

*Original scientific paper*

## **SATISFACTION OF VISITORS WITH THE WELLNESS TOURIST SERVICES OF REPUBLIC OF CROATIA**

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### **Abstract**

In order for destinations to be able to respond to the challenges imposed by the tourist market, they must observe visitor's attitudes and adapt their offer accordingly. In search of ways of how to improve their health and quality of life, travelers choose to travel motivated by wellness services. To be able to satisfy their needs, wellness service providers need to measure how satisfied they are with the wellness tourist offer and make necessary modifications. The purpose of this paper is to determine the level of satisfaction of tourists with the wellness tourism offer in the Republic of Croatia, and based on the findings propose improvements. Findings indicate that visitors are relatively satisfied with wellness tourist offer. Lower level of satisfaction was determined with innovativeness of wellness offer, offer of educations focused on visitors learning healthy ways of preparing food and drinks, offer of alternative therapies, adaptation of wellness offer to people with special needs, and ability for visitors to practice meditation and yoga. Based on the findings authors emphasize the potential of further improvement of previously mentioned elements of offer, which would contribute in Croatia achieving greater success on international tourist market and improving visitor's quality of life.

Keywords: wellness tourism, wellness services, satisfaction, Republic of Croatia

*JEL classification:* L83, Z32

### **INTRODUCTION**

To remain competitive in the tourism market, destinations must continuously adapt to new trends. This includes enhancing their existing offerings, introducing innovative elements, and maintaining authenticity. Authenticity, diversification, and quality are key prerequisites for achieving a competitive advantage. In recent years, changing tourist preferences have led to growing interest in health-focused tourism services, resulting in the development of health tourism and wellness tourism as its segment. Tourists increasingly recognize the importance of adopting healthy practices to maintain health, enhance their quality of life, and extend life expectancy. This shift is also reflected in their travel habits—they now actively seek high-quality wellness services and are willing to invest significantly in such experiences. Wellness tourism is appealing because it supports holistic health, balancing physical, mental, ecological, spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. The growing number of wellness centers, spas, and holistic resorts in Croatia reflects both tourist demand and provider interest in wellness development. Smith and Kelly (2006) note that wellness tourism has prompted significant behavioral shifts among travelers. Destinations now view

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wellness tourism as a strategy for achieving ecological, social, and economic sustainability—especially relevant in the post-pandemic context. Consequently, wellness service providers are encouraged to identify effective ways to meet tourist needs and shape the future development of wellness destinations (Lacković et al., 2011; Gračan et al., 2011; Alkier Radnić, 2003; Andrea et al., 2021; Smith & Kelly, 2006; Milojica, 2025). This can best be achieved by measuring tourist satisfaction with wellness services. The aim of this paper is to assess the level of tourist satisfaction with Croatia's wellness tourism offer and, based on the results, suggest concrete improvements. The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, a theoretical background is provided, followed by methodology, empirical findings, discussion, and conclusion.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout decades numerous research has been focused on satisfaction of tourists, in most cases with attributes of tourist destination that make the destination attractive and which contribute to the tourist's satisfaction (Kozak 2002; Bernini and Cagnone 2012; Medina-Munoz i Medina-Munoz 2014; Taplin 2012; Mikulić et al., 2024; Milojica, 2025). Medina-Munoz and Medina-Munoz (2014) emphasize in their research that "destinations base their attractiveness on natural and cultural-historical resources, accommodation capacities, traffic infrastructure, respectively the attributes that make a destination unique and recognizable on the tourist market, and which contribute to the positive experiences of tourists". Tourist destinations are focused on establishing tourist's loyalty due to the reduction of marketing costs (it is easier to stimulate them to revisit in relation to attracting new tourists), achieving continuous tourist turnover, and positive word of mouth (Milojica, 2025, 40). Tourists want stability and continuity during their stay in a destination in the sense that they enjoy it due to aesthetic reasons, emotional attachment, and affordability. This way they develop a positive image about the destination in their mind and choose to revisit it in the future (Lee et al. 2018). For destinations to be able to achieve success on the tourist market, wellness tourism destinations need to be competitive, which is possible to achieve through fulfilling or overcoming tourist's expectations. To be able to do that, attitudes of wellness tourists need to be observed, and based on the obtained information wellness service providers need to do their very best to answer their demands and fulfill their needs and expectations. This will enable them also to improve the current wellness tourist offer and manage tourist's satisfaction efficiently. "Satisfaction of wellness tourists measures to which point did provided wellness products and services satisfied tourist's expectations" (Prideaux et al., 2014; Lim et al., 2016; Alkier et al., 2021; Ferjančić Hodak et al., 2021; Milojica, 2025). In their research Liu et al. (2023) analyzed influence of wellness tourism experiences on tourist's wellbeing. Their findings indicate that escapist, aesthetic and entertainment experiences have a positive influence on tourist's eudaimonic and hedonistic wellbeing. As an intermediary variable tourist's satisfaction can increase a positive influence of experience of wellness tourism on tourist's sense of wellbeing. Xia et al. focused on determining the connection between quality of service, tourist's motivation, satisfaction, quality of life and spa and wellness tourism. They determined that tourist's motivation has a positive influence on their perception of service quality and satisfaction with wellness and spa services, and consequently their quality of life. Tourists who had a positive experience when using

