

## TOURISM RESTORATION AND REMODELLING OF BORSEC RESORT

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**ABSTRACT** - For the past decades, with its important social and economic projects, health tourism has become a major international tourist market segment. Major human and material resources focus on it with an even deeper involvement of science and technology in order to provide complex and high quality tourist and medical services, required to satisfy the vital necessities of modern man, due to population's changes in health state and living conditions.

**Keywords:** spa tourism, health tourism, mineral waters, villas, wellness, tourist restoration and remodelling

### INTRODUCTION

Spa tourism represents the first form of tourism in chronological order, which gave rise to a concrete form of tourist resort, whose size and complexity has evolved over time.

The diversity of the tourist offer is regarded as one of the strengths of Romania, but the Romanian spa offer faces a great competition on the European market, in the conditions in which it is still rigid, underperforming and inadequate to modern demands of the tourism market. One of the objectives for revitalizing spa tourism is raising the awareness on the international markets of the fact that Romania can have some of the most valuable resorts in Europe.

Among the dozens of resorts that represent the backbone of the spa tourism system in Romania, we also include *Borsec*, the oldest carbonated mineral water resort in Romania. Borsec is one of the most frequented and appreciated resorts in Central and Eastern Europe, once a resort that rivalled Baden-Baden or Karlovy Vary.

### BORSEC RESORT – PAST AND PRESENT

The history of Borsec and its mineral water has been quite controversial. Since the second half of the sixteenth century, a series of informal documents state that the Italian doctor *Bucello*, used to recommend, in 1594, the cure with mineral water from one of the Borsec springs for *Sigismund Báthory*, the Prince of Transylvania. The discovery is attributed also to Count *Bánffy Dénes*, who, according to the legend, in 1773, he was hunting in the surrounding forests when was led by several local shepherds to the mineral water springs of the depression. This assumption is however obsolete because, according to other sources, Borsec was first mentioned in a document dated 1700, under the name of "*Câmpul Borsecului*" ("*the Field of Borsec*"). According to a court record of 1745, during that period, the residents of Gheorgheni Seat built a series of bath establishments and chapels in Borsec.

The biggest turning point in the history of this place was the arrival of *Anton Zimmethausen*, a geologist from Vienna, in 1804. He signed a 28-year lease with the communes of Ditrău and Lăzarea, the owners of the lands that included the mineral water springs of the depression. The aim was to bottle the mineral water and to build and exploit some baths.

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After Zimmethausen, Borsec was leased to several investors, and more hot baths, shower baths and houses were built, which attracted a continuously increasing number of visitors.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Borsec became a permanent settlement.

Beginning with 1850, private villas were built close to sources. However, the accommodation capacity was quite low, and the entire organization tended to rely on high prices for very few visitors.

Most of the villas were not equipped for the winter months, the resort being open only during summer. The lack of equipments, spa facilities, and of a medical office, forced Borsec to function as a resort for rest not for treatment. Between 1856 and 1863, the annual number of visitors was over 400. Between 1864 and 1866 there were about 275-330, while, between 1868 and 1874, more than 500 visitors were recorded. After 1874, the number of visitors increased, reaching 1,155 in 1883. In 1890, Borsec had 34 villas and three hotels, summing up a total of 350 rooms. Gradually, there was a growth in the incoming number of tourists at the baths, reaching 1,349. After this golden period, a sharp decrease in annual revenue followed.

The two world wars caused significant damage to the baths, which were restored only in 1948. At this point, the baths and the villas entered in the possession of the Ministry of Health, which restored and equipped them with the necessary utilities, houses of rest, baths and clubs. Borsec was ready to receive series of about 3,800 visitors, the annual number exceeding 14,000 (*Local Plan for Sustainable Development of the City of Borsec*, 2005, pp. 21-22).



**Figure 1.** *The railway viaduct – an emblematic image for the town of Borsec*

*Local Plan for Sustainable Development of the City of Borsec*, 2005, pp. 21-22).

In 1918, the health tourism in Borsec became official. The first spa company was founded, whose primary task was the restoration of the resort infrastructure. The greatest revival was recorded in the interwar period, when most of the vast mansions were built, preserving the traditional architectonic style with beautiful wooden lace. An acknowledgement proof for the spa development is the fact that, in 1937, the International Congress of Balneology was held here.

Borsec was a mainly permanent resort, the largest tourist fluxes being recorded during the warm season, between May and September. As result of massive investments in the expansion and modernization of the tourist profile and due to its functional diversification, in 1956, Borsec falls into the category of urban settlements.

The communist regime brought major changes in the health tourism business, starting with the nationalization of villas, baths, restaurants, all these becoming a material base for the *Local Enterprise Bathing (L.E.B. Borsec)*, a state enterprise managing the tourism activity. Subsequently, it received the name of *Spa-Climatic Company (S.C.C. Borsec)*. This was followed by the improvement of the technical infrastructure in the villas in order to increase their level of comfort and to be able to function in the cold season as well.

