

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN THE THERMAL MINERAL BATHS OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF DEBAR

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Abstract

This paper deals with the thermal-mineral baths of Debar, their potential, and their role in tourism, as well as the number of visitors who frequent these baths during the year. These baths are located in the western part of the Republic of North Macedonia and are located in the rural settlements of Banjisht and Kosovrast, at an altitude of 880m (in Banjisht) and 590m (in Kosovrast).

The thermal-mineral baths "Capa", in the villages of Banjisht and Kosovrast, are among the tourist attractions with the greatest potential in the municipality of Debar, playing a primary role in economic development, increasing financial income, employment, and improving the living conditions of society.

Some of the methods used in this paper are descriptive methods, analytical methods, comparative and statistical methods, and graphic and cartographic methods, taking into account the official data of the State Population Statistics Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as the data obtained in the field.

This paper aims to present the values of these thermal localities, which at the same time represent an important natural resource in terms of attracting local and foreign tourists, as well as to provide an analysis of the factors that influence tourist movement, the dynamics of the number of tourists throughout the years, the benefits, etc. The high healing quality of thermo-mineral waters is the most important recreational and therapeutic element in these baths, which in combination with elements such as climate, landscape, and biogeographical qualities enable the healing ability that is determined to cure various diseases. The importance of the thermal baths of Debar is also increased by the fact that there are no other thermo-mineral waters in about 100 km (except those of Peshkopia, with poor infrastructure and suboptimal conditions for tourism). This fact presents extraordinary opportunities for the complex urbanism of these baths and maximum benefits from these natural resources. It is also worth emphasizing that suitable prices for rehabilitation and recreation in these hotel facilities play an important role in attracting customers.

Keywords: thermal-mineral baths, attractions, tourists, economic development.

1. Introduction

The municipality of Debar is located in the extreme western part of the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia and is one of the 9 municipalities belonging to the Southwest Region. It is bordered by the municipalities of Mavrovo and Rostusha on the north-eastern side, with the municipality of Kiçevo on the south-eastern side, the municipality of Center Zhupa on the southern side, and the Republic of Albania on the western side. The municipality of Debar includes an area of 145.67 km² and about 15,457 inhabitants (2022). The main residential center is Debar, a city with historical and social-cultural traditions [1].

The municipality of Debar represents a territory with many natural assets, which intertwine with each other provide a diversity of landscapes and offer opportunities for economic development in many aspects.

2. Thermo-mineral baths in the municipality of Debar

Thermo- mineral resources constitute important motives for tourist movements. The tourist locality Debar's Spa "Capa" plays a primary role in the tourist, economic, and social

development of the municipality of Debar. The thermal-mineral waters of the baths of Banjisht and Kosovrast are used by tourists for the treatment of various diseases, rehabilitation, recreation, and entertainmen.

There are many legends about the development of balneotherapy in this region, but the oldest evidence is the first written document from the 18th century. This document is a plaque found at the entrance of the hotel facility in the village of Banjisht, written in the Arabic alphabet. According to this document, we find that the Lower Bath was built in 1797, by Haxhi Mujhedin, the son of Numan Efendi, who are member of the old family Oruch-Zade, which has lived in the city of Debar since 1010. Later constructions of some private buildings date from the beginning of the 20th century, for some commercial purposes [2].

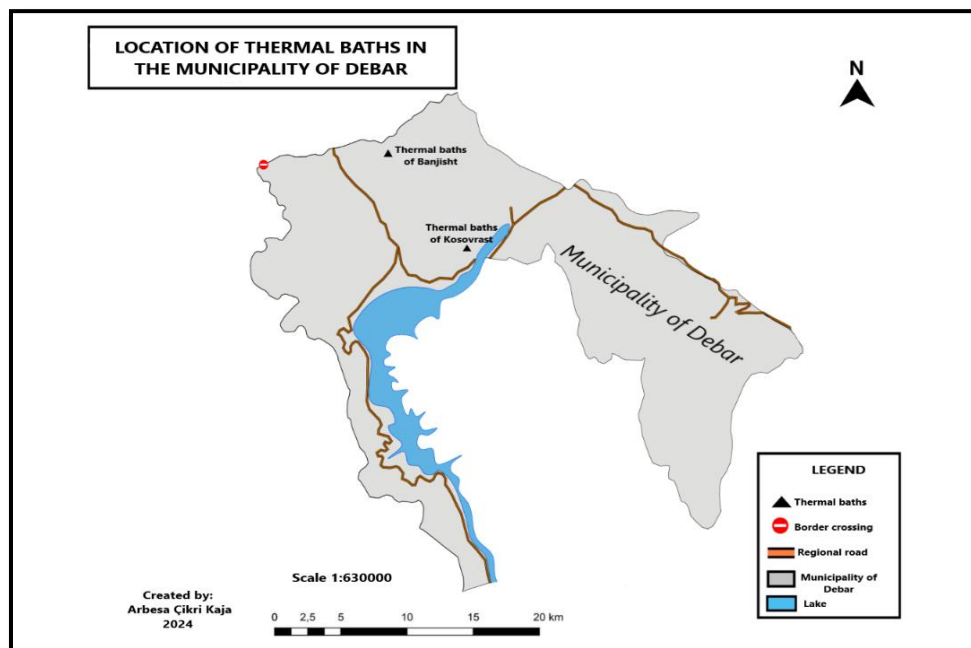
Debar's Spas commercial establishment was founded in February 1948, as the best baths in the former Yugoslavia, where they initially opened their doors only to politicians, army generals, and the upper class of society [3]. Meanwhile, the biggest tourist development in "Debar's Spa-Capa" started in 2004, namely after their privatization when large investments also started, which contributed to their recognition in a very wide area at the regional level, national, and even international.