good quality wellness and spa services will far more likely be satisfied with their tourism experience not only during their stay in a destination (Xia et al., 2024), they will experience these benefits long after returning home (Luo et al., 2017). Previously presented findings indicate quite clearly the relevance of measuring tourist's satisfaction with wellness services during their stay in a destination. These findings provide a valuable source of information not just for wellness service providers, but also for destination management. Based on the findings they will be able to improve high-quality wellness offer and design new and unforgettable experiences for wellness service users, improve their overall wellbeing and quality of life, ensure their loyalty and positive word of mouth in the future, prolong business through the entire year and improve the destination's competitiveness on the tourist market (Liao et al., 2023; Sthapit et al., 2025). Andrijašević and Bartoluci (2004) emphasize that Republic of Croatia has a long tradition of active development of health tourism, rich basis of natural resources, and significant potential for developing competitive wellness tourist offer. The final goal is to improve the quality and diversity of its tourist offer in general, achieving positive economic impacts, reducing seasonality of business through provision of wellness services throughout the entire year, and finally gaining competitive position on the tourist market as a destination of health (Milojica, 2025, 58 according to Ministry of Tourism of Republic of Croatia, 2013; Ivandić et al., 2014; Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Republic of Croatia, 2023a; Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Republic of Croatia, 2023b). This is in accordance with the still current National Program – Action plan of Health Tourism Development (Ivandić et al., 2014) which strongly emphasizes the potential and necessity of further wellness tourism development in the Republic of Croatia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper authors present selected results of an empirical research that was conducted for the purpose of writing a doctoral thesis. A structured questionnaire was used for data gathering, and the questions were formed based on previous research with minor changes in order for them to meet the needs of the research. First group contains nine questions focused on determining the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, which are in accordance with the research of Alkier et al. (2019). The second group of questions titled "Total satisfaction of wellness visitors" has thirty-six questions, of which thirty-five measure satisfaction of visitors with wellness services (wellness center). They were prepared based on the research of Marković et al. (2020), Marušić et al. (2019), and Ivanović and Milojica (2018). One question that was used as a single-latent variable in the research measured the satisfaction of visitors with the entire offer of wellness tourist destination, and was prepared according to Lim et al. (2016). A 5-point Likert scale was implemented (1-I am completely dissatisfied to 5-I am completely satisfied, and 1-I completely disagree to 5-I completely agree). In case of not using a particular service, the respondents were able to choose option 0. Respondents were visitors who stayed at least one night in a destination and used wellness services during their stay. Questionnaires were distributed physically, and online through e-mail and social networks. Data was collected in the period from June 1, 2023 to October 1, 2024. A total of 382 respondents (wellness visitors) participated in the research. After excluding the incompletely filled questionnaires the number reduced to 320. As part of the PLS-SEM analysis, 28 extreme values were identified,

which were excluded from the analysis. By removing them, along with the questionnaires with missing values for Visitor Satisfaction with Wellness Services, the total sample was reduced to 292 respondents. The research is based on data collected from 172 wellness visitors who used wellness services in coastal Croatia and 120 wellness visitors who used wellness services in continental Croatia. The sample included visitors to hotel wellness centers, spa wellness centers, and the wellness center at Thalassotherapia Opatija. Data was processed in SPSS, and methods of descriptive statistics were implemented.

### 3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part of the paper authors will present the selected results of the empirical research.

