

Consumer preferences for wellness vacations destinations in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: The development of the wellness travel industry has been propelled by the rising concerns of an overworked population faced with both physical and mental health issues. Wellness vacation enables travellers to rejuvenate themselves after a long working period due to burnout, stress, and feeling overwhelmed, especially after the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As the traits and preferences of Czech travellers could have been impacted by the recent pandemic lockdown, and as there are scarce published works that have documented their recent preferences for vacation destinations; this study investigates the traits and behaviours of Czech tourists in selecting wellness vacation destinations in the Czech Republic (CR). Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire survey, and participants who are familiar with wellness vacations in CR and at least visit a wellness vacation destination once a year were invited to participate in the study. Two hundred and sixteen respondents participated and 182 responses were finalised for data analysis after removing incomplete responses. Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 25, and description analysis was carried out to tabulate travellers' gender, age and income of participants, frequency of wellness vacation visits per year, intention to travel and willingness to travel based on distance. Findings show Czech travellers of both genders have similar preferences when it comes to wellness destinations. The result also shows most Czech travellers are willing to travel far distances (of more than 200km) to visit wellness destinations, which suggests that wellness destinations do not have to be concerned about the location if they are providing quality products and services to their visitors. The study also makes several suggestions and recommendations based on the results, including innovative ideas for future wellness vacation retreats to target both genders and age categories, especially for Millennials who work in busy cities where services such as digital detox would appeal to this market segment.

Keywords: wellness vacation, mental health, Czech Republic, post pandemic, competitive advantages

JEL Classification: D1, I12, M30, P46

1 Introduction

Wellness refers to a way of life that emphasises achieving the highest levels of health and happiness and unifying the body and mind. Self-responsibility, physical activity, aesthetic care, good food, relaxation, meditation, mental activity, education, and social interactions can all be viewed as essential components of wellness, which can be defined as a state of wellbeing that integrates the harmony of the body, mind, and spirit (Muhi & Durkovic, 2020). Wellness service offering such as dietetics and antistress regimens has been practiced with varying degrees of popularity making destinations in Europe like Spain, Germany, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (CR) drawing more and more travellers from across the world. This is also an expanding practice in Asia region such as China that includes seawater, mud, and seaweed therapy (C.S.Heung & Kucukusta, 2013).

Attracting 10.6 million international visitors arriving in 2018, the CR, one of Europe's top tourist attractions for the past 30 years, equalled its own population. With Spain, Italy, and France at the top of the list of EU tourist attractions, the nation comes in at number 10. The most significant forms of tourism in the CR are leisure travel, particularly active vacations (such as cycling and winter sports) and sightseeing travel. Tourism related to spas

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and conventions has always been significant (Muhi & Durkovic, 2020). The Association of Spa Resorts of the Czech Republic (SLL), which uses natural resources, has 36 spa resorts under its umbrella at the moment. These resorts are categorised into thermal, mud, radon, climatic, and mineral baths. Guests have a variety of options, including the style of bath, as well as the length of stay, lodging or dining arrangements, and wellness and relaxation therapies. Additionally, visitors can partake in a variety of cultural pursuits or go on excursions around the spa.

The spa towns provide visitors a chance to enjoy comfort together with age-old medicinal techniques in addition to their unmistakable architectural appeal. Fitness, preventive healthcare, and so-called wellness spa stays are currently rising in popularity. Wellness spas in CR are one of the main forms of active tourism in the country because of the customs and reputation of Czech spa resorts as a wellness destination. CR also has a sizeable market segment from the upper middle class, who are willing to spend for wellness tourism compared to foreigners. As shown in Table 1, 60% of overnight stays in wellness spas in CR are local travellers.

Table 1 Spa Resorts in the Czech Republic – Bed Capacity and Attendance 2015

Number of beds	Number of guests	of Number of overnight stays	of % overnight stays of foreigners	Average overnight stays
51,960	1,309	8,104	40	6.2

Source: (Vystoupil, Sauer, & Bobkova, Spa, Spa Tourism and Wellness Tourism in the Czech Republic, 2017)

A "benefits of wellness tourism scale" (BWTS) was mentioned in (K.Dillette, C.Douglas, & Andrzejewski, 2020) (J.Backman, Huang, Lee, Chen, & Che, 2023), pointing to six different roles of wellness, including transcendence, physical health and appearance, escape and relaxation, novelty, essential people, and re-establishing confidence and indulgence. However, there is a lack of published papers that has recently examined the traits of local tourist visiting wellness destination in the CR. Hence, this paper aims to investigate the traits and behaviour of Czech tourists in selecting wellness vacation destinations in the CR.