The thermal-mineral bath of Banjisht is located at an altitude of 880m above sea level with a very convenient communication position because it is located about 4.5 km away from the city of Debar and near the Macedonian-Albanian border.

This luxury resort has an area of 151,351 m², with modern swimming pools and spaces for fun and recreation, where from October 2022, nine luxury villas with private swimming pools, with thermo-mineral water (the first of this kind in our country) were added to the tourist offer.

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The thermal-mineral bath of Kosovrast is located in the village of Lower Kosovrast, 6.5 km to the east of the city of Debar, at an altitude of 580 m above sea level, overlooking the picturesque valley of the Radika River. The first mud bath here was built in 1915, while today this resort is one of the most modern hotel facilities, built on the shores of Debar's Lake, with luxurious bathtubs, an aquapark, and a total capacity of 75 rooms [2].



Map 1. Location of thermal baths in the municipality of Debar.

3. Tourist attractions in Debar's Spa

Debar's Spas "Capa" offers very attractive tourist offers for local and foreign tourists, of all age groups, relying on the healing properties of water, modern pools, aquasparks, picturesque landscapes, and the mountain areas around them. In addition, at the entrance of the resort "Banjisht", there is a protected area, where the main source and the ancient pools are located, which are an attraction in themselves for tourists.

The high healing quality of thermo-mineral water is the most important recreational and therapeutic element in the thermal baths of Debar, which in combination with elements such as climate, landscape, and biogeographical qualities enables to fulfill the healing ability that is determined to cure various diseases. The reports from the scientific studies that have been developed so far have emphasized that the thermal mineral waters of the Debar baths contain over 4 grams of different minerals such as Su, Mg, Ca, and K in 1 liter of water, an amount never seen before in other thermal waters in Europe. One of the most specific features of the thermal waters of Debar is the fact that they contain negative hydrogen ions, which are considered very important for human well-being, where there are more than 300 grams of such ions in one output of the spring water, and as a result, these waters are classified as "Alive Waters" or waters that give life [4].

Visitors are particularly satisfied with the medical services and the quality of the thermal waters for healing and improvement from various diseases such as: skin diseases (eczema, psoriasis, dermatophytoses), locomotor diseases (chronic rheumatic polyarthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, arthritis rheumatism, schleronia), diseases of the nervous system (damages of the peripheral nervous system, demyelinating diseases, Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy), diseases of the gastro-intestinal system (chronic atrophic gastritis, peptic gastro-duodenal ulcers), diseases of the respiratory system (chronic bronchitis, bronchial asthma, sinusitis), diseases of the urogenital system (chronic inflammation of the kidneys, bladder and urinary tract, vaginitis, cervicitis, endometritis), endocrine diseases (obesity, hyperuricemia). [2]

Table 1. Characteristics of Debar's thermal waters.

Characteristics	Unit	Banjisht	Kosovrast
Water temperature	°C	39	48
Yield	l/s	91.2	68.8
Radioactivity	Mah	16.89	33.79
Sulfur	-	soluble	crystallized
Hydrotherapy	/per day	21 600	16 600

Source: Debar's Spa "Capa" (data edited by authors).

From Table 1 we can conclude that the thermal waters, even though they both originate from below Mount Deshat, have significant differences between them. The water temperature in the Banjisht's bath reaches 39°C, while the one in Kosovrast reaches 48°C. The source of the Kosovrast spa has the highest level of radioactivity with 33.79 Mah units, while the Banjisht's source has the lowest level with 16.89 Mah units [5]. The chemical composition of the thermal water is carbonate-sulfate, but the sulfur in the bath of Banjisht is soluble, while in that of Kosovrast, it is crystallized. The two thermal localities also differ in terms of the amount of water flow from the source, where Banjisht's bath during an exit from the source produces about 20 l/s more water than that of Kosovrast's, while the thermal-mineral springs of Banjisht can provide 21,600 hydrotherapy per day while those of Kosovrast 16,600 hydrotherapy per day (about five thousand less than the other thermal locality) [6].