**Table 1.** Wellness service users by gender, age and region

	Adriatic Croatia		Continental Croatia		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	109,0	63,4	68	56,7	177	60,6
Male	63,0	36,6	52	33,3	115	39,4
Total	172	100,0	120	100,0	292	100,0
Age						
up to 25	9	5,2	7	5,8	16	5,5
26-35	52	30,2	38	31,7	90	30,8
36-45	46	26,7	27	22,5	73	25,0
46-55	39	22,7	25	20,8	64	21,9
56-65	21	12,2	19	15,8	40	13,7
66-75	4	2,9	4	3,3	8	2,8
76 and more	1	0,6	0	0,0	1	0,3
Total	172	100,0	120	100,0	292	100,00

Source: Milojica, 2025, 77

According to the data from table 1, most of the respondents were female (60,6% total, respectively 63,4% in Adriatic Croatia and 56,7% in Continental Croatia). According to the age, most of the respondents (30,8%) belong to the age group 26-35, followed by the ones being 36-45 (25,0%), and 46-55 years of age (21,9%). On the regional level, in Adriatic Croatia most of the respondents belong to the age group 26-35 (30,2%), 36-45 (26,7%) and 46-55 (22,7%). The same situation is in Continental Croatia, respectively 31,7% belong to the age group 26-35, followed by 36-45 (22,5%) and 46-55 (20,8%).

**Table 2.** Wellness visitors by education and type of wellness center

	In spas		In hotels		Thalassotherapia Opatija		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Elementary and high school	18	18,9	38	25,3	12	25,5	68
Junior College	11	11,6	14	9,3	0	0,0	25
University, Bachelor	18	18,9	14	9,3	3	6,4	35
University, Master	42	44,2	71	47,3	32	68,1	145
							49,7

University, Postgraduate	N	6	13	0	19
	%	6,3	8,7	0,0	6,5
Total	N	95	150	47	292
	%	32,5	51,4	16,1	100,0

Source: Milojica, 2025, 79

The data presenting the education structure indicates that 61,7% of the respondents are highly educated (49,7% with a university masters degree and 12,0% with a university bachelor's degree).

**Table 3.** Structure of wellness visitors by country and region in the Republic of Croatia

	Continental Croatia		Adriatic Croatia		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Croatia	54	45,0	59	34,3	113	38,7
Slovenia	19	15,8	38	22,1	57	19,5
Austria	4	3,3	11	6,4	15	5,1
Italy	5	4,2	5	2,9	10	3,4
Bosnia & Herzegovina	9	7,5	10	5,8	19	6,5
Serbia	11	9,2	20	11,6	31	10,6
Macedonia	1	0,8	3	1,7	4	1,4
Germany	11	9,2	22	12,8	33	11,3
Portugal	0	0,0	3	1,7	3	1
Czech Republic	2	1,7	0	0,0	2	0,7
Rest	4	3,3	1	0,6	5	1,7
Total	120	100	172	100	292	100

Source: Milojica, 2025, 80

According to the country of origin, most of the respondents were from Croatia (38,7%), followed by the ones from Slovenia (19,5%), Germany (11,3%) and Serbia (10,6%). According to the region, in Adriatic Croatia 34,3% of the respondents were from Croatia, followed by the ones from Slovenia (22,1%), Germany (12,8%) and Serbia (11,6%). In Continental Croatia most of the respondents were from Croatia (45,0%) and Slovenia (15,8%). According to the marriage status most of the respondents are married or in a partnership with children (45,5%), followed by the ones that are married or in partnership without children (29,8%), single (24,3%) and widowed (0,3%). 52,7% of them prefer to travel just with their partner, followed by family members (19,90%), friends and acquaintances (14,70%) and single (12,70%). According to the working status, 92,5% of the respondents are employed, 3,8% are retired, 3,4% are students, and 0,3% are unemployed. In terms of the monthly income, most of the respondents (22,9%) have 1.001-1.500€, followed by the ones with 2.001-2.500€ (21,2%), 1.501-2.000€ (19,5%), 501-1.000 (13,0%), 2.501-3.000€ (13,0%), up to 500 (4,1%), 3.001-3.500 (3,8%), and 3.501+ (2,1%). An insight into the structure of daily consumption of visitors on wellness services indicates that 38,7% of the respondents spends 51-80€, 32,9% spends 81-100€, 15,4% up to 50€, 9,6% spends 101 and more while 3,4% have no additional costs. (Milojica, 2025, 82-85).

