

# ***Profile of Thermal Spas users – comparative analysis between Portugal and Hungary***

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** Portugal is a country characterized by the existence of several hot springs with different characteristics regarding the curative properties of the waters. These resources are distributed along the territory, with a major concentration on the Northern and Central regions of the country. Hungary also constitutes a privileged destination for the practice of Health and Wellness Tourism, due to the abundance of hot springs, having a rich bath and spa tradition, with the combined influence of Roman and Ottoman rule. For these reasons, health and wellness is considered a strategic product for tourism development of both destinations.

**Objectives:** This study is focused on the demand side and it reports the empirical findings, characterizing the sociodemographic profile of the Thermal Spas users, establishing a comparative analysis between Portugal and Hungary.

**Methods:** This research is based on an empirical study conducted in both countries during a period of nine months. Using a self-administered, close-ended questionnaire and random convenience sampling method, data collection has been carried out at six Thermal Spas located in the Northern and Central region of Portugal (Melgaço, Chaves, Vidago, Curia, Luso and S. Pedro do Sul) and on six of the most famous historical spas in Budapest (Gellért, Széchenyi, Lukács, Rudas and Dandár). A total of 753 valid responses were collected. The comparative analysis was based on these primary data. The treatment of data was based on the statistical descriptive analysis

of the variables, by indicators such as mean, mode and standard deviation (Pestana & Gageiro, 2014), using SPSS (25.0). The fundamental set of sociodemographic characteristics of the sample include: age, gender, nationality, country of residence, level of education (LoE), professional status, family structure and household monthly income (HMI). Social, demographic and economic characteristics are important to consider on demand studies, due its influence on tourist motivations and travel behaviour (Kozak, 2002; Jönsson & Devonish, 2008).

**Originality/value:** The literature review revealed that there is a gap on comparative studies in health and wellness tourism research. Methodologically, comparative studies in social sciences and specifically in the field of tourism have a set of advantages and enable a better understanding of the subject under analysis, gaining significance, validity and reliability of the results obtained (Cohen, 1979; Dominguez-Mujica, 2015; Kozak, 1998).

**Main findings/discussion:** The findings revealed that are significant differences between the sociodemographic profiles of Thermal Spa users in both Portugal and Hungary. The users of the Portuguese Thermal Spas are older than the ones who visit the Hungarian Thermal Baths. The predominance in Portuguese case goes to Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) Traditionalists or Loyals (22,6% were born between 1928 and 1945). The same kind of results can be observed in previous studies for the same region (Antunes, 1997, 2004; Quintela, 2008; Alpoim, 2010), keeping the trend of associating this kind of tourism mainly to senior people. While in Hungary there is a relevant presence of Generations X (born between 1964 and 1980) and of *Generation Y* (born between 1981 and 1992). This profile concurs with the data presented in the study of Priszinger and Formádi (2014) for the same kind of population. In what concerns to gender, the differences are not significant. Although, the female presence is preponderant in Portugal and the male presence is preponderant in Hungary. More significant differences are visible in what concerns the professional status. Most of the visitants of the Hungarian Thermal Spas have a full-time job that contrasts with the fact that in Portugal there are mainly retired visitants. Differences regarding marital status are also evident. Most of the users of Portuguese Thermal Baths are married, while in the Hungarian case are single. In terms of LoE, the scenarios are particularly different. In Hungary, the preponderance goes to

postgraduate visitants, while in Portugal the average of academic degree is lower, constituted mainly by people who have concluded only the primary school. Although, there is an absent of data from respondents regarding HMI, in both cases most salaries are under 1.500,00 €.

**Conclusion:** This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge, providing the broad understanding of Thermal Spa users' profiles in Portugal and Hungary, evidentiating the differences between them through the comparative analysis. These findings can benefit the Thermal Spa services providers in terms of developing appropriate marketing strategies to their main publics, follow the trends of the tourist demand in the scope of health and wellness tourism.

**Keywords:** Health and wellness tourism, thermal spas, sociodemographic profile, comparative analysis.

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