

CURRENT ISSUES OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM BASED ON POPULATION HEALTH PRESERVATION IN EASTERN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract: Research is aimed at elucidating the salient challenges impeding the maturation of the health and wellness tourism cluster within the Eastern Kazakhstan region. The inquiry encompasses findings from a customer survey conducted within the Eastern Kazakhstan Region's sanatorium resort visitors in Katon-Karagay District in 2022-2023. Significant attention is devoted to the natural-ecological, economic-infrastructure, and socio-cultural components constituting the tourist cluster are expounded upon. Quantitative analysis revealed therapeutic mineral baths for targeted activities and massage for complementary activities to be the most fitting activities in the region's sanatoriums. Satisfaction rates detected 98% for the quality of medical services, 95% for the professionalism of medical personnel, 90% for medical procedures, 88.9% for entertainment programs, and 68.9% for children's activities. Critical challenges in medical and wellness tourism include insufficient accommodations for SPA and wellness, VIP segment tourists, and health-oriented tourist activities, including catering to children. The nation witnesses a promising landscape for the "Katon-Karagay" sanatorium-resort cluster, underscoring the imperative of establishing a public-private partnership and highlighting the need for a public-private partnership.

Key words: sanatorium-resort complex, tourist cluster, Eastern Kazakhstan region, Katon-Karagay, therapeutic and wellness tourism, public-private partnership

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INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning field of health and wellness tourism (HWT) is currently experiencing a surge in both domestic and international demand. This phenomenon can be attributed to the increasing awareness and emphasis on holistic well-being among individuals seeking to enhance their physical, mental, and emotional health through purposeful travel experiences (Ilies et al., 2017; Wendt, 2021). Within the broader context of national development priorities, exemplified by the "Kazakhstan-2030" Strategy, the health of citizens has emerged as a paramount concern. This strategic vision has culminated in the formulation and implementation of the state program "People's Health," which underscores the pivotal role of healthcare in ensuring the overall welfare of the population.

On a national scale, health policy in Kazakhstan is intricately intertwined with the advancement of sanatorium-based treatment, a cornerstone of the country's healthcare approach (Nazarbayev, 2003). As the nation acknowledges the significance of preventive and curative health measures, the integration of health and wellness tourism aligns seamlessly

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with the overarching objectives of promoting healthy lifestyles and enhancing the quality of life for its citizens. By exploring the nexus between health policy, wellness tourism, and strategic development initiatives, this study aims to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions that shape the landscape of health and wellness tourism in Kazakhstan and its implications on the nation's overall well-being (Dmitriyev et al., 2021; Suleimenov et al., 2022; Berdenov, 2015).

Through an analytical examination of scholarly discourse, empirical evidence, and policy directives, this research seeks to elucidate the intricate interactions between health and wellness tourism, policy frameworks, and the broader socio-economic landscape. By understanding these interconnections, stakeholders can make informed decisions to harness the potential of HWT as a catalyst for individual and societal well-being while contributing to the attainment of national developmental goals. The focal objective of Health and Wellness Tourism (HWT) within a regional context encompasses the attainment of economic efficacy and is subject to the patterns of spatial development inherent to growth centers and nodes (Semenova et al., 2020). Its intrinsic framework is shaped by the influence of natural-resource factors (Almasan et al., 2019, Chen et al., 2013), economic considerations, infrastructure provisions, ethno-social dynamics (Huang and Xu, 2014), administrative and managerial elements, as well as tourist demand, historical evolution, and business initiatives (Dryglas and Salamaga, 2017).

Contemporary wellness tourism garners global attention due to tourists' growing concern with health and rehabilitation. According to the Global Wellness Institute, wellness tourism encompasses endeavors to "sustain or enhance personal well-being" (Praprom and Laipaporn, 2023). Globally, wellness tourism manifests as a robust and lucrative sector, growing at an annual rate of 20% with a value of USD 60 billion. Factors contributing to the nation's attractiveness for wellness tourism include political and social stability, a reputable healthcare sector, substantial investments in healthcare infrastructure, accredited medical organizations, cutting-edge equipment, adept medical personnel, and developed tourism infrastructure (Battakova and Saipov, 2022). This study selects the Eastern Kazakhstan region as an exemplary model for comparing mountainous regions. Situated at the heart of Eurasia, the region boasts diverse landscapes, tourist attractions, remote locations, and a modest standard of living. Moreover, the Katon-Karagay State National Nature Park, located in the Eastern Kazakhstan region's Katon-Karagay district, is nestled within the Southern Altay mountains, featuring elevations surpassing 3000 meters (Keukenov, 2022).