Borsec was famous for a number of balneotherapy procedures with salutary effects on most varied diseases. Among the most important, we can mention *the soda baths* and *electrotherapy*. Treatment by physical balneo-climatic agents and spa facilities were provided at the polyclinic, with comprehensive and individualized treatment facilities within the treatment area.

Since 1990, the capacity of the Romanian spa resorts has evolved differently, while some started a quick development (Sângeorz-Băi, Covasna), others had a more slower growth (Slănic Moldova, Tușnad, Vatra Dornei, Sovata). A third category, Borsec included, recorded a decreasing trend (Table 1).

## TOURISM RESTORATION AND REMODELLING OF BORSEC RESORT

**Table 1.** *The accommodation dynamics in Borsec resort*

Resort	Number of accommodation places			The evolution between 1972 and 1990 (%)	Number of accommodation places			The evolution between 1998 and 2009 (%)
	1972	1980	1990		1998	2003	2009	
Borsec	2799	2847	2783	-0.6	2095	374	320	-84.7

Table 1 shows quite clearly that Borsec reached the peak of tourist interest around 1980, followed by a decrease as result of the worn out infrastructure, the step-by-step decommissioning of villas and the lack of new hotel units imposed by the presence of mineral water closed to the build-up area. This brought changes in the accommodation structure, villas being gradually replaced by boarding houses. Spa activity based on social grants was no longer supported in the market economy, and due to the aging infrastructure, Borsec went into decline (Figure 2).

In comparison with other Romanian resorts, the aesthetic landscape of Borsec successfully combines the therapeutic effects of mineral waters with the bioclimatic conditions, the fresh air of pine forests and the specific architecture.

After the changes of 1989, the *Borsec Spa-Climatic Company* came within the jurisdiction of the *State Property Fund* and was transformed into joint stock company, becoming *Commercial Joint Stock Tourism Company (CJSTC)*. An entrepreneur bought the shares and sold some of the villas, so that the remaining CJSTC came to belong to a different group of entrepreneurs.



**Figure 2.** *The polyclinic and the former Spa-Climatic Enterprise in an advanced state of decay (in 2010)*

Based on *Law no. 10 of 2000 on the restitution of properties*, the former owners or their heirs claimed some of the old villas. A series of legal problems emerged, with numerous ongoing legal processes and unusual situations. Thus, certain people own the villas and the land they are built on is in the property of local administration.

At present, due to the lack of financial resources required to modernize the accommodation and spa units and of a strategy to attract tourists, we can observe a decline in both categories. After the spa treatment services ceased in 2001, the tourist activity was carried out by private entrepreneurs, who provide limited accommodation and food services.

**Table 2.** *The evolution of accommodation establishments and places in Borsec Resort between 1998 and 2010*

<b>Accommodation</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2010</b>
Number of establishments	63	61	41	20	20	20	11
Number of accommodation places	2095	1601	1137	653	560	374	320

**TOURIST RESTORATION AND REMODELLING OF BORSEC**

The revitalization of Borsec Resort is an imperative activity that consists primarily in the creation of a treatment base facility to perform a variety of spa procedures based on mineral water. This requires projects to create a multifunctional spa complex, which, in addition to treatments, should be able to provide an opportunity for relaxation and leisure time throughout the year.

A general problem in Borsec and in other spa resorts in Romania is that privatization is inappropriate and the lack of coherent strategies in tourism has not been able to highlight the state’s role in tourism. If combined, all these effects represent a disadvantage for the Romanian resorts.

The development of Borsec is related to the development of health tourism, which depends on the interest shown by the financially capable investors. The investors’ interest, in addition to tourist infrastructure and services, could create the market for services, only if they were able to use marketing techniques to deal segments of the market and to maintain them.

Health tourism has three sectors:

- *the health sector*, which brings to the forefront the use of natural resources, the therapeutic mineral waters;
- *leisure and wellness tourism* - using water in a playful manner;
- *the sport sector* - ski slopes or fitness centres which may include swimming pools, spa equipment, etc.

These three sectors are addressed to different consumers for treatment, recreation and wellness, or to performance athletes, respectively.

The current tourist offer in Borsec Resort is non-spa since 2001, when, because of inadequate management CJSTC, the former Borsec Spa-Climatic Company, stopped its activity, resulting in a “downgrade” of Borsec from the category of national interest resort to a local interest one. Thus, the place of Borsec in the Romanian health tourism and in the world cannot be defined yet. Its revival will be accomplished when it has an adequate infrastructure, when competent and competitive enterprises appear and establish relationships with foreign tour operators, and, if possible, in the conditions of a constant presence at major tourism fairs and exhibitions.



