

Thermal Springs

Heat Up Future Wellness Destinations

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Since ancient times, thermal springs have served as a catalyst for the development of small settlements. Today, governments and private developers are pouring money back into thermal areas, given their position in the nexus of wellness and health tourism, a growing interest in nature-based experiences and the need to combat overtourism by directing tourists to less-visited areas.

According to the latest estimates from the Global Wellness Institute, the thermal/mineral springs sector is growing rapidly. As of 2022, there were 31,290 thermal/mineral springs establishments operating in 130 countries. However, through 2027, GWI projects a global industry growth rate of a compound annual growth rate of 14.3 percent a year – compared to 4.7 per cent annual growth in global GDP.





Thermal Waters Will Play a Key Role in Governmental Tourism Strategies

Thermal bathing centers often form the backbone of tourism in their regions. Places like Grindavík, Iceland and Kyushu, Japan have made thermal springs a significant part of their tourism branding.

Seeing the success of the strategy, and the growth of interest from wellness travelers seeking relief from chronic health issues, governments around the world have started pouring money into updating tourism facilities in thermal areas.

The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia is investing millions of dollars to turn former Soviet thermal spa towns like Tskaltubo into international level resorts.

The UNESCO designated spa town of Vichy, France is currently undergoing a six-year, multi-million dollar modernization funded in large part by regional and municipal governments.

After health tourism was identified as a key growth area for Croatia, the country's Ministry of Tourism and Sport, with support from EU funds, allocated approximately 120 million euros for investments in thermal tourism. According to Ivana Kolar, president of Croatian Health Tourism Association, **"This funding is part of a broader strategic plan aimed at enhancing tourism infrastructure, promoting sustainable practices, and improving the overall quality of service."** Not to mention it may help divert travelers away from already crowded Dubrovnik.



Rural Economic Development

Because they're often located in natural and rural settings, thermal springs are redirecting tourists away from often travelled urban centers. Moreover, they have the potential to deliver swift economic development to rural communities. Since it was inaugurated several years ago, the Colorado Hot Springs Loop, a 720-mile trail linking the state's key thermal areas, has brought economic opportunity to the places in between. New businesses have sprouted up along the route, creating jobs and local tax revenues.

The new Great Victorian Bathing Trail, a 559-mile route in southern Australia, has similar visions. Still in the process of expanding, the trail will move visitors out of heavily-trafficked Melbourne into less-visited parts of the state. While high-end properties like Peninsula Hot Springs and Alba Thermal Springs & Spa are included on the trail, so are indigenous sites, farms and thermal bathing holes in the middle of nowhere.

Yoriko Soma, a wellness tourism pioneer in Japan and CEO of CA Holdings notes a variety of businesses can spring up in rural onsen villages, including noodle bars, sushi bars, outfitters, gift shops and hotels, she notes. **"If you see a successful Japanese onsen village, you can see the future of wellness retreat style."**

The Urban Bathhouse Revival

While thermal springs in nature are having their moment, there is also a growing interest in bringing the bathing experience indoors. “**Hydrotherapy experiences, long cherished in Europe for their health benefits, are now becoming mainstream in the U.S. thanks to a growing awareness of the profound impacts of water on our health,**” says Tammy Pahel, VP of Spa & Wellness at Carillon Miami Wellness Resort.

Companies like Aire Ancient Baths and WorldSprings are centering their spas around thermal bathing rituals. Meanwhile, Therme Group, currently operating in Germany and Hungary, is expanding its thermal wellness and recreation park concept to locations in South Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. In seeking out a location in Washington, DC, Therme is exploring marginalized neighborhoods to bring economic opportunity and an appreciation of the healing nature of water into a wellness desert. The Therme ethos piggybacks on the concept of Wellness for All, a key theme for the industry as it moves into a more inclusive future.