In contemporary times, the Eastern Kazakhstan region is marked by swift economic progress, a beneficial geopolitical and geographical position, advantageous natural and climatic circumstances, a substantial historical and cultural legacy, centuries-old hospitality traditions, and the existence of educational establishments focused on nurturing specialized skills for the tourism sector (Yegorina and Loginovskaya, 2016; Makhanova, 2022).

These landscape components with balneological significance and resultant health-focused attributes have substantial potential for medical and wellness tourism development (Tokpanov et al., 2021; Nakonechnykh et al., 2021; Akhmedenov, 2021; Mazhitova et al., 2018). That means that such emergence of mountain tourism can improve mental well-being, especially for those coping with stress, trauma, or conditions like disability (Dunets et al., 2019; Dunets et al., 2020). Moreover (Hojcska and Szabó, 2021) highlighted that this acknowledgment of the significance had propelled health and wellness services to prominence within the tourism offerings spectrum (Dmitriyev et al., 2022).

In addition, the pandemic's repercussions have profoundly reshaped the tourism landscape (Rogerson, 2021). Consequently, changing paradigms will guide preferences for health and wellness journeys (Makhanova et al., 2022). Regions endowed with recreational centers and pandemic-related tourism events harbor the potential for health and wellness tourism growth. The Eastern Kazakhstan region, particularly the "Katon-Karagay" direction, emerges as a prominent choice (Hojcska and Szabó, 2021). This research aims to identify challenges in developing Eastern Kazakhstan's health and wellness tourism cluster by analyzing tourists' preferences and satisfaction levels. The investigation entails localized health-oriented tourism activities, surveying tourists using original methodologies (Efimenko and Glukhov, 2012: 54), and interpreting outcomes. Analysis of European tourism clusters describes the existence of HWT. It presents the structure of the health and wellness tourism cluster that encompasses medical treatment, wellness, and spa subcategories since the 80-s (The research of "TRAN – Health tourism in EU: The Department of General Policy Investigations of Structural Policy and Cohesion Policy of the European Union, 2005) (Figure 1). As depicted in the provided diagram, the conglomeration of the mentioned subtypes of Health and Wellness Tourism (HWT) shapes the structure of the medical and wellness tourism cluster (Figure 2).

According to (Belov, 2016) at the core of such a cluster operates a specialized complex of enterprises providing health and wellness, educational tourist services, immediate dining facilities, and an array of supplementary amenities within a sanatorium-resort complex, alongside tourist transportation. The nucleus of the cluster centers on the consumers of the tourist product, namely tourists, who can be accommodated both within the sanatorium's premises and beyond – in hotels and campgrounds (Ozgeldinova et al., 2017). The cluster core also encompasses tourist firms rendering services related to arranging sanatorium-resort trips, transportation passes, tourist accommodation, and organizing excursions. The coordination of cluster activities is overseen by a management board (administration) comprising representatives from governmental and business sectors. Consequently, the functional complexes of the medical and wellness tourism cluster fall within the realm of public-private partnership expertise.

