

## DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF SPA TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the development of spa tourism in North Macedonia. Spa tourism is the use of thermal, mineral, and thermal-mineral waters, for treatment, rehabilitation, and recreation where numerous recreational, sports, and cultural activities are held. This type of tourism is one of the oldest organized forms of tourism in the present-day area of North Macedonia, since ancient times. The Republic of North Macedonia states that the possibility of having a developed tourism economy should be based on its alternative forms, with the proper utilization of mineral and thermal-mineral resources, the country will greatly benefit from curative and spa tourism.

The focus of the paper will be the thermal mineral spas: Katlanova Spa, Kocani Spa, Spas of Dibra: Kosovrast and Banjishte, Kezovica Spa, Bansko Spa, Negorci Spa, Kumanovo Spa. In addition to these thermal mineral baths that are already used by tourists, less well-known sources that have the potential to turn into new tourist destinations will be mentioned, such as: Thermo mineral resources close to river Shkumbim near Tetovo, Dobrevo in Zletovo, Istibanja in Vinica, Uji i së shtunës (Sabota Voda) in Veles, Volkova in Skopje and others. Following is the data on the number of tourists, the number of domestic and foreign tourists, and the nights spent by them in spa resorts for the period 2018-2022. And the accommodation capacities found near the thermal mineral baths.

*Key words:* Spa tourism, thermomineral baths, thermo-mineral spring, tourists, North Macedonia, etc.

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### 1. Introduction

[5] The Republic of North Macedonia is rich in mineral and thermo-mineral resources with over 64 such resources, which are very important tourist potential. They have different characteristics and different water temperatures. From the analysis performed on the mineral and thermomineral springs in NMK, it was observed that they contain elements that are characteristic of juvenile-endogenous waters such as: sulfur, arsenic, phosphorus, iodine, bromine, etc. [3] There are several divisions of mineral waters according to different criteria, and the following Professional paper is most often encountered:

- According to water yield we have permanent and variable (temporary).
- According to the direction of water movement, there are mineral waters that originate from the interior of the earth and mineral waters that emerge above the earth and flow towards the interior.
- According to the mineral amount, they are divided into slightly mineralized (2-5 g/l), medium (5-15 g/l) and highly mineralized (15-30 g/l);
- According to temperature, mineral waters are divided into cold (up to 20°C), warm waters (20-36°C), thermal (37-42°C) and hyperthermal (above 42°C).

## 2. Geographical position, borders and size of the Republic of North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia is a country in South-Eastern Europe, it is located in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula.

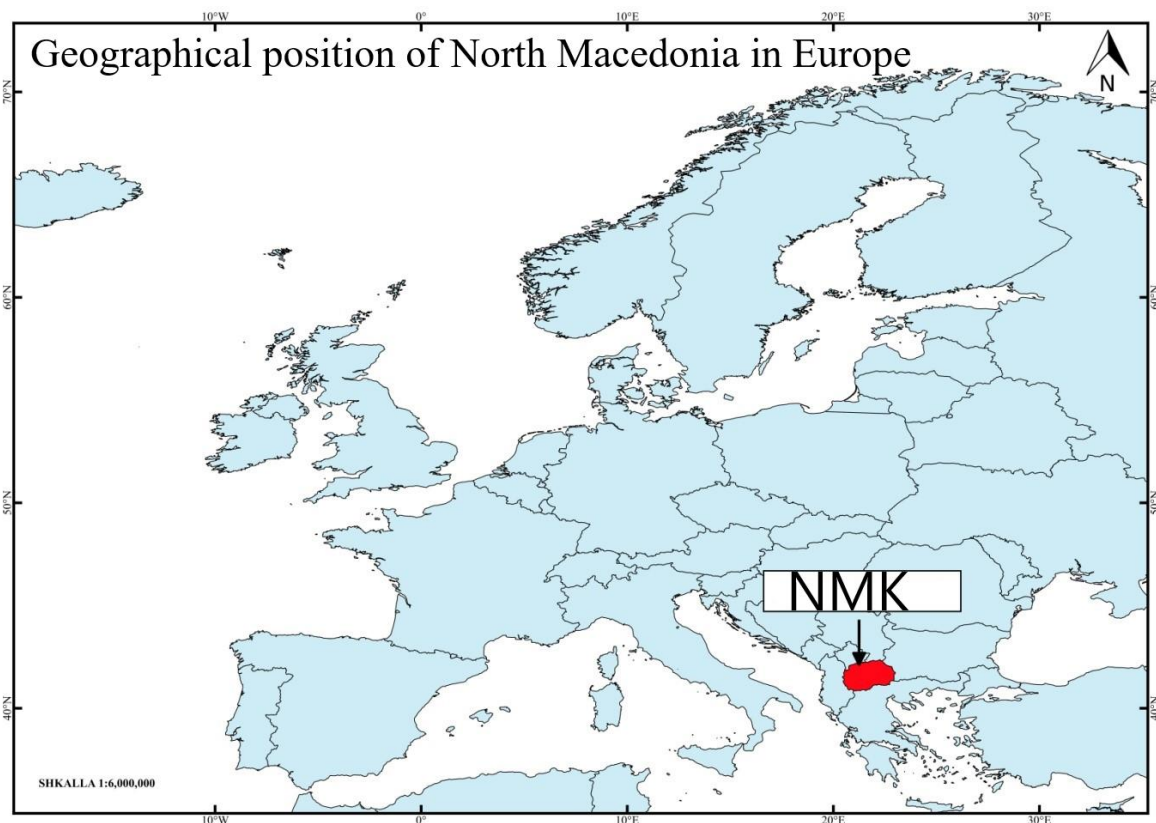
It lies between the parallel  $40^{\circ} 51' 16''$  and  $42^{\circ} 22' 21''$  north latitude and between the meridian  $20^{\circ} 27' 32''$  and  $23^{\circ} 02' 12''$  east longitude.

