

Revitalising the healing tradition

Thermal springs in the Western Cape

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South Africa has in its medicinal springs a potential national asset which is capable of considerable development.

(Rindl, 1936: 7)

South Africa has some 87 documented thermal springs (Tshibalo et al., 2010), although only about one-third of these have been developed into resorts of various sizes. Most of South Africa's thermal springs, particularly those in the Western Cape, have been used at some time in the past for medicinal purposes, both by European settlers after they arrived in the seventeenth century, and by indigenous tribes before them (Booyens, 1981).

The health spa tourism industry in South Africa is dominated by day spas, resort spas and destination spas (Global Spa Summit, 2011). There are currently very few links between South Africa's health spa industry and its thermal springs. While there are numerous thermal spring resorts in South Africa, only a few offer health or wellness treatments.

The Western Cape has all four of what Niv (1989) describes as the basic characteristics which can transform a destination into a leading centre for health tourism, namely:

- 1 thermal mineral springs;
- 2 a stable, comfortable climate all year round;
- 3 a good medical system;
- 4 attractive scenic locations.

There are 11 thermal springs in the Western Cape, seven of which have been developed into eight resorts. Only one of these resorts has a focus on health and wellness, with appropriate facilities, with the others functioning primarily as family leisure resorts. Internationally there has been a move by traditional thermal spring resorts to begin offering a combination of health (medical and wellness) services in combination with leisure activities. In light of current international trends, as well as perceived domestic needs, it appears that the Western Cape's thermal spring resources are not being optimally utilised as tourist attractions, neither for domestic nor for international tourist markets.

TABLE 32.1 Distribution of thermal spring resorts among the provinces of South Africa

Western Cape	Caledon Spa, Goudini Spa, Avalon Springs, Baden Klub, Warmwaterberg Spa, Calitzdorp Spa, Uhuru Guest Farm, The Baths
Eastern Cape	Aliwal Spa, Cradock Spa, Fish Eagle Spa, Badfontein Guest Farm
Northern Cape	Riemvasmaak Hot Springs
North-West	Nkolo Spa
Free State	Florisbad
Kwazulu-Natal	Natal Spa, Thangami Safari Spa, Shu-Shu Hot Springs, Lilani Hot Springs
Mpumalanga	Badplaas
Limpopo	Warmbaths, Tshipise, Zimthabi Resort, Die Oog Hot Spring Resort, Rhemardo Holiday Resort, Eiland Spa, Makutsi Spa, Mphephu Hot Spring Resort, Sagole Spa

Eight different types of 'medicinal' thermal waters have been distinguished in South Africa, three of which occur in the Western Cape, each of which has specific therapeutic uses (Kent, 1952), and stories abound of amazing 'cures' that have taken place over the years (Proctor, 1948; Booyens, 1981). In the words of Wilmot (1914: 23), 'It is quite unnecessary to go to Baden-Baden or Carlsbad when we possess waters superior in efficacy'. However, medical treatments are not offered at any of the Western Cape's thermal spring resorts, despite the fact that domestic leisure visitors believe in the apparent healing powers of the water, report considerable health benefits from their visits, and express a desire for information on the health benefits of the water (Boekstein, 2001).

There was therefore a need to research and evaluate the development potential of these springs. This will undoubtedly assist in the positioning and marketing of the thermal spring tourism product in the Western Cape, so as to, first, better satisfy the needs of domestic leisure tourists who have an inherent belief in the healing qualities of the water and, second, to attract the growing international health (medical and wellness) tourism market. It contributes to revitalising a centuries-old healing tradition that is in danger of being lost altogether.

The mineral contents of the thermal springs in the Western Cape present some interesting opportunities for the development of balneotherapy/medicinal products. All of the springs contain radon gas, which has well-known medicinal properties, as well as various combinations of minerals with known medicinal/healing properties (e.g. sodium, magnesium, potassium, calcium, chloride, fluoride, sulphate, silicon, iron, lithium and arsenic). In addition, the presence of relatively rare trace elements, such as nickel, rubidium, selenium, strontium and zinc, which are thought to have medicinal properties, but about which very little if any research in a thermal spring context exists, could also present opportunities for further research and product development.

While the mineral and gas content of thermal waters in the Western Cape are an indication of considerable potential for the development of water-based medical and wellness products, the actual viability of such products would depend, to a large extent, on the

motivations and activity preferences of visitors. A visitor survey was thus carried out, involving 383 respondents at six thermal spring resorts in the Western Cape. The questionnaire included a section comprising 32 activities to provide data for activity-based market segmentation, together with questions designed to elicit trip-related data, respondents' opinions on the health and healing aspects of the water, and limited demographic information. A combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions was included, with the final question inviting respondents to add any comments they wished to make.