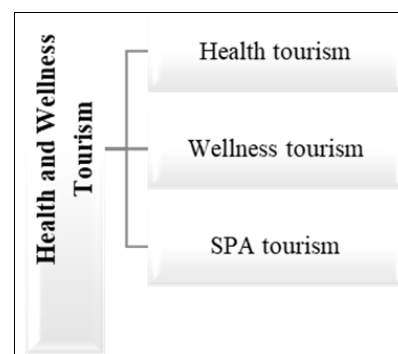


Figure 1. Medical and Wellness Tourism (Source: Research Documentation, 2023)

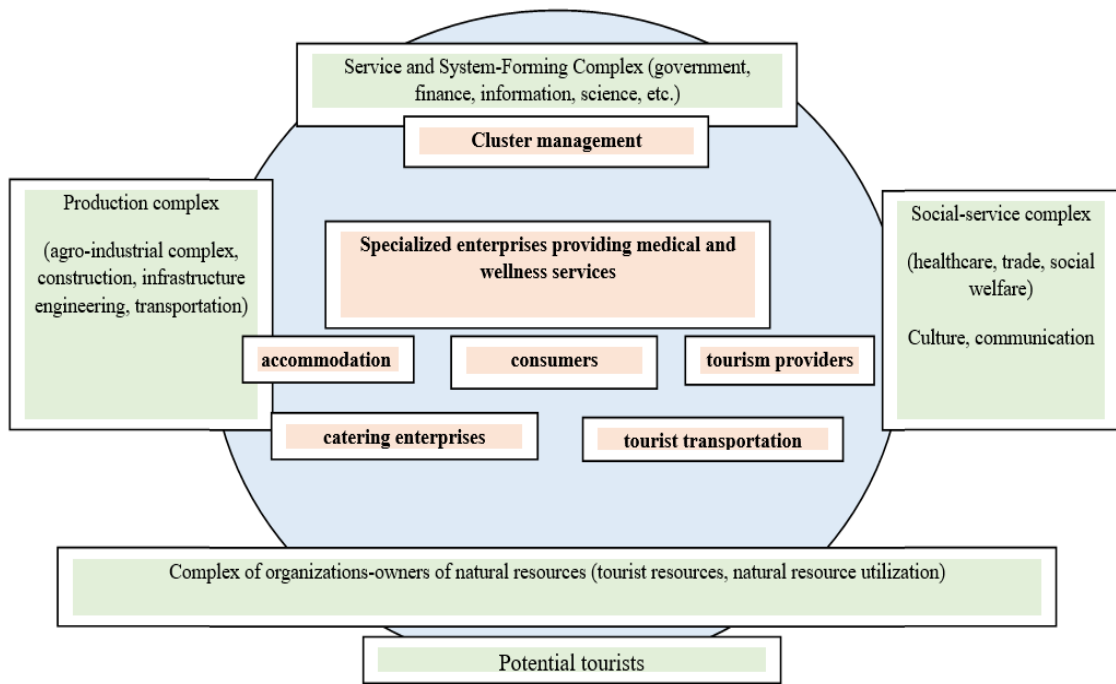


Figure 2. Functional complexes of medical and wellness tourism cluster (Source: Research Documentation, 2023)

"Katon-Karagay" - the primary focal point of investigation

The East Kazakhstan region connects Southern Siberia and Altay with Central Asia while sharing borders with two areas of Russia, a Chinese province, and three regions of Kazakhstan (Takhtayeva, 2014; Safarov et al., 2020).

Encompassing the Katon-Karagay State National Natural Park are the southern macro-slopes of the Lystvyaga and Katun ridges (constituting the south and eastern flanks of the Belukha Knot), the western expanse of the high-altitude Ukok plateau in Kazakhstan, Southern Altay, Tarbagatay (Altay), and Sarymsakty (Janaleyeva, 2010) (Figure 3). Furthermore, of particular significance are the rare species requiring conservation efforts, with more than 30 of these species teetering on the brink of extinction and listed in the Red Book (Aralbayev et al., 2004).

