

CENTRAL EUROPEAN SPAS POPULAR AMONG VISITORS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST



Latest statistics confirm the trend of growing popularity of CEE health spas among patients from the Middle East. Local tour operator intensify their marketing efforts in the ME&NA region.

Despite the current difficult economic situation in most developed countries many incoming tour operators in the Czech Republic offering niche travel products have recorded moderate growth in terms of both tourism arrivals and revenue. **The latest statistics however show significant changes in the source countries of travelers visiting Central and Eastern Europe.**

The spa sector has been also affected by the latest trend as confirms Eva Bendova, Customer Relation Manager of Spa-Resorts.cz, one of the leading tour operators focusing on international health tourists in the Czech Republic.

“This year there has been a considerable decline of clients from Germany and Russia, that were the greatest source markets of international patients not only for the Czech Republic but also the entire Central European market,” said Ms. Bendova.

On the other hand, since 2007 the local spas have been recording a growing demand from customers in Middle Eastern countries. **Today, two thirds of foreign guests in Czech health spas are patients from UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Egypt.** Although the growing numbers of guests from the Middle East or North African regions are the trend of only few last years, the local health service providers are well aware of specific aspects related to this type of clients.

“First of all, people from the ME&NA region often require more sophisticated services, such as special diets or more intensive treatment programmes. However, they mostly stay longer than other foreign guests, take their whole families with them, and also spend more money,” explained Ms. Bendova. “Their growing interest in Central Europe is very positive because it significantly diversifies our customer base and also pushes other service providers to broaden and improve their offers,” added Ms. Bendova.

Many experts also point out that the trend of greater numbers of ME health tourists is likely to continue even in the coming years. Mr. Brandl from a luxurious hotel in Karlovy Vary, the most popular Czech spa town, said: “The potential for incoming medical tourism from the ME&NA countries to Central Europe is simply enormous, especially because of the strong demand and popularity of health treatment in foreign countries among these patients.”

A recent survey carried out in UAE by the international research organization YouGov for National newspaper, revealed that **over 70% of UAE residents would seek treatment abroad, if they fall seriously ill.** Based on the reactions of the respondents the researchers stated that despite all the modern diagnostic equipment and up-to-date facilities in the country, the overall health care services do not meet the patients’ expectations. Therefore they look to other destinations offering quality healthcare with favorable prices.

As a result the Central European incoming tour operators of both leisure and medical segments have started discovering the new business opportunities in the Middle East and North African countries and began marketing their products in the region. Although many providers and regional boards from the Central Europe fail to promote their destinations and services efficiently countries like Hungary, Slovakia or the Czech Republic remain attractive destinations for travellers from the ME&NA countries.

“The strong growth of arrivals from this specific region is expected in the future particularly for inbound health and leisure segment of the Central European travel market. In fact, the Middle East could become one of the most important feeder markets, particularly for health tourism in the Czech Republic and Hungary,” said Brandl.

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Date: 2009-11-16

Article link:

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