

# SOME THEORETICAL BASIS AND EXPERIENCE FOR DEVELOPING WELLNESS TOURISM

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**Abstract:** *Wellness tourism is the combination of two large and growing industries worth millions and billions of dollars: tourism and Wellness. Differences in the definition of wellness tourism in different countries have created specific differences in the segmentation of wellness tourists in different countries. Wellness tourism is often confused with medical tourism - not only by consumers but also in destination marketing. Using the desk study methodology, the paper aims to clarify some theoretical and practical bases for developing wellness tourism, thereby drawing some lessons for Vietnam in developing this kind of tourism.*

**Keywords:** *tourism, Wellness, development, wellness tourism, theoretical basis, practice.*

## I. Introduction

Today, most countries in the world identify tourism as one of the important economic sectors, contributing significantly and effectively to the economic, political, social, and cultural development of the country. According to Statista, in the years before the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism contributed 10.3 - 10.4% of global GDP.

Wellness tourism has become a new and fast-growing trend in the global tourism market. Thus, it brings new changes to the customer base, services, and product offerings. (Stara Jana, Peterson Christina, 2017). Wellness tourism is identified as an emerging trend in the Tourism industry and mainly develops awareness among people about maintaining a healthy lifestyle (UJ Mirando, P.U.I Dabare,

B.T.K Chaturanga, 2022).

However, wellness tourism is a complex type of tourism. Differences in the definition of wellness tourism in different countries have created certain differences in the segmentation of wellness tourists in different countries (Meikassandra et al., 2020).

Vietnam has many advantages to developing wellness tourism with a diverse terrain system, including mountains and plains, especially with a favorable strategic location on the sea and islands. Many hot mineral springs and hot mud stretch across the country, and many areas have cool, temperate climates and rich medicinal plants. However, the potential of wellness tourism has yet to be well exploited for development (Thai Ngan, 2021). In Vietnam, there is not much access to

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wellness tourism. Researchers' research on domestic wellness tourism is still exploratory and has yet to be implemented.

In order to further develop wellness tourism in Vietnam, a better understanding of the theoretical and practical basis for this issue is necessary, helping to identify some basic contents related to wellness tourism, as well as some lessons learned for developing it in Vietnam.

## II. Theoretical basis

### 2.1. Wellness tourism

Wellness is increasingly recognized as an important aspect of tourism (Voight & Pforr, 2017). Smith & Puczko (2009) explain that wellness tourism is the journey to find health and harmony of body, mind, and spirit. However, wellness tourism is a complex type of tourism. Differences in the

definitions of wellness tourism in different countries have created certain differences in the segmentation of wellness tourists (Meikassandra et al., 2020). Therefore, Smith & Kelly (2006) also believe that the definition of wellness tourism must be associated with the types of wellness products, wellness activities, and aspects of each destination.

Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness tourism as a type of tourism in which tourists seek services to improve health and well-being. This may include activities such as therapy, spa, yoga, medical treatment, or participation in health and beauty programs.

To differentiate between wellness tourism and medical tourism, GWI suggests looking at a person's health chart on a continuous line:



Figure 1: Comparison between Medical Tourism and Healthcare Tourism

Source: Global Wellness Institute

### 2.2. Wellness tourism development

Wellness tourism development is a concept that combines two main components: "development" and "wellness tourism." Development can be understood as improving and enhancing a certain field's quality, quantity, or importance. Development can include enhancing facilities, improving services, expanding markets, enhancing human capacity, or

changing policies to meet the increasingly diverse needs of society. GWI defines wellness tourism as a type of tourism in which tourists seek services related to improving health and well-being. This may include activities such as therapy, spa, yoga, medical treatment, or participation in health and beauty programs.

Accordingly, wellness tourism development is the process of enhancing

and expanding wellness tourism services to meet the needs of tourists and improve their Wellness. This includes Improving the quality and diversification of wellness services, increasing investment in medical infrastructure and tourism services, training and capacity building for experts in the wellness field, and building effective promotion and marketing programs to attract tourists.

### III. Methodology

A desk study methodology was used to write this paper. It includes already published materials in reports, articles, or similar documents. Accordingly, relevant data about wellness tourism is collected from scientific research, scientific articles, proceedings, reports, etc., from reliable sources such as the Vietnam National Tourism Administration, the Institute of Tourism Development Research, the National Library, the Hanoi Open University Library, etc. These data are then screened, classified, sorted, and structured to serve the paper.