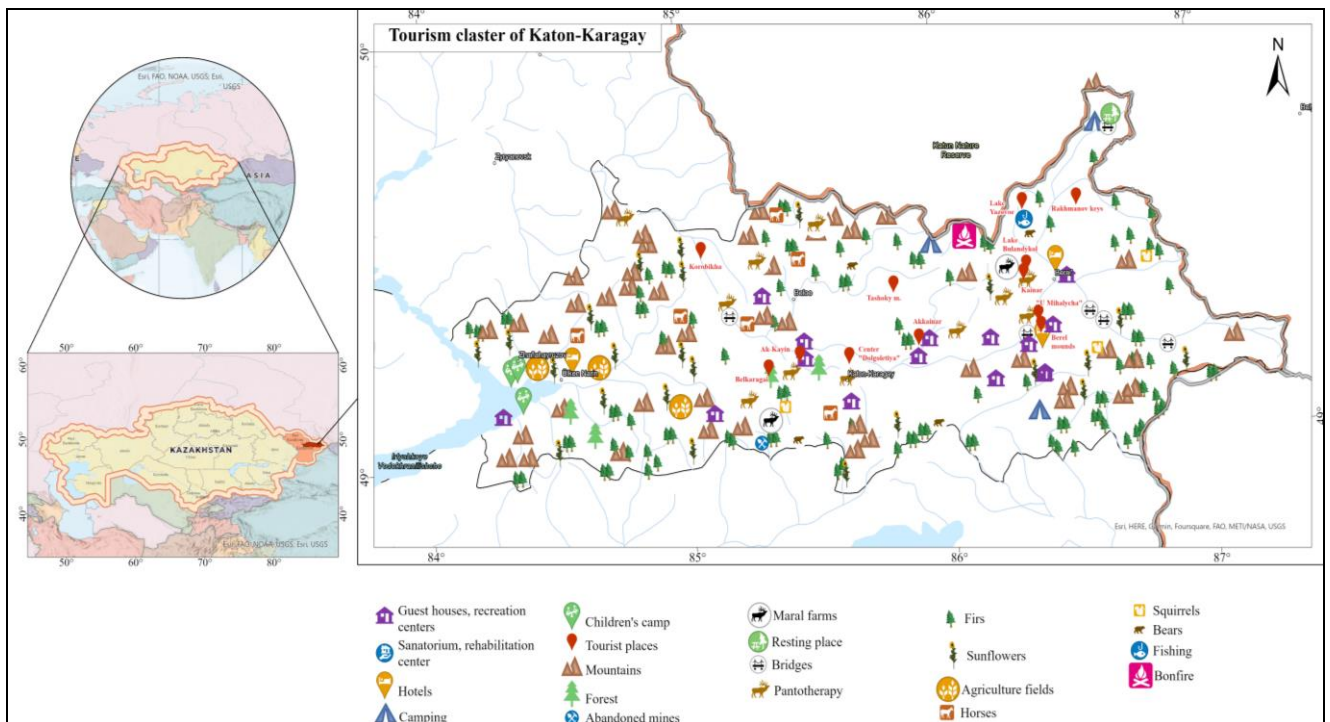


Figure 3. Tourism cluster of Katon-Karagay (Source: compiled by Shyngysbaeva in the ArcGIS program)

The park's demarcation is delineated as follows:

- Northward and eastward: Its boundary adjoins Russia (Altay Republic).
- Southeastward: The park's demarcation traverses the terrain of the Katon-Karagay district.
- Westward: The Farpusnaya (Shurshutsu) River defines the boundary to the hamlets of Belkaragai (bear) and Soldatovo.

- Southward: The boundary traces the northern declivities of the Southern Altay Mountain ranges, demarcating the confines of the Altay Tarbagatay, Muza-Belsky forestry, Chingistay forestry, and aligning with the administrative boundaries of the Katon-Karagay and Kurchum districts (Ivashchenko, 2009).

Over the preceding 10-15 years, the park's domain has witnessed the emergence of novel tourist attractions, substantial transportation infrastructure enhancements, and innovative investment initiatives. From our perspective, the formulation of a destination development strategy should be firmly anchored in the tripartite constituents of the tourism cycle: the natural-ecological, economic infrastructure, and socio-cultural. We shall succinctly expound on each facet.

The natural-ecological constituent encompasses the heart of the resort domain, comprising tracts imbued with the status of healthful and wellness-centric locales and the Katon-Karagay Natural Park itself. Nature, as a maternal benefactor, has endowed these territories with resplendent landmarks, including the Berel Mounds, the disused high-altitude Kokkol mine, the Rahmanovskie Klyuchi thermal springs, the Kokkol, Rahmanovskoe, Yazevoye, Ushkol, Maralye, Kaumysh, Bukhtarminskoe, and Yazevoy Kokkol water bodies, along with the cascading Rahmanovskiy waterfall. Additionally, these areas hold historical significance as they encompass the northern arm of the Great Silk Road, referred to as the Golden Branch of the ancient caravan route, and the Austrian road.