4. Numerical movement of tourists in Debar's Spas

During the last decades, balneary tourism in the baths of Debar has been developing at a fast pace. The continuous tourist circulation has been influenced by different factors such as the level of economic development, the growth of the leisure fund, the development of the tourist culture-tradition, etc. "Capa" tourist resorts are mainly frequented by two types of tourists: tourists for well-being (for relaxation - mainly families, users of the sauna, swimming pools and aquaspark) and tourists for healing (kinesitherapy, electrotherapy, fangotherapy, hydrotherapy, phototherapy).

Table 2. Number of nights spent in "Capa" hotels facilities.

Year	Banjisht	Kosovrast	Total
2019	52 551	33 091	85 642
%	61	39	100
2020	17 139	12 439	29 578
%	58	42	100
2021	37 526	16 032	53 558
%	70	30	100

Source: Debar's Spa "Capa" (data edited by authors).

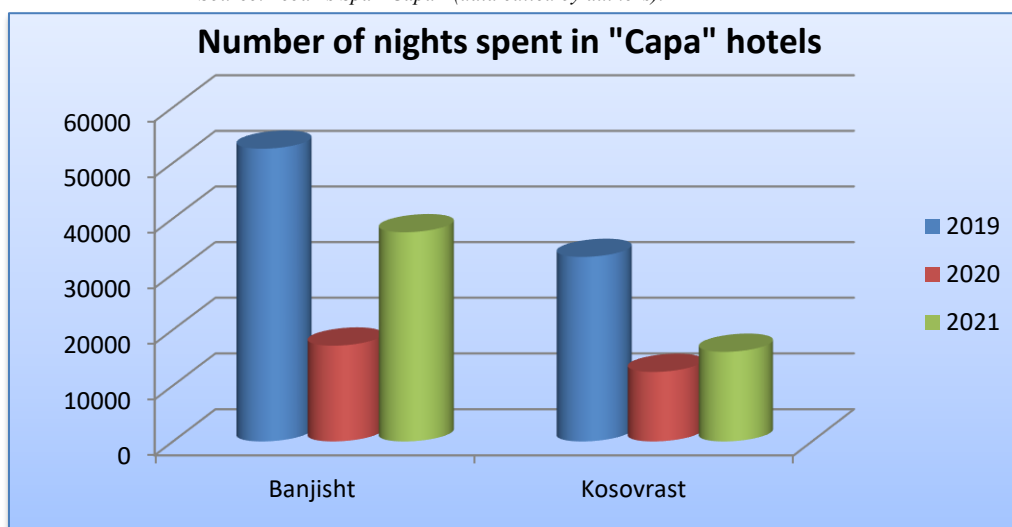


Figure 1. Progress of number of nights spent in "Capa" hotels facilities.

From the tabular overview and the figure presented above, we can conclude that for the period 2019/21, we have a decrease in the number of nights spent in "Capa" hotel facilities by about 38% less as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which appeared as a factor with a great impact on the entire tourism industry and more affected the adult age that are the biggest visitors in these hotel capacities. Also, from the table, we can conclude that the hotel in Banjisht has more tourist traffic with about twice as many nights spent as the hotel in Kosovrast.

Table 3. The number of nights spent realized during the year 2021.

Location	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	Total
Banjisht	1 741	1 862	2 623	1 475	2 826	4 351	3 129	3 758	4 162	5 766	4 059	1 774	37 526
Kosovrast	-	-	-	302	1 129	1 795	1 378	2 483	1 914	3 201	2 651	1 179	16 032

Source: Debar's Spa "Capa" (data edited by authors).

From Table 3, we can conclude that in addition to the different number of nights spent in both hotel capacities, the time of attendance of tourists also differs, where we have more tourist traffic during the summer and autumn months, with a maximum in October and with a minimum in January.

The thermo-mineral baths of Debar are known in a very wide area at the regional, national, and even international levels as they are considered the first ones in Europe because of their healing ability. Usually, about 70% of the tourists who frequent the baths of Debar are domestic, while about 30% are foreign tourists (90% from the Balkan countries and 10% from European countries).

Table 4. Nights spent realized during the year 2021, by domestic and foreign tourists.

Tourists	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	Total
Domestic	1 501	1 622	2 143	1 081	2 893	5 236	3 929	4 942	4 931	6 001	4 819	2 554	41 652
Foreign	240	240	480	696	1 062	910	578	1 299	1 145	2 966	1 891	399	11 906

Source: Debar's Spa "Cupa" (data edited by authors).