### IV. Research results and discussion

#### 4.1. Results

##### 4.1.1. Wellness tourism destinations

Wellness tourism destinations are a concept that has been around for a long time and is gradually becoming a popular trend worldwide. After the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, wellness tourism destinations are increasingly focused on and prioritized. Many concepts of wellness tourism destinations have been proposed, the most prominent of which are the following:

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) proposed a similar concept describing wellness tourism destinations as “tourist destinations where tourists seek to improve their health and mental well-being through participation in health and wellness activities and experiences, including spas, fitness, yoga, physical and mental care.”

Hjalager & Richards (2002) also defined wellness tourism destinations in a way that is somewhat similar to the above

definitions: “Wellness tourism destination are tourist destinations where visitors can engage in activities related to health and well-being, such as exercising, practicing yoga and meditation, and relaxing in a peaceful environment to improve their health and well-being.”

In their study on wellness tourism, Smith and Puczko (2014) define a wellness tourism destination as “a geographic area or tourist destination defined by health and wellness experiences and services such as spas, fitness centers, healthy foods, and fitness activities.”

Cohen et al. (2014) offer a more specific definition: “A destination designed to create an environment that promotes health and well-being for visitors, often located in a natural environment and featuring amenities such as spa and fitness centers, healthy dining options, and spiritual and stress-reducing activities.” In the Vietnam Wellness Tourism Development Workshop, the Institute for Tourism Development defined a wellness tourism destination as “a tourist destination that provides two main types of services: medical/health care services, products, and infrastructure; and tourism services (guides, accommodation, transportation and entertainment.”

Praprom, C. and Laipaporn, J. (2023) study on potential health tourism destinations in Southern Thailand also introduced the concept of a health tourism destination: “The destination needs to have health tourism services including various tourism activities, such as visiting cultural and natural sites, learning about local customs and health care services at hotels or accommodation such as massage and therapy, spa.”

##### 4.1.2. Wellness tourists

According to C. Michael Hall (2002), wellness tourists travel to different countries to receive medical services, including treatment, surgery, and rehabilitation.

Wellness tourists are more affluent, educated, and experienced. They are pioneers and adopters willing to try new or unusual experiences. Wellness tourists tend to be motivated by purposeful

fulfillment, personal growth, giving back, and helping others (Global Wellness Tourism Economy Report, 2018)

Based on their health-related consumption behavior, wellness tourists are divided into two levels: Peripheral wellness consumers and intermediate and core wellness consumers. Peripheral wellness consumers take a reactive approach to Wellness, focusing on specific health issues rather than drawing connections among different aspects of healthy living. Meanwhile, intermediate and core Wellness consumers take a proactive approach, focusing on comprehensive health prevention. However, the “average wellness consumer” engages in Wellness more moderately (Global Wellness Travel Economy Report, 2013)

Based on their travel purpose, wellness travelers are divided into two main categories, namely: Primary Wellness Travelers and Secondary Wellness Travelers. Primary Wellness Travelers are travelers who consider Wellness to be a driving factor in their trip and destination choice. Secondary Wellness Travelers are travelers who seek wellness experiences as part of their trip. To devote time and resources to a trip that is purely for the primary purpose of Wellness, one must have a high level of interest and commitment to personal health and well-being and also have the means to devote to it (as these trips tend to be expensive). These types of tourists typically fall into the “core wellness consumers.” In contrast, “secondary” wellness tourists represent a large population and a variety of trip types and tend to be “mid-level and peripheral wellness consumers” (Global Wellness Tourism Economics Report, 2013).

#### *4.1.3. Factors affecting the development of wellness tourism*

According to WTO (2007), the attractiveness of a tourist destination is composed of 6 factors:

##### - Tourist attractions

Tourist attractions are the main factors that attract tourists’ attention to a destination. This is also the motivation

that makes tourists decide to choose a destination for their journey. Tourist attractions can be classified into:

+ Natural tourist attractions: Beaches, high mountains, national parks, etc.

+ Cultural and historical tourist attractions: Museums, theaters, art exhibitions, cultural events, traditional craft villages or ethnic villages, etc.

+ Attractions with built works: Architectural works such as the Eiffel Tower, heritage monuments, religious architectural works, etc.

For wellness tourism, these attractions can be in public areas such as national parks or nature parks, or they can be within a community with specific cultural characteristics and unique Indigenous traditions, where there are remedies and healing methods, bringing benefits to the body and mind to visitors. In addition, some other, less tangible, elements are unique, creating emotions or experiences for visitors, such as participating in, experiencing daily life with the local community or learning about cultural values of Indigenous communities at tourist destinations, etc., are also factors that attract tourists to wellness tourism destinations.

##### - Amenities

Amenities are created from a variety of services and facilities that support visitors during their stay at the destination – from basic infrastructure, such as useful utilities, public transportation, and roads, to services that meet guests’ needs, such as accommodation, dining, and entertainment services; tourist information, guiding and operating services; shopping service, etc.