Economic-Infrastructure Framework. The official page of Katon-Karagay region akimat, in the vicinity, there operates a sanatorium ("Rahmanovskie Klyuchi") situated within the premises of the Katon-Karagay Botanical-Mineralogical Reserve and the Katon-Karagay State National Natural Park. The sanatorium's single-time capacity is 80 beds, specializing in balneotherapy (Zhensikbayeva and Saparov, 2017).

Additionally, there is one rehabilitation center ("Center for Longevity") and 12 healing resorts ("Zhannat" in Barlyk village, "Ak-Kayyn" in Katon-Karagay village, "Bayan" in Topkayn village, "Akmara" in Akmara village, "Akbulak Altay" in Akmara village, Tikhoye section, "Maraldy" in Maraldy village, "Abzal" in Sennoe village, "Zhazaba" in Yazovoye village, "Belovodie" in Bekalka village, "Verkh-Katun" in Aksharbak village, "Dimash" in Shubaragash village, "Katon-Karagay Deer Park" in Akmara village, "Temirlan" in Belqaragai village), five hotels, 12 guesthouses, 12 cafes, four restaurants, nine petrol stations, one pharmaceutical workshop for processing propolis and honey products (JSC "Aksu DEEN"), two honey product processing workshops (Collective farming of "Kasenov" and "Nectar Katon-Karagay"), two bus stations, and one seasonal ferry. The sanatoriums and healing resorts of the region collectively offer 105 rooms with a total capacity of 920 beds per day**.

Socio-Cultural Components of the Tourist Framework encompass supplementary activities within wellness and tourism. These involve traditional crafts and trades such as metal roofing and ceramics production. Primary tourist attractions surround the Katon-Karagay Mosque, the Pokrovskaya Church, museums including the "Oralkhan Bokei" House-Museum in Chingistay village, and the expansive Naryn Historical and Ethnographic Museum. Also, of interest are features like the "Key to the Eye" spring, the "Snake" well, and the City History Museum.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During the initial phase of the research conducted within the primary destination area of the wellness resort "Rahmanovskie Klyuchi," questionnaires were devised to complete a preliminary survey of tourists. The central aim of the survey was to discern the level of satisfaction among clients of the sanatorium regarding the services provided. Anticipating the culmination of this endeavor in 2023, a subsequent survey was meticulously designed to delineate the potential for developing wellness tourism, commonly known as Health and Wellness Tourism (HWT), in East Kazakhstan. This investigation considered the latent prospects of such an enterprise within the broader context of the regional economy (Zyryanov, 2020). Face-to-face interviews were conducted during direct interactions with the respondents, complemented by distributing printed questionnaires to health and wellness facilities.

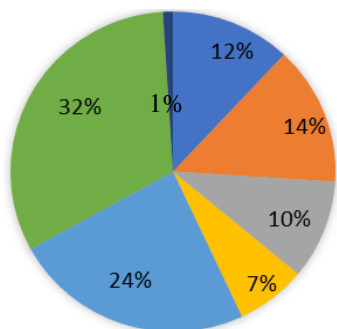
The Katon-Karagay District Department of Entrepreneurship, Industry, and Tourism played a pivotal role by furnishing substantial support in orchestrating the survey. The architecture of the questionnaires was conceived to encompass inquiries targeting various forms of activities, as well as supplemental endeavors, undertaken during visits to wellness-oriented destinations. These instruments are strategically devised to evaluate the developmental potential inherent in the HWT concept within the confines of the "Rahmanovskie Klyuchi" resort. Through a meticulous analysis of the obtained outcomes, this assessment aims to discern the most promising modes of treatment conducive to patient recovery. Notably, the implications of these findings extend beyond the confines of the specific resort, potentially finding resonance within analogous establishments. The responses regarding the appeal of therapeutic procedures, the influential factors affecting the selection of HWT destinations, and the contemplations concerning seasonality, preferences, and vacation duration held significant importance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the premises of the sanatoriums "Rahmanovskie Klyuchi," "Center of Longevity," and "Ak-Kain," an extensive collection of 1700 responses were garnered from the visiting clientele, all in response to the distributed questionnaires. After meticulous processing and in-depth analysis, a panorama of significant findings emerged.