Although North Macedonia is a "geographically handicapped state" and for foreign tourists it serves mostly as a transit passage to neighboring countries that are close to the seas, however, this should not be an obstacle for the development of tourism in our country, especially for the development of alternative types of tourism, such as spa tourism.

With an area of  $25,713 \text{ km}^2$ , the Republic of North Macedonia belongs to the group of small continental states.

North Macedonia is bordered by five countries: Serbia to the north, Kosovo to the northwest, Albania to the west, Greece to the south, and Bulgaria to the east.

The total length of the NMK border line is 899 km. Of this length, 809 km or 90% of it is land border. While the other 90 km are lake 47 km and river 43 km.

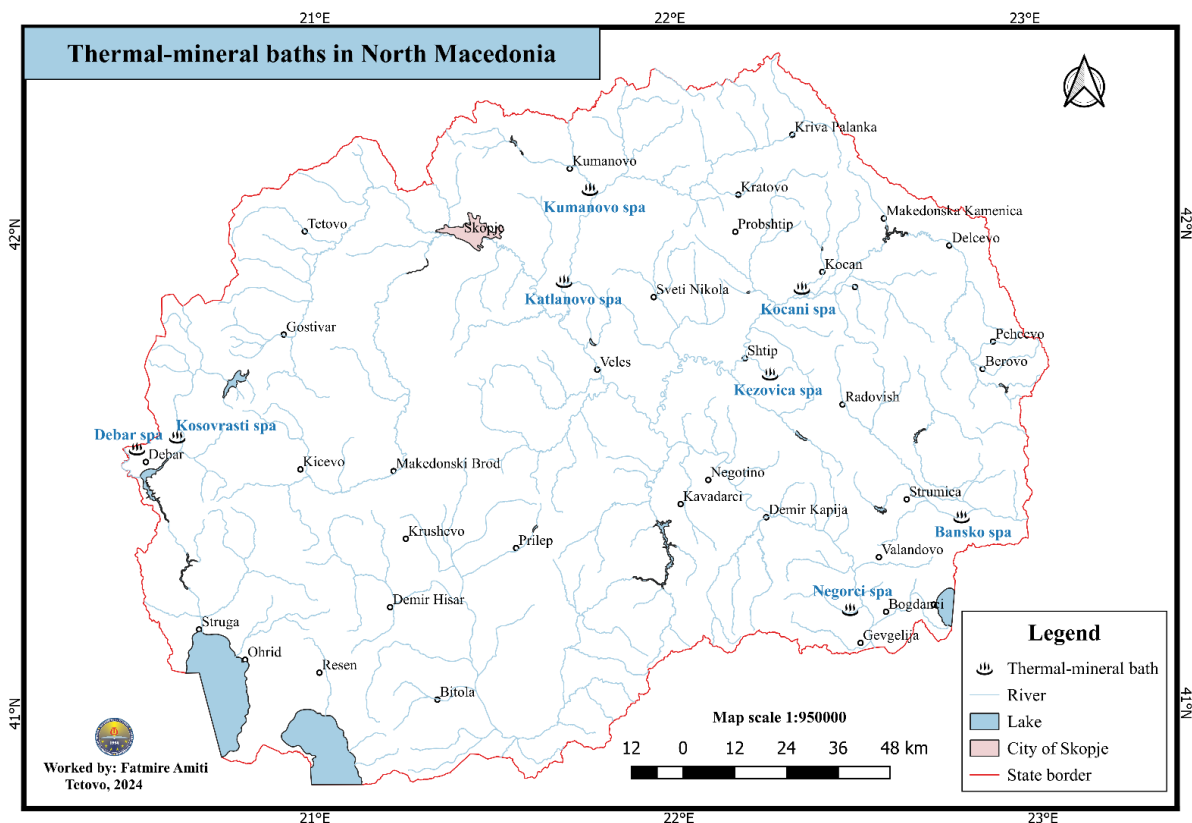


*Map 1.*

## 3. Thermomineral baths in North Macedonia

[4] There are 8 thermomineral baths in North Macedonia: The Katlanova spa is located in the village of Katlanova, 15 km away from the