##### - Accessibility

To promote tourism development, destinations need to be easily accessible through road, air, and water transport systems. Convenience must be ensured for tourists’ travel within the destination. Visa requirements, entry conditions, etc., are also issues that need to be considered as part of expanding the accessibility of the destination to tourists.

- Destination images

The unique image of a destination plays an important role in attracting tourists. A wide range of tourist attractions and amenities will only be effective in attracting tourists if they are aware of the destination. Therefore, building a positive, unique image of the destination is one of the critical factors that helps the destination come closer to potential tourists. Destination image can be promoted thanks to unique features of the landscape, attractions, environmental quality, safety, service quality, and people's hospitality, etc.

- Prices of tourism products

The price of tourism products and services at a destination is one of the important competitive factors of the destination compared to other competing destinations. Prices are related to shipping, accommodation, food, and sightseeing costs, etc. Tourists' decisions to choose a destination are also based on price factors or other economic factors such as foreign exchange rates.

- Human resources for tourism

Training human resources to serve tourism systematically and enhancing the positive attitudes of local communities at tourist destinations is one of the critical factors in tourism destination management activities. A high-quality tourism workforce and a citizenry that is equipped and properly aware of their rights and responsibilities regarding tourism development are inseparable factors in the country's tourism development strategy.

- Communications

In addition to the above factors, many studies have confirmed the role of media in developing a specific type of tourism, including wellness tourism. Media helps raise public awareness about the existence and benefits of this type of tourism. This is especially important for new or lesser-known types of tourism, such as wellness tourism. Through advertising and PR campaigns, the media

can help build and reinforce a positive image of a tourist destination. Beautiful, safe, and attractive images will attract more visitors. Communication also creates trust and a good reputation for customers. Communication helps manage the image and reputation of a tourist destination, handle communication crises, and build long-term trust with tourists. Reviews from previous travelers on travel websites and social media can create trust and credibility for a travel destination. Positive feedback from customers is an important factor in attracting new visitors. It can be said that media is a powerful and indispensable tool in developing any type of tourism. Effective coordination between communication strategies and tourism activities will help raise awareness, attract tourists, and create sustainable development for the tourism industry.

*4.1.4. International experience in developing wellness tourism*

a) Japan

According to the Japan National Tourism Organization, Japan also has the potential for a rich and diverse source of hot mineral springs, with more than 26,000 hot mineral springs and more than 3,000 resorts with mineral hot springs. In Japan, it is a long-standing tradition for people to go to a place to bathe in hot mineral water. Hot mineral water spas and resorts in Japan have, therefore, been developing for a long time to target the domestic tourist market. There are many types of hot spring spas (onsen); some have traditional accommodations called ryokan, and others are just public hot springs (called sento).

Some ryokan also offer massage and spa services and traditional hot mineral baths, such as the Seiryoso Hotel in Shimoda. Experiencing a ryokan, visitors not only come to bathe in hot mineral water but also experience traditional elements of Japanese beliefs, expressed in different aspects. Each mineral spring has its own story, the resonance of the ground and water, creating a special natural landscape.



Grasping the development trend of wellness tourism, Japan has used onsen and ryokan systems as an outstanding wellness tourism product to introduce to international tourists. Famous hot mineral water areas are widely advertised on tourism websites of the Japan Tourism Board, Japan Ryokan Association, etc., in international languages. In addition, traditional rules for bathing onsen, choosing the type of onsen, etc., are also fully and clearly recommended by service providers in advance and guided by international tourists. Some of Japan's strict traditional regulations that are not suitable for international tourists have also been considered to be changed to be more flexible, for example, recently, the Japanese Government encouraged ryokan to allow tourists to Travelers with large tattoos can bathe in public onsen (in Japan, people with large tattoos are considered gangsters, so hotels restrict admission to avoid affecting other tourists). In addition, to ensure the quality of hot spring facilities, the Japanese Environmental Committee has regulations that these facilities must submit water samples for testing once a year and notify the public of these results.

#### b) Thailand

Thailand is a Southeast Asian country with many similarities in culture, landscape, beauty of clothes and people, weather, climate, and resources to Vietnam. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (announced in the 2021 Tourism Revenue Report), the country earned 11.9 billion Baht from health tourism in 2021, an increase of 47% compared to 2020. Five of Thailand's most prominent medical tourist markets are Kuwait, Cambodia, Myanmar, Japan, and China. It is expected that in 2023, Thailand's medical tourism could bring in revenue of 25 billion baht (more than 700 million USD).