Undoubtedly, the primary endeavor of the survey was to meticulously discern the myriad motives that impel the guests to seek respite within the confines of the resorts. The outcomes bore testament to the intricate mosaic of reasons underpinning their sojourn, vividly delineated as follows: a substantive 32% of respondents disclosed a proclivity towards targeted medical interventions; an additional 24% accentuated their fervent pursuit of convalescence and proactive well-being pursuits; a notable contingent of 14% were drawn by the captivating allure of environmental

change; another discerning 12% demonstrated a penchant for immersive exploration of the distinct travel encounters embedded within the Altay region's landscape; a further 10% displayed a discerning interest in engaging in vigorous leisure pursuits; lastly, a contemplative 7% sought sanctuary in the tranquil realms of pure relaxation (Figure 4).



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 10% displayed a discerning interest in engaging in vigorous leisure pursuits;
 7% sought sanctuary in the tranquil realms of pure relaxation
 1% of respondents simply came to relax for the occasion.

Figure 4. Purpose of Visiting the "Rahmanovskie Klyuchi" Sanatorium (Source: Shyngysbaeva, 2023)

Remarkably, a resounding 91.5% of the surveyed participants were endowed with a comprehensive cognizance of the existence and multifaceted functions intrinsic to health and wellness tourism. This perceptible awareness underpins an elevated state of enlightenment within the populace, thus significantly contributing to a more informed understanding of this tourism segment. Furthermore, 97% of the respondents expressed a sense of contentment with the caliber of medical services bestowed upon them. In comparison, a substantial 96% lauded the consummate professionalism radiated by the medical personnel. In tandem, a commendable 93% vouched for the therapeutic procedures' efficacy.

In stark contrast, the satisfaction levels discerned regarding recreational programs unveiled notable disparities: the realm of entertainment initiatives garnered an approval rating of 87.9%, active participatory endeavors merited an appreciable 85.8%, and intriguingly, offerings oriented towards children's amusement garnered an appraisal of 67.9%. The management of sanatoriums and resort complexes should accord due significance to this latter facet, given its potential to galvanize demand amongst the parental demographic.

In a meticulously structured approach, respondents were entrusted with judiciously assigning priority ratings, utilizing a 5-point scale ranging from 1, denoting the least appealing, to 5 representing the utmost allure to the diverse categories of target activities. The discerned outcomes emerging from this concerted effort, pertinently aligned with the central tenets of HWT, are astutely expounded within the contours of Table 1.

Table 1. Description of target therapies in HWT by tourists' priorities (Source: Shyngysbaeva, 2023)

Code	Name of target activities
1	Mineral baths therapy
2	Climate therapy
3	Physiotherapy
4	Mineral water drinking therapy
5	Mud therapy
6	Unnatural physical therapy (light therapy, vibration therapy, speleotherapy, ozone therapy, hyperbaric chambers)
7	Non-standard therapy (aromatherapy, apitherapy (use of bee products), hirudotherapy, herbal treatment (phytotherapy))

In parallel, the panorama of auxiliary pursuits finds comprehensive elucidation through the intricate exposition embodied in Table 2. Particularly noteworthy is the distinct resonance exhibited when respondents were queried concerning the contemporary resonance of the WOT programs.