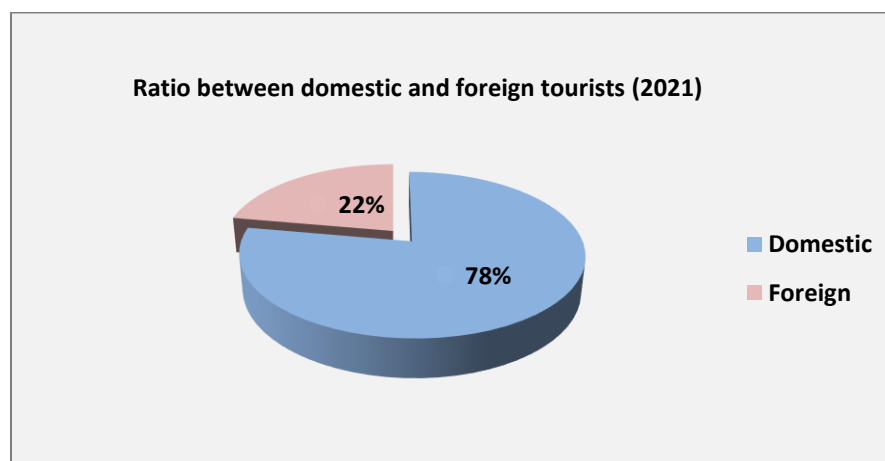


Figure 2. Presentation of the ratio of nights spent from domestic and foreign tourists

According to the data of 2021, we can conclude that in the thermal baths of Debar, the attendance ratio between domestic tourists (residents of the municipality, region and our country) and foreigners is about 80% to 20%.



Map 2. Location of thermal-mineral baths in North Macedonia.

There are 8 thermomineral baths in Republic of North Macedonia and taking into account world methodologies, we can classify the thermal-mineral bath centers into two basic groups:

- Thermal mineral centers offering spa services: Bansko, Kosovrasti and Banjishite spas, Katlanovo spa, Negorci spa.
- Thermal mineral centers that do not offer spa services: Kezovica spa, Kumanovo spa, Kocani spa. [9]

Table 5. The accommodation capacity in spas of NM.

SPA	Bansko	Debar	Katllanovo	Negorci
Accommodation capacity	-	213 rooms 522 beds	108 rooms 227 beds	134 rooms 288 beds
Conference room	✓	✓	✓	✓
Restaurant capacity	✓	130 tables 550 chairs	41 tables 125 chairs	- 390 chairs
Cooperation with the Health Insurance Fund of R.M.V	✓	✓	✓	✓
Medical center	✓	✓	✓	✓
Basic spa services	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional SPA services	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parking (capacity/vehicle)	150	90	80	90
Additional activities	Organization of events	Organization of events	Organization of events	Organization of events

Source: "Студија за СПА туризам во Република Северна Македонија, 2019. (data edited by authors).

Among all those thermal baths, Debar's spas have the highest accommodation capacity with 213 rooms and 522 beds, whereas the others have about half the capacity (the Katllanova spa with 108 rooms and 227 beds and the Negorci spas with 134 rooms and 288 beds), that's a result of great interest from customers and numerous investments and increased capacity every year from the owner of the "Capa" spas.

5. Conclusions

The study confirmed that balneal tourism in the municipality of Debar has a great impact on many aspects of social-economic life, enabling the growth of economic development through investments and employment (about 250 employees in the "Capa" hotels) and that is affected by various factors such as the increase in the standard of living, the reduction of working time, the development of the touristic tradition, material goods, urbanization, etc.

Balneary tourism has separate economic trends from other types of the tourist market, because it has a longer stay period, shows smaller seasonal oscillations, and represents a more stable type of tourism economy. The importance of the thermal baths of Debar is also increased by the fact that there are no other thermo-mineral waters in about 100 km (except those of Peshkopia, with poor infrastructure and suboptimal conditions for tourism). This fact presents extraordinary opportunities for the complex urbanism of these baths and maximum benefits from these natural resources. It is also worth emphasizing that suitable prices for rehabilitation and recreation in these hotel facilities play an important role in attracting customers.

"Capa" tourist resorts during 2020 faced a large decrease in the number of tourists by about 40%, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which significantly affected the tourism industry, but through planning, appropriate policies, and the promotion of various tourist offers, this sector quickly improved and from year to year it shows a satisfactory increase in the number of domestic and foreign tourists.

We recommend that for even higher development of the tourism economy in the thermal baths of Debar, it is necessary to intervene in the state through the design of a long-term and sustainable strategy by making the correct determination of direct and indirect measures based on means and ways for the economic development (to improve road infrastructure, transport services, to promote tourism through videos and brochures, to promote local tourism through campaigns and reasonable offers for the standard of living of our citizens, etc). Also, special importance should be given to the promotion of tourist offers through the media and marketing in international terms, since today's technological-modern tools enable the immediate connection of the offer with the tourist demand.

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