2 Literature Review

Wellness tourism has grown significantly over time in the tourism business (Yeung & Johnston, 2016), and it keeps expanding yearly despite the current weak global economy (Kazakov & Oyner, 2020) (Pyke, Hartwell, Blake, & Hemingway, 2016). The global wellness tourism market reached a value of US\$822.44 billion in 2021 and growing at a rate of 6.5% annually from 2015-2017, which is more than double the 3.2% annual growth rate of all tourism (Institute G. W., 2018) (Newswire, 2022). According to a recent analysis by Vision Research Reports, it is anticipated to be worth almost US\$ 1.10 trillion by 2028 while analysis done by Globe Newswire indicate US\$1250 billion by 2027 with CAGR of 7.23% during 2021-2027 (Wellness Tourism Market - Global Industry Analysis, Size, Share, Growth, Trends, Regional Outlook, and Forecast 2022-2030, 2021) (Newswire, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to assess consumer behaviour and traveller preferences when they are choosing a wellness location in order to utilise and maximise the potential of wellness tourism. A new approach to the multifaceted concept of wellness and health has been developed as a result of the birth of wellness intertwined with tourism (Medina-Munoz & Medina-Munoz, 2013). The conceptual paradigm has been evaluated and changed from a traditional view of health to a holistic wellness orientation (Kazakov & Oyner, 2020) (K.Dillette, C.Douglas, & Andrzejewski, 2020). A number of researchers concur that tourist experiences and transformations must incorporate both hedonistic factors, such as fleeting pleasure, and eudemonic features, like self-realisation, personal expression, growth, and goals (Filep & Deery, 2010) (Lee & Jeong, 2020). As a result, wellness tourism should work to satisfy the constantly shifting needs of visitors who seek out hedonistic and eudemonic experiences as well as transformative goods and services (Mackenzie & Raymond, 2020).

Previous research has attempted to categorise wellness tourists into the supply and demand sides in an effort to better conceptualise and plan the growth of wellness tourism (Hekmat, et al., 2022). According to the demand side by Kim (2016) and Lim (2015), travellers need holistic wellness itineraries that encompass a variety of wellness activities and services (Lim, Kim, & J.Lee, 2015) (Kim, Chiang, & Tang, 2016). Studies by Voigt and Pforr (2017) classify travellers into different groups based on a variety of factors, including the characteristics of the destination, Thal (2017) the tourism industry, or the push and pull factors that influence travel decisions (Thal & Hudson, 2017) (Voigt & Pforr, 2017) (Damijanic, 2020). Other studies examined the factors that influence

travellers' initial destination decisions and their reasons for returning to the same place is local flora and fauna as well as prominent local attractions (Lim, Kim, & J.Lee, 2015). Besides that, destinations now have a new chance to create cutting-edge wellness products thanks to the recent rise in demand for wellness experiences. According to the Institute of Global Wellness, wellness tourism can happen in any location, across a range of industries, and at any time of the year (Institute G. W., International Wellness Tourism Growing Much Faster than Domestic, 2015). However, Turner (2019), contends that in accordance with the Wellness Tourism Association (WTA), the ability to use the title "wellness destination" should be accompanied by particular obligations (Turner, 2019). As a result, she has developed the list of requirements that each wellness destination must adhere to: a perceivably and realistically safe environment, a clean and sanitary infrastructure for travellers and locals, a high standard of living for locals who gain from tourism. Natural resources such as hot springs, mountains, lakes, and forests, a choice of hotels and independent restaurants serving healthy food (Bodeker & Cohen, 2010) and collaborating with regional growers (Wellness Tourism Market - Global Industry Analysis, Size, Share, Growth, Trends, Regional Outlook, and Forecast 2022-2030, 2021); the availability of a variety of activities and excursions (yoga, hiking, cycling, fitness classes, etc.); and a tranquil setting free from the clamour of modern life. Although there is some overlap between these criteria and Morrison (2014) 10 A's system, it is still feasible to discern the additional demands that wellness tourism places on the site (Morrison, 2014).

The need to stimulate and increase the value of tourist locations has been caused by tourism development, which places an emphasis on creative tourism activities to set these destinations apart from others (Gato, Dias, Pereira, Costa, & Goncalves, 2022). The comparative and competitive benefits of wellness tourism locations are mentioned by (Voigt & Pforr, 2014). The resources that a destination offers (such as scenery, nature, protected areas, cultural heritage, and infrastructure) are referred to as comparative advantages, whereas competitive (i.e., competitive) advantages refer to the capacity to use resources to produce goods that outperform those of rivals and the capacity to satisfy consumer expectations. Consequently, if a location with a comparative advantage is unable to secure a competitive edge, it may cease to be so. A site with access to mineralised waters but no wellness items have a hidden comparative advantage but no competitive advantage in the area of wellness. By purchasing resources and adding value to them, a destination can get a competitive advantage even when it may not have a comparative advantage based on organic resources (Voigt & Pforr, 2014). High-quality and varied lodging options and wellness services, for instance, might serve as a competitive advantage in wellness tourism.