**Figure 3.** *Historic villas in 7 Springs Alley in an advanced state of decay*

The main starting point in creating competitiveness for the Borsec Resort are the qualitative and quantitative parameters of mineral water, their variety and especially their therapeutic action, which made Borsec become the only powerful brand on the international market of mineral waters, receiving the honorary title of the “Queen of Mineral Waters”.

Starting from the fact that the resort must give priority to health tourism inside the tourist local and microregion offer, we must analyze these conditions set on development programmes. At the same time, we must give a closer

look at the complementary elements of infrastructure, development and health tourism, the restoration of the monument buildings in Aleea 7 Izvoare (7 Springs Alley) (Figure 3), protection of the cultural heritage with tourist potential, renovation of the traditional architecture buildings and also their change of destination.

According to the measures stipulated in the *Tourism and Local Development Strategy of Borsec* (2006), the creation of a support base for ecotourism development and training based on the attractions provided by nature and cultural historical monuments must be encouraged. However, this needs to be credible, in the conditions in which the restitution problem is still dealt with, part of the existing villas belonging to private owners either Romanian or foreigner from Israel, Kuwait, Ireland, Canada, who have not benefited from the involvement of the central administration. Thus, the villa accommodation infrastructure has not yet been restored, but on the contrary, it has been sentenced to a continuous state of decay.

In order to restore the past of Borsec Resort, it is highly required to create a future image relied on a combination of tourism services, integrating the traditional treatment based on modern technologies, and different possibilities for active sport and wellness. This combination might finally provide an international reputation. The development priorities are goals to achieve, leading to long-term performance of strategic goals (improving livelihoods, economic development, sustainable exploitation of resources, attracting tourists and creating a unique image for the resort). All these can be done through measures and programmes, and the facilities that need investment and actions require organization and communication projects. Among the priorities listed in the *Tourism and Local Development Strategy of Borsec* (2006) are the following:

1. *development of tourism infrastructure*, which includes a series of measures to increase the capacity of accommodation and food services by creating hotel units, hostels, restaurants, cafes; development of spa infrastructure involving the renewal of the spa treatment centre and creating a wellness centre; development of complementary tourism services and infrastructure for both winter and summer activities (skiing, skating, cycling trails) and other tourism infrastructure (summer theatre, park wildlife and wildlife observation points);

2. *development of the human resource*, which involves training specialists in catering and hotels sector, attracting experts in medicine and bathing by providing facilities for them, reconversion and re-employment of people employed in the mining field;

3. *development of tourist services*, including activities meant to widen the accommodation and services offer, to create supply of health tourism (spa), to develop complementary tourist services and to build partnerships within the region and the micro-region (e.g. partnership with resorts such as Bradul, in the town of Toplița);

4. *settlement marketing*, refers to the creation of a management plan for the local preservation of cultural heritage, which includes renovation of existing villas and preservation of the specific architecture, and last but not least, to the declaration of Borsec as a spa resort of international tourist interest in the near future;

5. *development of technical infrastructure*, implying actions related to restoration, development planning and modernization.

All these priorities stated in the *Tourism and Local Development Strategy of Borsec* are classified based on criteria such as *degree of priority* (on a scale of from 1 to 3), *duration*, and *officers, partners and employees*, which may include tourism companies, Borsec local administration, local community, enterprises, and business managers.

Recently, a series of feasibility studies have been conducted on the development of a complex and modern spa centre, with treatment units (hydrotherapy, massage, electrotherapy, salt therapy), mineral water pools and thermal baths in the tub, as well as a wellness centre (sauna, solarium, beauty centre). The total daily capacity of the complex is estimated at 694 persons, taking into account the working time of 6 hours per day, but without taking into account the capacity of wellness items not requiring attention from the medical personnel. In addition, the construction of three modern ski slopes, of a fitness centre, restoration activities and construction of new hostel villas are also planned in the project.

According to these projects, a series of calculations have been made on the estimated number of tourists per year, who may come to Borsec. Thus, in the first three years, the estimations indicate a total of 31,230 tourists and in the next 10 years about 83,680 visitors.

### CONCLUSIONS

Spa tourism is one of the forms of tourism that, in the last twenty years, has reshaped the European perspective through the concept of “*Health is Wealth*”.

Tourist restoration and remodelling of Borsec Resort involves high financial and managerial efforts. The state plays a major role in providing the overall quality by investing in the modernization, as well as in the creation of an incentive framework, aimed at integrating the European standards of the spa product, while the demand for international tourism is increasing. Thus, the potential exploitation of the Borsec spa resort should be supported on behalf of a large number of Romanian and foreign tourists.

Achieving all these programmes is a long-term commitment. Local authority should have a major role in attracting financial resources and in providing facilities for new investors. Therefore, the main objective is the development of tourism and the promotion of spa traditions and natural heritage, which will lead to an increased quality of services and an increased number of tourists. Thus, in the near future, health tourism could become the main economic sector of Borsec Resort.

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