis for certification of service quality in balneo and spa hotels in Bulgaria;
- ensure that strict control is applied by the Expert Committee on the classification and certification of tourist sites (EKKCTO) on the introduction and implementation of the new regulatory requirements for balneo and spa hotels in terms of category symbols.

The herein drawn conclusions and proposed recommendations are intended to help investors in their decision to invest in quality assurance systems and certification of service quality in balneo and spa hotels.

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