This success comes from Thailand's clear national tourism development plan. In the period 2023-2027, Thailand aims to be in the "Top 5" world-leading destinations for wellness tourism according to the

ranking of the Global Health Institute, with an average growth rate of 8 points in this field alone. From this goal, relevant agencies are actively implementing many solutions at the same time to make this goal soon become a reality.

The Thai Ministry of Health has implemented the "Health to Wealth" policy by improving medical care and treatment services to strengthen the Thai economy. Regarding this field, traditional medicine and medicinal herbs are given priority to create prosperity for the country. At the same time, Thailand has strongly developed its wellness infrastructure, increasingly attracted the participation of private hospitals and spa facilities, and built the image of herbal cities to introduce tourist destinations' health calendars.

In addition, Thailand promotes the development of healthcare industry models using green medicine and creative economics to enhance healthcare programs and medical tourism. The Medical Centers Committee has approved guidelines to develop the "Andaman Wellness Corridor" (AWC) on the model of the advanced healthcare industry in the world. AWC aims to enhance competitiveness in wellness tourism in four provinces along the Andaman Sea, including Phuket, Krabi, Phang Nga, and Ranong, to recover economically and tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic in these localities. At the same time, Thailand also focuses on in-depth training in the medical field, aiming to train more doctors who can meet higher requirements.

#### **4.2. Discussion**

From the reality of developing wellness tourism in Vietnam and analyzing the successes of Japan and Thailand in increasing revenue from the wellness tourism market, the study draws a number of lessons that contribute to promoting the development of wellness tourism in Vietnam in the coming time, specifically as follows:

First, Vietnam has advantages in its hot mineral water resources and natural landscapes. Therefore, we need to promote

and advertise programs for domestic people to exploit these potentials, gradually forming the habit of relaxing and going to hot springs for Vietnamese people.

Second, the tourism industry needs to have specific orientations and policies in developing wellness tourism, as well as service and product orientation, so that tourism businesses can quickly build and connect tours and put into operation the type of wellness tourism. Travel companies add meditation/yoga tourism products and spa treatments to relieve stress in places where nature is pristine, quiet, and with fresh air, along with resort tour discovery, which is all too familiar. These tours all have private coaches to guide visitors.

There needs to be coordination between the tourism industry and the health sector to develop solutions to expand this type of tourism. The two sectors need to collaborate to develop a set of criteria to standardize services and medical examination and treatment processes at tourism facilities; have policies to encourage localities and businesses to invest and build high-quality wellness tourism areas; Strengthen propaganda and promote wellness tourism both domestically and internationally.

Third, professional and foreign language training should be increased for teams of doctors, nurses, and medical staff to meet the requirements of serving tourists needing health care.

Fourth, the state and related industries, first of all, the tourism industry, need to strengthen propaganda and promote wellness tourism in the domestic and world markets to attract international visitors.

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the world wellness tourist market is forecast to grow rapidly and strongly in the near future after the global tourism industry recovers from the pandemic. The supply and demand of this market have many different characteristics compared to regular tourism, so meeting the needs of wellness tourists also poses

many challenges for destinations. However, in the new context where the whole world puts health issues first, the first trips after the pandemic will have the priority goal of taking care of and improving both physical and mental health. Therefore, wellness tourism is a development trend in a new context and is suitable for the advantages and potential of Vietnamese tourism to create a highly competitive tourism product, contributing part of recovering and taking off Vietnam's tourism industry.

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## MỘT SỐ CƠ SỞ LÝ LUẬN VÀ BÀI HỌC KINH NGHIỆM VỀ PHÁT TRIỂN DU LỊCH CHĂM SÓC SỨC KHỎE

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**Abstract:** Du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe là sự kết hợp của hai ngành công nghiệp lớn và đang phát triển với trị giá hàng triệu tỷ đô la, đó là: du lịch và sức khỏe. Những khác biệt trong định nghĩa du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe ở các quốc gia khác nhau đã tạo ra những khác biệt nhất định trong phân khúc khách du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe ở những quốc gia khác nhau. Du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe thường bị nhầm lẫn với du lịch y tế (medical tourism) - không chỉ bởi người tiêu dùng mà còn trong tiếp thị điểm đến. Bằng phương pháp nghiên cứu tại bàn, bài viết hướng đến mục đích làm rõ một số cơ sở lý luận và thực tiễn về phát triển du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe, từ đó rút ra một số bài học kinh nghiệm cho Việt Nam trong phát triển du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe.

**Từ khóa:** du lịch, sức khỏe, phát triển, du lịch chăm sóc sức khỏe, cơ sở lý luận, thực tiễn.

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