One of competitive advantage can be found in wellness hotels and services although it does not specifically draw tourists, but does offer support services, a vital component of tourism (Dutt). The most common classification used for lodging facilities is between group and individual (Vystoupil, Sauer, & Novotna, 2017). However, lodging facilities can also be divided into year-round and seasonal, hotel-type and other, commercial and non-commercial, and other categories. The significance of lodging and other physical components of the tourism infrastructure is mentioned by Hudson (Focus, 2018). Customers frequently use the actual surroundings of a lodging establishment, like a hotel, as a concrete indicator of the quality of a service before making a purchase. Hudson uses the Swedish Icehotel as an illustration, which is composed of ice and snow and provides guests with an unforgettable experience. This implies that even accommodations might be an attraction in and of themselves, which slightly refutes Dutt's assertion. This is an intriguing discovery for wellness tourism as well, which in the Czech Republic is mostly focused on hotels as a form of lodging. Researchers Randhawa, Miran & Ronald (2017) found that managers saw an increase in engagement after renovating various hotel properties and assets, including the golf courses, kitchens, and dining rooms. Two managers gave an overview of some of their actions which result in revenue and utilisation peaked such as renovating their pool cabana complex, bar service and providing better food and bar service, they renovated the pool cabana complex. Not only that, four outdoor dining verandas that can accommodate 200 people at once were built as part of the refurbishment and were frequently packed on summer evenings (Randhawa, Kim, & F.Cichy, 2017). By giving customers a higher perceived value in the improved facilities, renovation helped the hotel draw in new customers and encourage its existing ones to use the facilities more frequently. The wellness hotel successfully has raised consumer expectation. Thus, most travellers may be disappointed by the lack of these services (Yfantidou, Spyridopoulou, Chatzigeorgiou, & Malliou, 2019). The advantages of hotel wellness amenities can be considered as a value-added component that helps hotels generate cash.

The wellness and spa industries have been significantly impacted by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which has had an unprecedented effect on the tourism sector. Both negative (government regulations, business closures, etc.) as well as positive (people realising the value of their health) effects have been seen in the wellness setting. They started paying more attention to their health and wellbeing, which, together with their desire to travel, directly benefits wellness tourism (Choudhary & Qadir, 2021). The pandemic, according to Global Wellness Institute (2022), has caused "digital wellness" to reach a turning point, and wellness activities that bring people together in

real life are currently popular (Institute G. W., Digital Wellness Initiative 2022 Trends, 2022). There will be an increase in the number of 26 social wellness clubs, where social interaction and wellness activities will take centre stage. Another trend is the growing significance of "baby boomers" for wellness tourism, as this kind of service is advantageous for their health, wellbeing, and social perspective. The emphasis on holistic self-care has increased in recent years, particularly as individuals get older. In an effort to satisfy their need to feel young, many older travellers are exploring alternate forms of health treatment, such as going to wellness centres. The "baby boomer" demographic has distinct needs, which are essentially balance and spiritual relaxation (Patterson & Balderas, 2022). This trend should be mirrored in product offers.

3 Research Methodology

This study gathered primary information to learn about the characteristics and travel habits of Czech tourists in the CR when choosing wellness destinations. Participants in the online survey are chosen based on their familiarity with wellness vacations. The questionnaire was originally designed in Czech by a certified native Czech researcher and then translated into English by native speaker. The questionnaire comprises of sections on general demographics of the respondents, including gender, age, education, income range, region, frequency of wellness vacations, as well as personal preferences for wellness destinations.

Questionnaires were distributed among tourist who visit wellness destinations in CR. Only questionnaires from respondents who take wellness vacations at least once a year will be considered valid, and of the 216 respondents, 34 are disregarded for this reason. Data were collected by a CAWI method, using the service of the system Survio. The respondents were attracted in thematical groups and mainly at the web portal spa.cz where the link to the questionnaire was distributed as a newsletter.

4 Result

Table 2 shows the respondents' age distribution. The age group of 61-70 has a higher percentage (23.6%), followed by the age group 51-60 and 71 or more are represented by 23.1%. **Table 3** displays the gender of respondents and the frequency of wellness stays in the Czech Republic. It demonstrates that women (61.5%) are more committed to wellness than men (38.5%).

