

Health Spa vs. Medicine: Similar Terms, Different Concepts

The health economy is booming despite the global financial crisis. At the “Capital Congress for Medicine and Health” 2009 in Berlin, one of the world’s largest medical conventions, the sector was even described as a “cyclical and political stabiliser”.

Medical vs. Health Tourism

A major share in this development can be attributed to health or medical offers directed specifically towards tourists. They attract people who want to maintain or regain their health far away from home. The reasons for such a journey are multifarious. While some people want to benefit from a particular expertise or treatment not available at home, others are looking for alternative healing methods, an exotic ambiance or simply for an opportunity to save money.



Health treatments abroad can sometimes cost a fraction of the price one would have to pay at home. There are different primary reasons for the journey. **If the purpose of the journey is to receive a certain medical treatment, for example eye surgery in Turkey or dental treatment by the Black Sea, insiders call it “medical tourism”.** If guests just want to relax and at the same time improve

their health, it is called “health tourism”. The transition between the two is fluid. Journeys can range from a short spell of intensive care to a cure lasting several weeks or just a holiday weekend.

Active vs. Passive Wellness Programmes

In Germany the differentiation between active and passive wellness programmes is becoming more and more established. The former include all applications in which the guest undertakes special training programmes in order to reform his or her lifestyle. As a rule they usually begin with a medical examination. Typical examples of such “Medical Wellness Programmes” include medically-supervised fasting cures with a change in diet, burn-out vacations with anti-stress training, or special programmes with individual motor-activity-training. By contrast, passive wellness programmes focus primarily on relaxing, recreation and recuperation. These can include massages, beauty treatments, thermal spa water applications or deep relaxation in floatation tanks, soft packs or special vibration couches. In all cases, pleasant and comfortable surroundings are very important. Specially furnished areas which evoke new atmospheres, memories, cultural or natural environments are a more recent and growing phenomenon. The focus is on creating a sense of authenticity.



Preventative health programmes that aim to improve general level of health and quality of life, as opposed to preventing diseases, are also becoming ever more popular. For example, the term “**cure**” denotes a period of recuperation lasting several weeks involving medically prescribed applications that aim to prevent, or rather with medical means to alleviate, individual ailments.

The terms used to describe these emerging oases of well-being are as varied as they are ambiguous. This is due to the different ways in which they are understood around the world. New facilities that aim to actively attract international customers have begun to abandon the term “wellness” in favour of establishing their own brand.

“Abroad, no one really gets what we mean by wellness” says Renate Brune, the owner of “Gut Klostermühle”, a health resort which opened in autumn 2008. Located in the former East German lakelands, it comprises a hotel, a day spa and medical center. The health resort markets its services all together under the name Brune Balance med & spa: “The name expresses how both facilities coexist alongside one another, how our medical center for integrative medicine and our spacious spa with plenty of space to relax, rest and revitalise, work together,” explains Brune.



Europe vs. USA: Different Terminology

Generally, guests don't always know what is meant by the different terms. A further cause of misunderstanding is people's different experiences of their respective public health care systems. While in Germany, services in the so-called second health care market are generally viewed as additional benefits, guests from Western Europe and overseas fail to see the strict separation into private-pay and health insurance patients.

In the USA, “wellness” is seen as a holistic package of measures for health promotion, whereas in Germany it is commonly seen as merely “passive” pampering. Because the term “wellness” is

both over-used and imprecise, being used to describe all manner of offerings, a new term has been introduced that can be used more specifically: "Medical Wellness". **By comparison, the term "spa" is used as a generic term describing health and wellness facilities in the German-speaking countries, while in the rest of Europe it denotes a therapeutic bath or is synonymous with a therapy concept (health through water).**

Those who wish to attract international guests are, therefore, well advised to steer clear of ambiguous terms and to describe their offers clearly and distinctly. Today's customers seek emotional experiences that thrill and appeal to the senses; they do not need to be taught or convinced!

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