Almost all of the respondents (97 per cent) were domestic tourists, with only 3 per cent from outside South Africa. Respondents were fairly equally divided between male (47 per cent) and female (53 per cent), and also fairly equally spread in age, with about half (51 per cent) between 31 and 50 years old, almost one-third (30 per cent) over 50, and 19 per cent being 30 years old or younger. Nearly half of the respondents (41 per cent) were travelling as a group of three–four, a good indication of their being family units. Almost one-third (29 per cent) were travelling in groups of six or more. A similar number (28 per cent) were travelling as couples, with 23 per cent of these aged 61 or older. Almost half of the respondents (46 per cent) indicated that they visited a thermal spring resort more than once a year, with one-third (34 per cent) visiting once a year. Some 99 per cent of respondents were overnight visitors. More than half (58 per cent) of respondents were staying from one–three nights, with a further 28 per cent staying four–six nights, and the remaining 14 per cent staying longer than six nights.

A range of activity groups was identified. Two of the three activity groups with an average of more than 50 per cent 'Strong interest' are 'Water-based leisure activities' and 'Wellness activities'. In the first group, almost all the respondents (91 per cent) attach importance to being able to swim in a hot pool. The availability of hot water for swimming is, of course, the *raison d'être* of thermal spring resorts. However, the majority of respondents (65 per cent) also attach importance to having a cold swimming pool available. These would seem to be essential components of any thermal spring resort that wants to attract both summer and winter markets.

The second group, 'Wellness activities', has four activities with more than 50 per cent 'Strong interest'. Having a quiet pool available for relaxing is important to most respondents (77 per cent), as is swimming in mineral water (72 per cent). While both of these activities are essentially passive wellness activities, support for them does indicate a general desire for respondents to use their visits to thermal spring resorts to improve their health in some way. Many (60 per cent) would prefer to cook and/or eat healthy food, and more than half (53 per cent) would enjoy sitting in a jacuzzi/sauna/steam room, with another 35 per cent showing some interest. Wellness treatments and activities, such as massage and yoga, would be welcomed by 39 per cent of all respondents, with slightly more (42 per cent) showing some interest. While only 28 per cent have strong interest in beauty treatments, such as skin care, manicures and pedicures, a further 35 per cent have at least some interest. While the last two figures seem comparatively low, it still indicates that at least one-third to half of the respondents would be interested in these types of treatments and activities if they were available. It is, however, interesting to note that as many as 43 per cent of respondents express an interest in water-based medical treatments for diseases such as rheumatism, arthritis and psoriasis.

Respondents were asked their most important reasons for visiting the thermal spring resort where they completed the questionnaire. The most common reasons for visiting are for relaxation (29 per cent), and for the hot swimming pools (27 per cent), followed by the peaceful, tranquil atmosphere (11 per cent), the scenery and natural environment (8 per cent), to rest and do nothing (6 per cent), a holiday, vacation or break (5 per cent) and to have family time/be together as a family (4 per cent). Almost all respondents (95 per cent) were aware that bathing in thermal mineral water is reputed to be healthy, and 80 per cent felt that it was good for their own health, or that of members of their family or group. Some 5 per cent felt that the water did not help in any way, and 15 per cent were not sure. Those respondents who did feel that the water was good for their health were asked if there was anything specific that the water helped with. Out of 268 answers, some 34 different ways in which the water was found to be good for respondents' health were given.

Respondents found that the water helps them to relax and unwind (20 per cent), that it soothes, relaxes, heals or reduces stiffness in muscles and joints (14 per cent), it alleviates back pain (8 per cent), it helps with arthritis and rheumatism (6 per cent), it reduces stress and relieves tension (6 per cent), it moisturises and softens the skin, and is good for the eczema and psoriasis (6 per cent), it relieves general aches and pains (5 per cent), it relieves tiredness and leaves one feeling rested, refreshed, or invigorated (4 per cent), it helps one to sleep better (2 per cent), it helps to relieve painful legs and hips (2 per cent), it detoxifies and cleanses the system (2 per cent), it is good for the mind and makes one feel clear-minded (1 per cent), it improves blood circulation (1 per cent) and is good for overall well-being (1 per cent).

While thermal spring resorts in the Western Cape function primarily as family leisure resorts, it would seem that health, albeit indirectly, is still a strong motivation to visit. The resorts differ considerably from each other in terms of a number of factors, including water type and mineral content, range of facilities and services offered, number of visitors that can be accommodated, distance from Cape Town (the principal tourist-generating city), and location in relation to tourist attractions and scenic drives. Furthermore, each resort receives different types of visitors with different combinations of interests. It is doubtful, given the diversity outlined above, if any single framework could be designed to facilitate optimal health tourism development for all the resorts and undeveloped springs.

Nevertheless, there appears to be considerable potential for the development of thermal spring health (medical and wellness) tourism products in the Western Cape, based on available resources. It would, however, be unrealistic to expect thermal spring resorts in the province to produce the types of facilities and services that are offered by large international thermal spring resorts. The results of the survey suggest that the types of products that may appeal to international health tourism markets, particularly the wellness and beauty treatment markets, might only appeal to a relatively small segment of current, almost exclusively domestic, visitors.