Table 1 Respondents' age category

Age	entage (%)
0 – 20	1.1
21 – 30	3.3
31 – 40	8.8
41 – 50	17.0
51 – 60	23.1
61 – 70	23.6
71 or more	23.1

Table 2 Frequency of Wellness according to Gender

Gender	N	Percentage (%)
Man	70	38.5
Woman	112	61.5

The respondents' monthly earnings are shown in **Table 4**. The majority of respondents (39.6%) reported having a monthly income between 20 001 – 40 000 CZK, followed by 40 001 – 60 000 CZK (28%).

Table 3 Respondents' Monthly Income

Income (CZK)	N	Percentage (%)
0 – 20 000	13	7.1
20 001 – 40 000	72	39.6
40 001 – 60 000	51	28.0
60 001 – 80 000	26	14.3
80 001 – 100 000	10	5.5
100 000 and more	10	5.5

According to the result in **Table 5**, the majority of men and women travel primarily to refresh and reenergise themselves before moving on to discover new places. However, there is no statistical difference between male and female with their intention to visit a wellness destination. Both genders are found to have similar motivations when visiting a wellness location. Not only that, both genders are seemed to have the least interest in discovering new activity and techniques, improving lifestyle and physical appearance which require each wellness vacation to minimise this attraction. Eventually, these findings show our misinterpretation on traveller's intention thus more improvement can be made in the future.

Table 4 Gender and Intention to Travel

Intention to Travel	Man		Woman	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Recharge & energise	57	13	95	17
To Know New Place	28	42	56	56
To Discover New Activity & Techniques	2	68	7	105
To Improve Lifestyle	6	64	10	102
To Get Rid of Stress	20	50	39	73
To Meet New People	3	67	6	106
To Improve Health	26	44	44	68
To Improve Physical Appearance	2	68	1	111

Table 6 shows that most of participants in each region of Czech Republic are willing to travel more than 201km to a wellness destination (38.5%) followed people who are willing to travel up to 200km (26.3%).

Table 5 Participant Region x Willingness to Travel

Willingness to Travel					
Participant Region	Up to 50km	Up to 100km	Up to 150km	Up to 200km	201km and more
Central Bohemian	0	6	2	8	10
Usti	0	4	1	3	8
Pardubice	0	1	2	1	7
South Moravian	0	4	5	5	5
Highlands	0	0	0	6	3
Capital City of Prague	0	2	7	4	11
Kalovy Vary	1	0	1	0	1
Olomouc	0	2	2	3	4
Zlin	0	1	2	4	1
Moravian-Silesian	0	2	2	2	4
Liberec	0	0	1	2	6
Pilsen	0	2	2	2	1
South Bohemian	2	5	5	6	7
Hradec Kralove	0	0	0	2	2
Total	3	29	32	48	70

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Recent study shows there was an increase of over 300% in corporate employees stating their mental health has worsened because of burnout and workplace-related stress (UK, 2022). Poll by Retreat Away (2022), shows that 53% of workers found it more difficult to unplug and take time away from their work. Wellness vacations have been a much sought after vacation for people who wants to rest and rejuvenate. In this study, we examined the characteristics of travellers and what they look for in a wellbeing destination in CR.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that women between the ages of 51 and above are more likely than men between the ages of 51 and above to participate in wellness stays with the goal of rejuvenating or reenergising themselves. Therefore, aiming for wellness during a vacation that includes resting, relaxing, and having a pleasant place to sleep is a wise choice for wellness service providers. Besides finding relaxing at a spa as rejuvenating, some travellers might prefer a warm day by the pool or a hike amid breath taking sceneries. Hence, it will be beneficial to allow visitors access to solitary environments such as yoga and meditation in the wellness locations (Rosen, 2023).

The study also found that going on wellness retreats on a regular basis can lower instances of stress and sadness because they have a mood-lifting effect and improve both mental and physical health. In addition, Health and Fitness Travel (2023) noted that a change in routine that improves one's health can have a lasting positive effect on one's wellbeing, since good vacations give people the inspirations, they need to maintain their regime back home (Travel, 2023).

Based on the findings, we found more female respondents participated in this study. We would recommend for wellness stays to expand their strategy in attracting various age groups and gender categories of travellers, since male employment rate (81.6%) is higher than female employment rate (68.8%) in CR (Office, 2023). Additionally, destinations could target more Millennials for their destinations by modernising and providing personalised packages that will interest this age group. The employment rate of the Millennial age group of 30-49 years (88.4%) is higher than the age group of 50-64 years old (80.2%) (Office, 2023). Hence targeting Millennials, with innovative services such as attracting working Millennials from the big cities and giving them spa packages to get-away from the busy city, digital detox at spa and etc. would be favourable for working Millennials (Beauty, n.d.).

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