**Table 4.** Results of descriptive analysis of the Overall satisfaction of wellness visitors

Visitor satisfaction with wellness services		
Indicator	AM	SD
Beauty treatments	4,575	0,784
Kindness of wellness staff towards wellness users	4,572	0,579
Massages	4,555	0,651
Wellness staff's knowledge of the wellness services they provide	4,546	0,582

Helpfulness of wellness staff	4,467	0,630
Responding to customer inquiries about wellness services	4,462	0,613
Professional provision of wellness services	4,458	0,617
Providing users with a sense of security and carefreeness when using wellness services	4,451	0,629
Professional behavior of wellness staff	4,450	0,617
Individual approach to wellness users	4,419	0,678
Sauna	4,380	0,709
Creating a relationship of trust with users when providing wellness services	4,375	0,652
Quality of information about the wellness center and its services	4,363	0,673
Therapist/doctor/professional services	4,331	0,814
Tidiness of wellness staff	4,327	0,660
Tidiness and cleanliness of the wellness center	4,286	0,710
Fitness and/or exercising	4,279	0,651
Careful consideration of the requirements and specific needs of wellness users	4,275	0,690
Speed of providing wellness services	4,274	0,658
Overall satisfaction with the wellness center's offerings	4,270	0,554
Quality of equipment for providing wellness services	4,235	0,672
Providing wellness services within the promised time	4,231	0,742
Attractive appearance of the wellness area	4,165	0,744
Pleasant inventory and furniture	4,155	0,757
Pool/s	4,134	0,782
Variety of equipment for providing wellness services	4,082	0,771
Providing healthy food and beverage services	4,037	0,917
Jacuzzi/whirlpool	4,029	0,850
Innovativeness of wellness offer	3,619	1,034
Education on the healthy way of preparing food and drinks	3,288	1,380
Adaptation of wellness offers to people with special needs	2,800	1,489
Offering meditation/yoga practice	2,456	0,667
Alternative therapies	2,234	1,370
$\bar{x}$	4,108	0,767
Information about wellness services		
Satisfaction with the quality of information about the wellness offering will encourage me to purchase a wellness product/service.	4,757	0,530
Satisfaction with the reliability of information about the wellness offer will encourage me to purchase a wellness product/service	4,733	0,528
Satisfaction with the variety of information about wellness offerings will encourage me to purchase a wellness product/service.	4,490	0,691
$\bar{x}$	4,660	0,504
Visitor satisfaction with the destination's offerings (single-item latent variable)		
Overall satisfaction with the offer of the wellness destination where the wellness center is located.	4,462	0,545
$\bar{x}$	4,249	0,716

Source: Milojica, 2025, 88-89

The results presented in the previous table indicate that tourists are satisfied with the elements of wellness tourist offer of Republic of Croatia, since a significant majority of the elements was marked with a mark above 4,00. In terms of satisfaction with wellness services, the respondents evaluated the following elements with the highest marks: *Beauty treatments* (AM=4,575), *Kindness of wellness staff towards wellness users* (AM=4,572), *Massages* (AM=4,555), *Wellness staff's knowledge of the wellness services they provide* (AM=4,546), *Helpfulness of wellness staff* (AM=4,467), *Responding to customer inquiries about wellness services* (AM=4,462), *Professional provision of wellness services* (AM=4,458), *Providing users with a sense of security and carefreeness when using wellness services* (AM=4,451), *Professional behavior of wellness staff* (AM=4,450), *Individual approach to wellness users* (AM=4,419), *Sauna*

(AM=4,380), *Creating a relationship of trust with users when providing wellness services* (AM=4,375), *Quality of information about the wellness center and its services* (AM=4,363), *Therapist/doctor/professional services* (AM=4,331) and *Tidiness of wellness staff* (AM=4,327). The lowest results were determined for the *Innovativeness of wellness offer* (AM=3,619), *Education on the healthy way of preparing food and drinks* (AM=3,288), *Adaptation of wellness offers to people with special needs* (AM=2,800), *Offering meditation/yoga practice* (AM=2,456) and *Alternative therapies* (AM=2,234). Satisfaction with the information about wellness services was also marked with high marks (quality of information AM=4,757, reliability of information AM=4,733, and variety of information AM=4,490). *Overall satisfaction with the offer of the wellness destination where the wellness center is located* was marked with AM=4,462.

Results of the empirical research presented in this paper are significantly in accordance with the findings of study Health Tourism 2018. Attitudes and consumption of health tourism service users in Croatia (Marušić et al., 2019), as respondents have expressed a high level of satisfaction with most of the wellness services. Findings indicate need for improvement of the following:

