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# spa | Turkey's medicinal thermal spas

by Camille Hoheb

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**F**or centuries, thermal spas have been used as an integral part of general health and well-being therapies. Many cultures have recognized the benefits of thermal waters to the spirit, mind and body. Each year eight million visits to thermal spas are made in more than 60 countries. Spa Finder identified thermal and hydro experiences as one of the top industry trends of 2008.

The healing waters of thermal spas are used to treat a number of health issues, including dermatological ailments and metabolic diseases such as obesity, as well as degenerative inflammatory and soft tissue conditions.

## Healing spa therapy

While most Americans are familiar with thermal spas for pampering and relaxation, Europeans have long acknowledged the healing properties and clinical application of thermal treatments in treating medical conditions. For example, the former Czech Republic had 53 mineral health spas in which 220,000 citizens were granted spa therapy for three weeks by the national health insurance program. In Europe, spa therapy has historically been subsidized by the government, but more recently there has been an increase in out-of-pocket expenses as the system has moved to an “evidence based” approval system.

Thermal spa tourism is an industry that is a crossover between spa and medical tourism (see “The Link Between Spa and Medical Tourism,” p. 130). Both industries represent incredible growth and profitability. Accord-

ing to the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions, medical tourism represents a \$60 billion dollar industry while the Global Health Summit reports that the spa industry is estimated to be worth \$250 billion worldwide.

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Turkey is a country that is uniquely positioned to reap the benefits of the interest and demand of thermal tourism. With the enormous advantage of 1,300 thermal springs, Turkey ranks 7th in the world in natural thermal resources. It boasts 190 thermal resorts in more than 46 cities and enjoys a longstanding tradition and culture of thermal spas dating back to the Roman Empire.

## Research backed treatment

Thermal spas play a major role in the socio-economic status of Turkey. Within the last 10 years the use of spas for wellness, treatment and rehabilitation has increased, largely due to studies that support it. Turkey and Hungary have been at the forefront of research in which clinical studies of thermal spas have been published in international peer-reviewed journals. Istanbul University offers higher degrees in Medical Ecology and Hydro Climatology for physicians, physiotherapists, biologists and other science professionals. The department



interior of modern hammam

at Istanbul University was established in 1938 to research thermal mineral water springs and balneology—the study of the therapeutic uses of various types of bathing.

With its academic focus and abundance of natural resources, Turkey recognizes that thermal spa tourism is a critical component to expanding its tourism offerings. As spas are returning to their historical origin as places of healing and socializing, consumer expectations have increased. The desire for natural and organic products and services has influenced the greening of spas. Consumers are seeking authentic healing traditions worldwide, which thermal spas can provide. ■

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