capital of NMK - Skopje. Kocani spa (Banja) is located 7 km from the city of Kocani. The two themominal baths of Debar: Kosovrasti, which is located east of Debar, at 550 meters above sea level, near the village of Kosovrasti i Poshtëm, and Banjishte (or Debar spa), is located 4 km from the city of Debar, near the border with Albania. It is at 780 m above sea level, near the mountains Kircin and Deshat. Kezovica spa is located near the bank of the river Bregallnica, in the southeastern part of Shtip. Bansko spa is

located at 270 above sea level, near Belasica mountain, in the village of Bansko, 12 km southeast of Strumica. Negorci spa is located in the south of NMK., near the city of Gevgelija, only 6 km from the border with Greece, at the foot of Kozuf mountain, at an altitude of 22 m. Kumanovo spa is located 4 km east of the town of Kumanovo, close to the railway line to Belgrade.



Map 2.

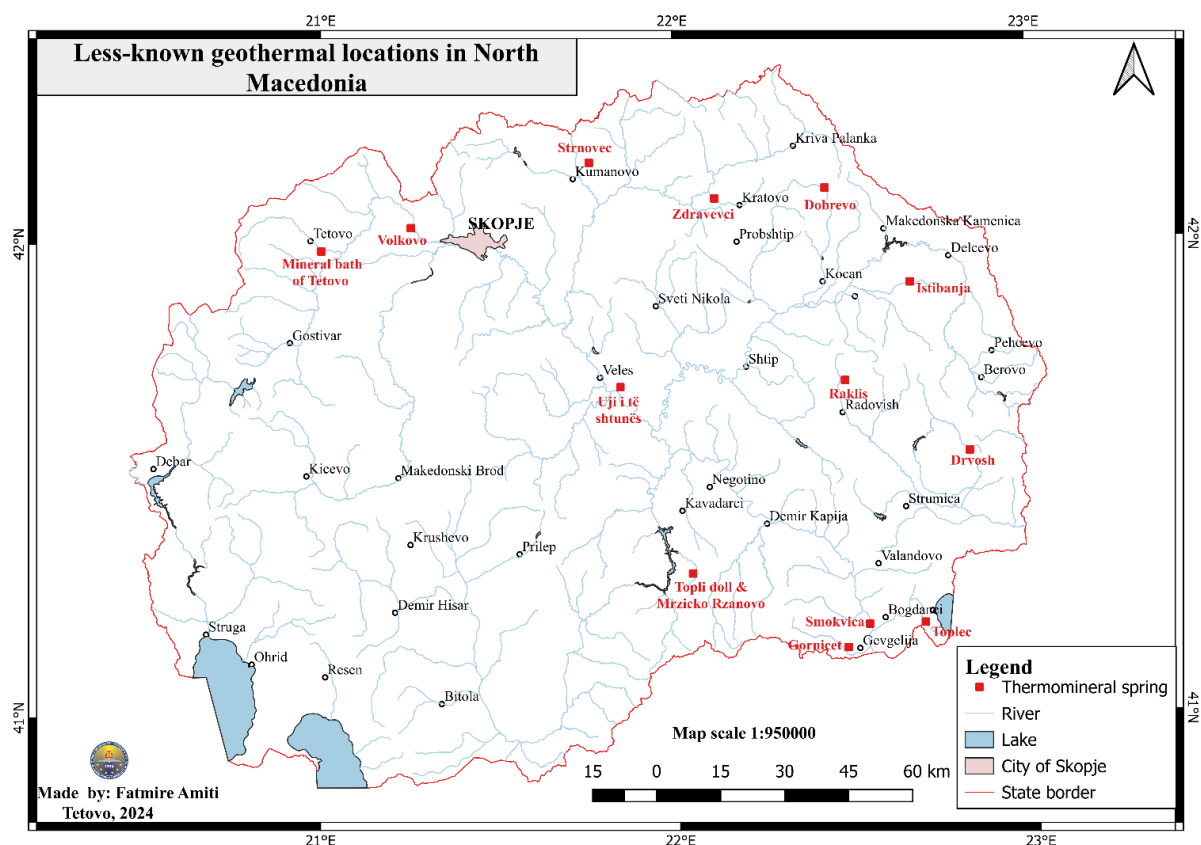
Table 1. Overview of thermal-mineral baths centers in the Republic of North Macedonia