Table 2. Related tourism therapies by priority (Source: Shyngysbaeva, 2023)

Code	Related Therapy	Code	Related Therapy
1	massage	11	Art and DIY workshops
2	sauna complex	12	children's activities (entertainment staff)
3	terrain walks (hiking)	13	craftsmanship training
4	indoor pool	14	active games
5	outdoor swimming	15	berry and mushroom picking
6	excursions (historical, botanical, geological)	16	horseback riding
7	skiing, ice skating, sledding, snowmobiling	16	dancing
8	special dietary options	17	visiting sacred sites
9	sunbathing, insulations	18	shopping
10	museum visiting	–	–

Significantly, their collective sentiment unequivocally leaned towards an affirmative inclination for water-centric procedures, as aesthetically and informatively rendered in the visual medium of Figure 5. Participants were presented with ten discernible factors influencing their predilections regarding HWT destinations within the questionnaire framework. The resulting data from their responses to this specific inquiry have been meticulously encapsulated in Table 3.

In the realm of Altay, tourism reveals a conspicuous presence of seasonality, wherein 65% of vacationers opt to immerse themselves in the warm embrace of the summer season. Moreover, the mountainous expanse of the Katon-Karagay District bestows a plethora of essential requisites conducive to orchestrating invigorating winter recreational pursuits. These prerequisites encompass the undulating foothills, an unwavering mantle of snow cover, an abundance of daylight hours, and an entrancing panorama. In this context, strategic investments, the cultivation of a distinct and resonant brand identity, and the adroit deployment of efficacious advertising stratagems assume a role of paramount significance.

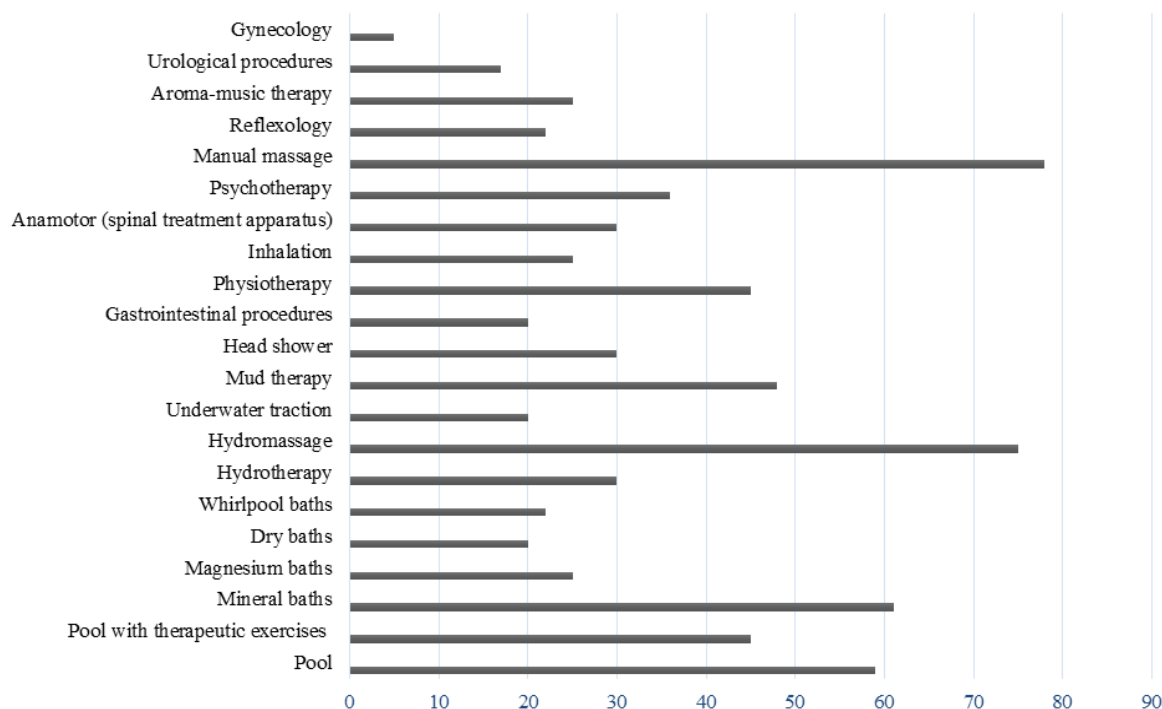


Figure 5. Priorities for medical services among tourists in percentage (Source: Shyngysbaeva, 2023)

In the annals of the Soviet era, an intriguing vignette emerges whereby trade unions extended the coveted privilege of a 21-day vacation package to eager seekers of leisurely reprieve. However, the resounding chorus of respondent voices today reveals a transformational narrative. Within this nuanced tapestry, 50% of the surveyed populace distilled their aspirations for holiday respite into a more compact 7 to 10 days. In contrast, the erstwhile revered span of 21 days commanded a mere 11% allegiance. These metrics serve as an eloquent testament to the heightened cadence of life dynamics that characterizes the landscape of market-driven paradigms.

