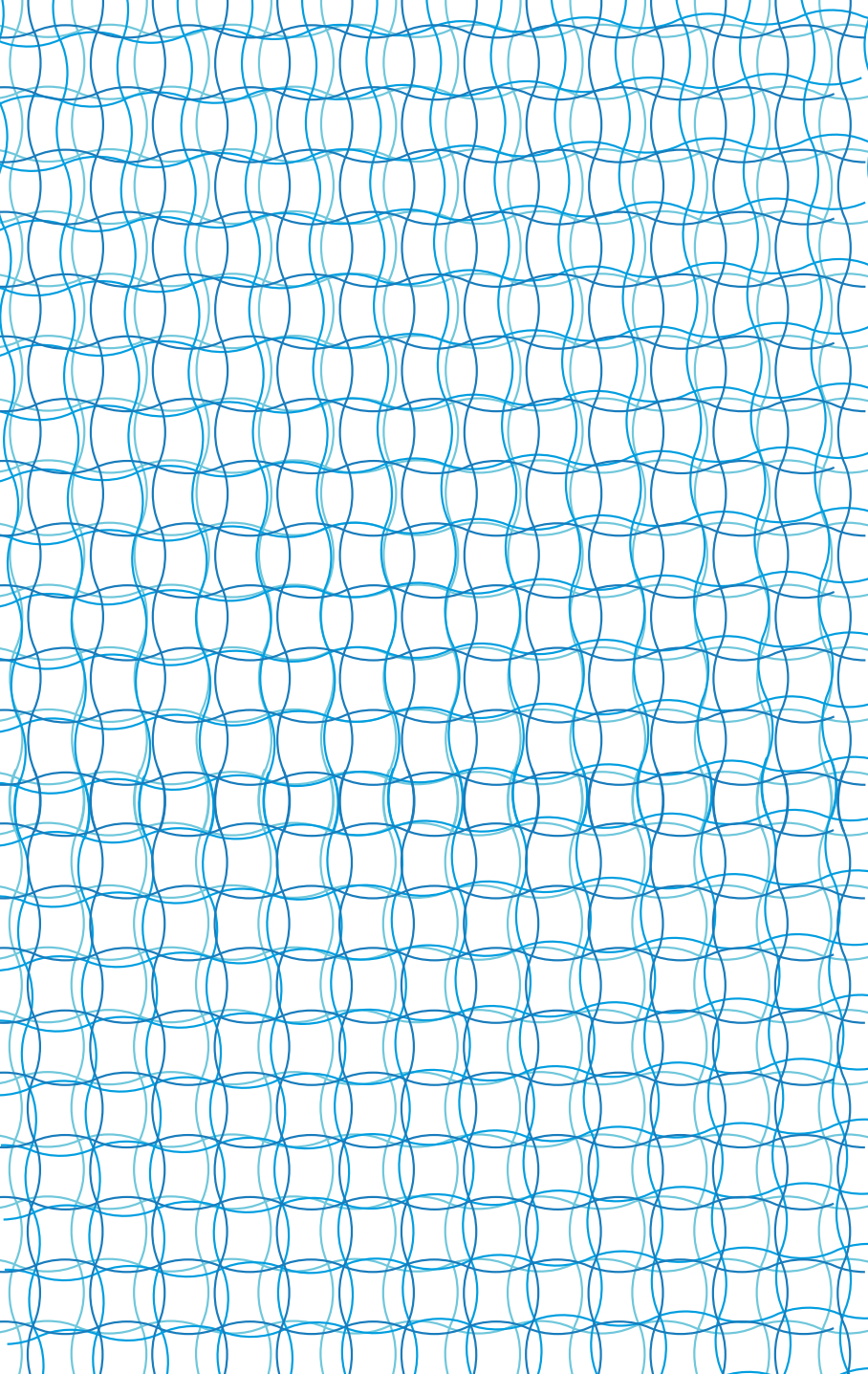


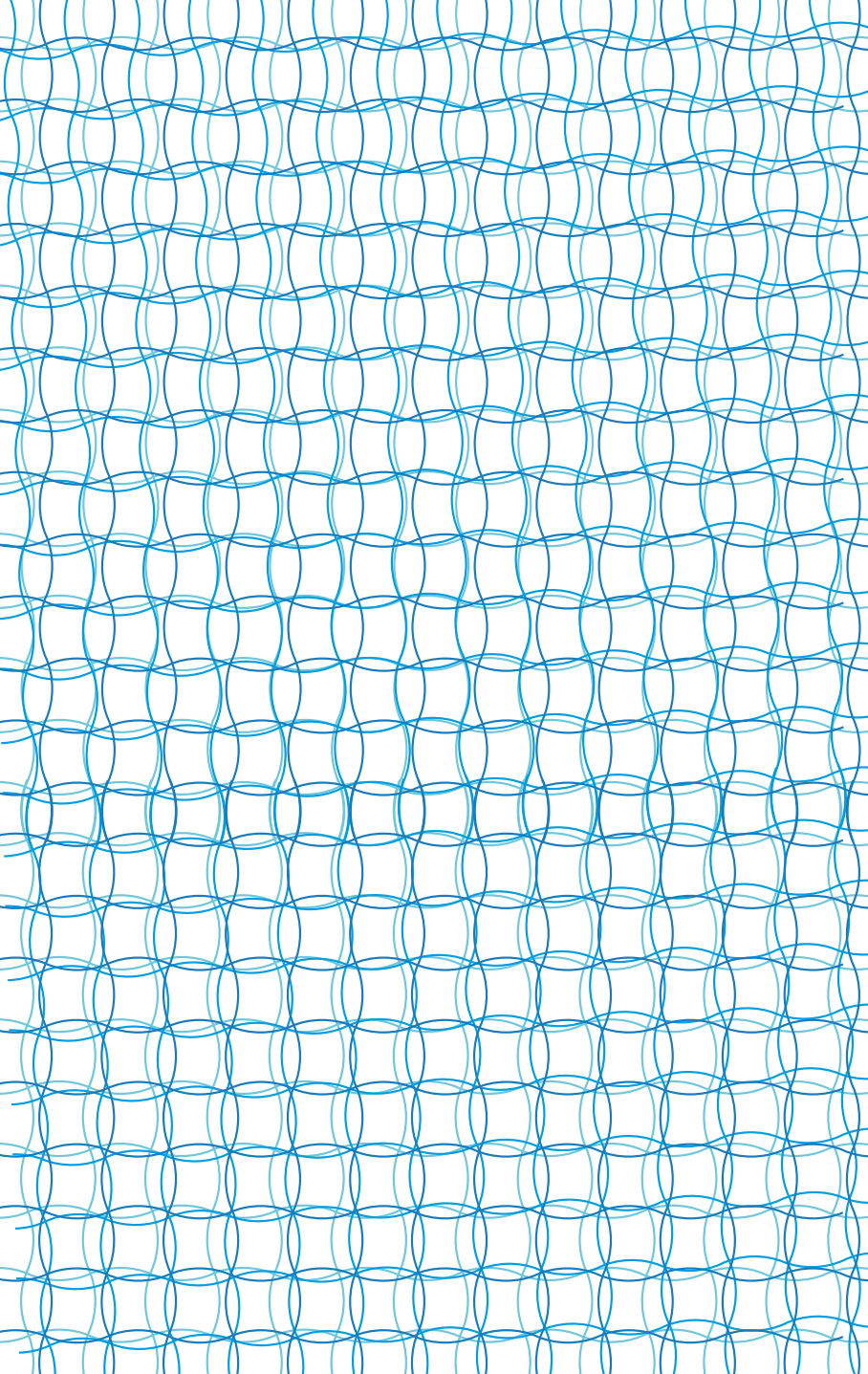
THERMAL TOURISM AND SPA HERITAGE IN EUROPE