Thermomineral bath	Location	Region	Spring capacity l/sec	Water temperature in °C
Bansko spa	v. Bansko/Strumica	Southeast	40 l/sec	72
Debar spa	v. Banjishte/Debar	Southwest	51 l/sec	38.8
Kosovrasti spa	v. Kosovrast/Debar	Southwest	68.8 l/sec	48
Kocani spa	v. Banje/Kocan	East	65 l/sec	64
Katlanovo spa	v. Katlanovo/Skopje	Skopje region	1.5-2 l/sec	41
Kezovica spa	v. Novo Sello/Shtip	East	36 l/sec	64
Kumanovo spa	v. Proevc/Kumanovo	Northeast	2.5 l/sec	30.4
Negorci spa	v. Negorc/Gevgelija	Southeast	1.1 l/sec	40

Source: Ташков, Н & Методијески, Д (2014): Термален туризам, рг. 19.

Kosovrasti spa has the largest water flow with 68.8 l/sec. Bansko spa has the highest temperature of 72°C.

In addition to these baths, North Macedonia also has a significant number of other geothermal resources that are not exploited, but which have the potential to be new tourist objects, thus enriching the country's tourist offer. We have presented some of these locations on the map below.



Map 3.

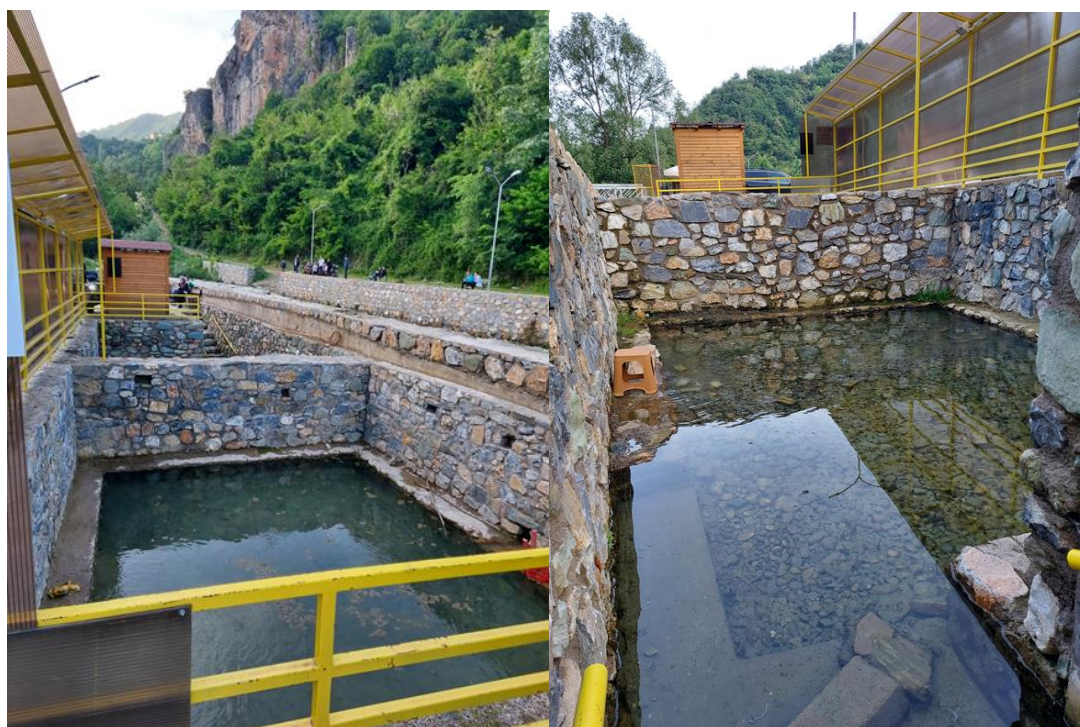
From the analysis of the map of the location of the baths in North Macedonia and the map of the less known geothermal locations in North Macedonia, we see that the eastern and southeastern parts of the country are richer in thermal mineral resources.