- *Inovativness of wellness offer*. According to UNWTO, this implies introducing new or improved components of tourist offer that combine both intangible and tangible benefits not just for tourists, but also destination stakeholders and local community (UNWTO, 2016, 14). Tourists are actively searching for completely new and unique experiences, which include spiritual, mental and emotional well-being. This is supported by examples of good practice such as Sensei Lāna'i, A Four Seasons Resort which implement scientific and technological solutions enabling wellness service users to understand their own well-being in a better way. Along with data-driven approach, they combine both traditional and luxurious hospitality services to provide unique experiences (Leal, 2025). Most recent wellness trends also emphasize use of artificial intelligence, mobile applications, virtual reality, etc. (Hitec, 2025; FasterCapital, 2025). Implementation of Artificial Intelligence would enable forming personalized programs based on individual's profiles, health information, and individual preferences, support 24/7 in planning and scheduling activities or seeking any advice, implementing wearable devices that track real-time biometrics like sleeping patterns, measuring heart rates, stress level, etc., predictive analytics focused on predicting potential arise of health problems and recommending preventive measures, etc. (Wellness Tourism n.d.c.; Bentley, 2024)

- *Education about healthy way of preparing food and drinks*. Healthy food and drinks represent an important part of wellness industry, which is supported by the data published by Technavio which indicate that in period 2025-2029 global health and wellness food market size will reach USD 627.6 billion (Technavio, 2025). This indicates that healthy nutrition represents an important part of people's everyday life, by enabling them to boost their energy, strengthen their immune system, improve mood and maintain healthy weight. Tourists who travel motivated by wellness tourist services are very often interested in new experiences by learning new ways how to prepare healthy meals and drinks, and maintain practicing healthy habits not just during their stay in a destination, but also after returning home (Okumus and Kelly, 2023; Pilford, 2024). Sanvictores (2024) emphasizes the importance of providing tourists education on the healthy way of preparing food and drinks through participation in nutrition

workshops and cooking classes. Gaining adequate knowledge about nutritional value of food and proper way of preparation enables them to make healthy choices and improve their health and quality of life.

- *Adaptation of wellness offers to people with special needs.* Wellness tourism offer needs to be adapted to people with special needs. Thin (2025) emphasized traveling today represents one of the basic human rights, which is in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), article 30. When traveling, people with special needs can feel free, and show how self-determined they can be. Unfortunately, very often they are faced with many obstacles, i.e. inaccessible information online (i.e., for blind people), lack of appropriately adapted forms of transport for them to hotels, reaching the reception desk, restaurant, wellness center, etc. To prevent that, appropriate measures need to be implemented that would include access without stairs, captions for audiovisual content, tactile floor guidance systems, accessible sanitary facilities, etc. This would contribute to the expansion of wellness tourism market and achieving economic benefits for wellness service providers and destination in general, improving their inclusion into the society and sense of equality, improving destination's reputation on the tourist market and stimulating tourists to revisit in the future.

- *Offering meditation/yoga practice.* Over the years yoga and meditation became important elements of wellness tourism offer due to its numerous advantages. Tourists who practice it are in search of transformative experiences focused on achieving emotional, mental and physical well-being. Primary reasons for practicing yoga are achieving greater mental clarity, reduction of stress and promoting emotional balance, body health (its flexibility, strength, functioning of cardiovascular system, etc.), emotional healing and personal growth (Wellness Tourism, n.d.a; Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d.; Lehto et al., 2006).

- *Alternative therapies.* Tourists who are interested into a more holistic approach to health improvement show interest for services which encompasses traditional treatments. Therapies like naturopathy, Ayurveda, acupuncture, energy healing, and others are combined, focusing on establishing connection between mind, body and spirit, and not treating the mere symptoms. Their main idea is to prevent illness development, and promote overall well-being of an individual. Travelers who seek these authentic experiences tend to travel to China, India, etc. from which these therapies originate (Wellness Tourism, n.d.a; Wellness Tourism, n.d.c; Leung, 2023; TOI Lifestyle Desk, 2025).

Previously presented empirical findings indicate that respondents are satisfied with most of the elements of Croatian wellness tourism offer. Through a brief discussion authors addressed the advantages of wellness tourism offer elements for which respondents expressed lower level of satisfaction. The quality and diversity of offer of these elements needs to be improved in order to increase their satisfaction and stimulate them to revisit in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to emphasize the importance of measuring satisfaction in tourism, as well as to determine how satisfied are Croatian visitors with wellness tourist offer. Despite evaluating most of the elements of wellness tourist offer with high marks, it can be concluded that wellness service providers failed to meet their visitor's needs

entirely. Focus needs to be placed on improving the innovativeness of wellness offer, offering educations that will enable visitors to learn healthy ways of preparing food and drinks, offering alternative therapies, adaptation of wellness offers to people with special needs, and ability for visitors to practice meditation and yoga. Republic of Croatia is a destination renowned for its health tourism offer, which still hasn't entirely reached its full potential in terms of wellness tourism offer. To do so, attitudes of wellness visitors need to be monitored and its wellness offer adapted according to their interests, in order to take a more competitive position on the international tourist market.

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