Table 3. Primary determinants in the selection of a leisure destination encompass (Source: Shyngysbaeva, 2023)

Code	Determinants
1	Natural resources (mineral springs, climate, landscape)
2	Qualification of medical personnel
3	Availability and quality of medical equipment for conducting laboratory and instrumental examinations
4	Accommodation and catering
5	Competence of service personnel
6	Feasibility of utilizing externally sourced therapeutic agents (curative mud, mineral waters)
7	Availability and quality of information about the leisure destination
8	destination popularity
9	Hospitality of the local population
10	Level of economic development in the locality (leisure destinations)

Surpassing the threshold of 80%, the respondents unequivocally expressed their inclination to embark upon specialized expeditions tailor-fitted to accommodate exertion levels deemed admissible within the framework of age and health status. Embedded within this endorsement is the recognition of the paramount importance accorded to calibrating route length and the intricate contours of elevation disparities. As the spotlight shifts to the realm of overnight sojourns during two-day or more extended excursions, prospective participants overwhelmingly favor accommodations infused with a palpable aura of elevated comfort, serving as sanctuaries of repose in exploratory sojourns.

Venturing into the fiscal terrain, respondents candidly unveiled the mosaic of their financial capacities, portraying a distribution that unfolds thus: 45.3% of respondents reported an annual family income of up to 1 million tenge, 23.8% positioned themselves within the band of 1 to 3 million tenge, followed by 14.9% who gravitated towards the range of 3 to 4 million tenge. A discerning 4% sought their place within the echelons spanning 4 to 6 million tenges, while an additional 3% ascended to the pinnacle where annual income exceeds 6 million tenges.

This panoramic portrayal underpins a discernible stratification of financial endowments, underscoring the imperative for an expansive portfolio of lodging options and service attributes that harmoniously resonate with the heterogeneous fiscal capabilities of prospective clientele. The demographic landscape is a mosaic of ages spanning a broad spectrum, from the tender age of 18 to the seasoned maturity of 73 years. Nonetheless, the torch of prominence is gracefully passed to the age bracket between 35 and 50 years, emblematic of the diverse and variegated fabric of experiential narratives intricately woven through this study's intricate lattice.

CONCLUSION

In substantiating the specialization and structure of health and wellness tourism, it is imperative to draw upon the scholarly and methodological framework established within the broader socio-geographical domain and authors' works. One avenue for information acquisition and synthesis is through surveys, predicated upon an original methodology devised by the authors. Analyzing respondents' answers in tandem with selective surveys conducted among managers of tourism agencies concerning the consumer attractiveness of health and wellness tourism destinations in Eastern Kazakhstan has unveiled the following issues:

- Within the ambit of therapeutic courses, sanatoria with extended patient intake periods predominate, while a limited number of short-term lodging options exist in the realms of SPA and Wellness.
- More provisions should be present within sanatorium-resort complexes to accommodate tourists from the VIP segment, with service provisions befitting their corresponding class.
- Young potential tourists highlight the need for more health-focused offerings coupled with tourist activities.
- The entrenched image of a sanatorium solely as a "place of treatment" dissuades individuals with satisfactory health conditions from engaging.
- The state of advertising and the HWT cluster's brand identity should reflect the latent potentialities for expanding this domain within the region.

Addressing these outlined challenges will augur a heightened competitive edge for Eastern Kazakhstan's HWT cluster, catalyzing improvements in local employment levels and quality of life. This strategic advancement will also amplify the tourism sector's share in the gross regional product. The gleaned outcomes of the survey serve as a robust foundation for crafting a strategic spatial plan for medical-wellness tourism within the Katon-Karagay region, fostering holistic development.

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