Table 2. Overview of less known geothermal locations in North Macedonia

Geothermal source	Location	Spring capacity l/sec	Temperature °C
Mineral bath of Tetovo	River Pena/Tetovo	10	27-30
Dobrevo	Zletovo	8	28
Drvos	Baldovci/Strumica	5	29
Gornacet	Gevgelija	5	24
Istibanja	Vinica	73	65
Zdraveci	Kratovo	20	20-50
Raklis	Radovish	2-3	27
Uji i të shtunës(Saturday water)	Veles	3.5-4	90-120
Smokvica	Gevgelija	120	65
Strnovec	Staro Negoricane	14.4	39
Toplec	Dojran	-	40
Topli doll & Mrzicko Rzanovo	Kavadarci	2	27
Volkovo	Skopje	20	25

Source: Chingoski, V. & Petrevska, B. (2021) Geothermal resources: new insights for spa tourism in North Macedonia. International Scientific Conference GEOBALCANICA 2021. pg. 134

In Table number 2, we have presented an overview of 13 less well-known geothermal locations where the resource capacity is between 2-120 l/sec and the temperature is between 24-120°C. The Smokvica spring has the largest water flow, while the Toplec spring in Dojran has the highest temperature.



*Photos 1 and 2. Mineral resources near Tetovo (F.Amiti)*

#### 4. Number of tourists in thermal-mineral baths of North Macedonia

The number of tourists who visit the baths of North Macedonia varies depending on the year and the specific location of the baths.

**Table 3.** The number of tourists in spa resorts in the period 2018-2022

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Spa resorts</b>	Domestic	12,910	10,165	4,701	6,791	8,896
	Foreign	522	1,089	812	733	725
	Total	13,432	11,254	5,513	7,524	9,621
<b>NMK</b>	Domestic	419,590	427,370	349,308	408,500	431,841
	Foreign	707,345	757,593	118,206	293,963	537,436
	Total	1,126,935	1,184,963	467,514	702,463	969,277
<b>Spa resorts in the state framework %</b>		1,19	0,94	1,17	1,07	0,99

Source: [www.stat.gov.mk](http://www.stat.gov.mk)

(Edited by the author)

The number of tourists in the spa resorts make up 1 percent of the total number of tourists in North Macedonia. These resorts are mostly visited by domestic tourists.

**Table 4.** Nights spent by tourists in spa resorts in the period 2018-2022

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Spa resorts</b>	Domestic	105,626	86,515	36,798	66,086	83,378
	Foreign	2,417	11,920	12,315	9,396	6,598
	Total	108,043	98,435	49,113	75,482	89,976
<b>NMK</b>	Domestic	1,685,273	1,684,627	1,444,605	1,643,083	1,703,841
	Foreign	1,491,535	1,577,771	252,930	670,460	1,144,763
	Total	3,176,808	3,262,398	1,697,535	2,313,543	2,848,604
<b>Spa resorts in the state framework %</b>		3.4	3.0	2.8	3.2	3.1

Source: *www.stat.gov.mk*

(Edited by the author)

The nights spent by tourists in the spa resorts make up 3 percent of the total number of nights spent by tourists in all of the tourist facilities of North Macedonia. The average night stay by local tourists at the state level is three nights, while foreign tourists 4 nights. But, in the spa resorts, in particular, the stay of tourists is longer, on average 7 nights. This, of course, is related to the fact that visitors to these spa centers receive various medical therapies and other services that have a certain time limit as to how long and how often they should be performed.