THE CASE OF EHTTA
European Historic Thermal
Towns Association

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Mario Crecente Maseda
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Paul Simons

2018 
EUROPEAN YEAR
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SCIENTIFIC
COMMITTEE OF
EHTTA
2018



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INTRODUCTION

When talking about thermalism and all related sectors, we must remember that we start from a basic natural resource, mineral-medicinal and thermal waters, which shapes and defines its complexity. So, starting from this resource, we designate as thermalism the ensemble of aspects (natural, cultural and intangible) related to its exploitation and use, that include health, leisure and tourism phenomenon, and that comprehend historic and cultural determinants of different territories and regions throughout history.

Within the multiple shades that can be associated to this resource, there is a terminological issue derived from the continuous creation of parallel products that, excluding the resource of mineral-medicinal waters, have been included in the global concept of health or wellness places related to water. Nevertheless, many of these places disguise or push traditional thermalism into the background,

despite its significance and its prominence in history, culture, economics and society, and suppress its identity under equivocal terms that correspond to divergent realities.

In order to tackle this terminological confusion derived from diverse languages and the multiple meanings of the word SPA (Smith & Puczko, 2014, p. 13; Crecente Asociados, 2015, p. 17), we retrieve the original definition of this word, which is defined as a ‘spring or resort with thermal or mineral water used for drinking and bathing (...) to which persons travelled for the reputed curative properties of its mineral springs’ (*«spa | health resort»*. Encyclopaedia Britannica), focusing the attention on places created on the basis of the natural resource of mineral-medicinal water, where health benefits and, afterwards, social and cultural factors, act as a driving force and the appealing factor for a large number of visitors that come to these health, leisure and socialisation destinations.

In this regard, we deem that it is necessary to compile and concisely define the identification and description criteria for the multiple meanings present in different products created during the search for health and wellness in recent years, aspects that we have already proposed in previous conferences (Crecente 2001, forthcoming, 2007). In the first of these meetings in Mondariz in 1999 it was proposed to create a ‘thesaurus’ that allowed to recognise the singularities of each wellness

destiny according to the type of water and that went more deeply into the definition of thermal tourism in different cultures and regions of the world, based on the concept created by the WHO, under an observed international and interdisciplinary consensus that helped to join efforts and to share experiences, taking into consideration the multiple connotations of this type of tourism.

In this regard, for example, the International Standardization Organization (ISO), through the work group ISO/TC 228/WG 2 'Health tourism services', pursues the standardisation of the terminology and the specifications of those services related to this industry. The standards ISO 17680:2015 (Thalassotherapy) and ISO 17679:2016 (Wellness spa) are already published, whereas the standards ISO/DIS 21426 (Medical spa) and ISO/WD 22525 (Medical Tourism) are being developed.

The detailed definition of all these products is fundamental for thermalism development in the future. In fact, as it is described in the European Commission report about health tourism (Mainil, Eijgelaar, Klijs, Nawijn, & Peeters, 2017, p. 9), there is an urgent need of creating a common strategy related to European thermal tourism, since the vagueness, the infiltration, and the lack of actual and exhaustive data about thermalism at a European scale implies an important obstacle to create a well-defined, coherent and competitive quality product. This is evidenced by, for example,



FIGURE 01

Logo of the European
Historic Thermal
Towns Association



FIGURE 02

Logo of thermal
heritage of Europe

the unknown exact number of spas and health resorts in Europe, the nature and volume of exploited water, their economic implication in the industrial sector, their social repercussion, as well as thermal heritage situation in its broadest sense (natural, cultural and intangible), among other factors.

Given the situation, the creation of the EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association, described below) in 2009 plays a fundamental role [FIGURE 01](#). Besides establishing cohesive measures to set up a common front and identity for European thermalism (endorsed by the recognition of the European of Historic Route of Thermal Towns by the Council of Europe in 2009), it supported the start-up, with the back-up of the Scientific Committee of this institution, of a European thermal atlas [FIGURE 02](#) that will help to recognise the whole complexity of this industry and to state the multiple facets and singularities of a natural and cultural heritage which is unique in the world and specific to European culture.