### 5. Accommodation capacities near spa centers in North Macedonia

[1]. Taking into account world methodologies, we can classify the thermal-mineral bath centers in the Republic of North Macedonia into two basic groups:

- Thermal mineral centers offering spa services: Bansko, Kosovrasti and Banjishte spas, Katlanova spa, Negorci spa.
- Thermal mineral centers that do not offer spa services: Kezovica spa, Kumanovo spa, Kocani spa.

	Б а н с к о	К о с о в р а с т и	Б а н ј и ш т е	К а т л а н о в а	Н е г о р ц и	К е з о в и ц а	К у м а н о в о	К о ц а н и
<b>Accommodation capacity</b>	✓	213 rooms 522 beds	108 rooms 227 beds	134 rooms 288 beds	✓	/	/	/
<b>Conference room</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	/	/	/	/
<b>Restaurant capacity</b>	✓	130 tables 550 chairs	41 tables 125 chairs	390 chairs	/	/	/	/
<b>Cooperation with the Health Insurance Fund of R.M.V</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	/	/	/	/
<b>Medical center</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	/	/	/	/
<b>Basic spa services</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	/	/
<b>Additional SPA services</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	/	/	/	/
<b>Parking (capacity/vehicle)</b>	150	90	80	90	20	10	/	/
<b>Additional activities</b>	Organization of events	Organization of events	Organization of events	Organization of events	/	/	/	/

Source: Студија за СПА туризам во Република Северна Македонија. 2019.

(Edited by the author)

## **6. Obstacles in the development of spa tourism in North Macedonia**

Spa tourism, as one of the tourist branches with a lot of potential for further and sustainable development, is stuck in some obstacles and problems that stagnate its improvement and development, such as:

- The small number of baths, considering that the country has over 60 mineral and thermal mineral sources, the existence of only 8 baths is insufficient and leads to a lack of accommodation for a larger number of tourists.
- Lack of a development strategy or plan from competent and relevant bodies in this field.
- Lack of investments, low financial investments in infrastructure, services and promotion, affect the growth and development of spa tourism.
- Poor road infrastructure, accommodation facilities near the spas and transport services sometimes make it difficult to reach the spas.
- Lack of promotion and marketing. In promotional videos of tourist facilities, in brochures, etc. the thermal-mineral baths are given a very small space or not mentioned at all, making many people unaware of the tourist potential of the baths in North Macedonia.
- Inadequate services make some visitors not satisfied with their experience in the country's spa centers.
- Competition with other countries. States close to North Macedonia such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy have developed spa tourism at a much higher level than NMK. Therefore, tourists, especially foreign ones, may prefer them as vacation destinations, bypassing North Macedonia.

## **7. Conclusions**

Spa tourism in North Macedonia has great potential for growth and development, given that this country has a significant number of exploited and unexploited thermal sources. Improving spa tourism in North Macedonia involves a combination of strategies aimed at improving infrastructure, marketing, service quality, and accessibility. The measures to be taken include: Upgrading existing spa facilities and developing new ones where potential natural resources are available. Ensuring that these facilities are modern, and well-maintained to attract visitors seeking relaxation and wellness. Marketing campaigns to promote North Macedonia as a spa tourism destination, highlighting the unique natural features of the spas, such as thermal springs, mineral-rich waters, and picturesque surroundings. Raising the quality of services: training spa staff to provide high-quality services, including massage therapies, beauty treatments, and wellness programs. Improvement of transportation infrastructure to make it easier for visitors to reach spa destinations. This includes upgrading roads, expanding public transportation options, and enhancing connectivity with major airports and cities. Collaboration with local communities, engaging local communities in the development and promotion of spa tourism. With financial support and capital investments, modern and attractive bathing complexes can be built. A choice for this could be foreign investments or public-private partnerships as in other countries. Likewise, it is important to make efforts to protect and preserve natural thermal resources, ensuring that tourism has a minimal impact on the environment.

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