STATE OF THERMAL TOURISM AND SPA HERITAGE MATTERS

We start from the idea of Tourism as a global phenomenon that occupies the third position as an international export category (UNWTO, 2017, p.6) and that this is a constant feature of expansion and globalisation. This is confirmed by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which predicts a 3.3% annual increase in the number of inbound international tourists to Europe up 2030 (UNWTO, 2017, p. 3). According to this organization, we define Tourism as the ‘combination of activities people do during their trips and stays outside their usual environment, for less than a year, for leisure, business or other non-lucrative purposes.’ (UNWTO, 1993, p. 9).

In the same vein, we understand by thermal tourism that tourism whose fundamental reason for travelling is the use and enjoyment of natural resources related to mineral-medicinal and thermal waters, as well as their by-products, always under

medical surveillance and in appropriate facilities for its use, including visits to ‘take the waters’ to the current concept of ‘wellness tourism’ (Crecente Asociados, 2015; Crecente, 2007). Essentially, thermal tourism is based on treatments with mineral-medicinal or thermal waters combined with elements from traditional medicine: curative programmes or techniques, although adapted to current societal demands and needs. In this case, the key must be that the use of these mineral-medicinal and thermal waters is the engine of the trip, and not a simple complement for the tourist.

Nevertheless, most of the definitions included in the current bibliography leave out two aspects in the definition of this concepts:

On the one hand, spa or thermal tourism is included within broader conceptions related essentially to health tourism, and this aspect may occasionally distort its meaning (Crecente Asociados, 2015). In this regard, the European Parliament report on health tourism (Mainil et al., 2017) states that this tourism category represents the 5% of total tourism in the EU28 and is composed by three main constituents: medical tourism, wellness tourism and spa tourism, the latter approached according to the definition of ‘healing, relaxation or beautifying of the body that is preventative and / or curative in nature’ (Smith & Puczko, 2014, p. 10). So, as well as it happens in reference manuals about wellness tourism (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009), this

conforms a confusing landscape where thermal tourism is diluted between the medical and the wellness side, ignoring the multiple implications and connotations (medical, geological, geographic, historic, economic, etc.) of a natural resource such as mineral-medicinal waters.

In these reflections, we consider that it is essential to complete the definition of the spa tourism concept making reference to three aspects: water and its complements (essential for mineral-medicinal waters, emphasizing that ‘the difference is in the water’. [Rodríguez Míguez, 2014, p. 36](#)); the therapeutic landscape ([cultural and natural. Pound, 1986](#)); and the cultural heritage (including intangible heritage), historically created as a result and around this resource.

As we already insisted in 1999 ([Crecente, 2001](#)) and as other authors suggested ([ITER-CADSES Project, Interreg-IIIb, European Union 2005. Smith & Puczko, 2008, p. 217](#)), it is extremely important to focus attention on the European heritage of historic spas and their landscape, as well as on the importance of spa tourism being accompanied by adequate policies that contribute to the thermal heritage identification, knowledge and protection beyond the diverse wellness trends that have come and gone.

So much so that, despite the multiple attempts to resume that reality ([Moldoveanu, 1999; Lee & Gillette, 2008](#)), the significance of thermal heritage in Europe has been a greatly ignored and occasionally

considered aspect, even though the tourism industry has produced enriching mixtures of spa hotels, wellness centres and thermal entertainment developments during recent years. Nevertheless, developed standardizations have undervalued our own resources and cultures, in some cases even abandoning historic models, ignoring natural resources and the added value of the broad and rich thermal heritage history itself.

If we resume heritage valuation of mineral-medical waters according to the definition of Cultural Heritage by the UNESCO (UNESCO, 25 C/4, 1989, p.57), this will be a valuation and definition factor for this kind of health resorts, allowing to improve prestige and differentiation criteria, and consequently their possibilities as businesses and touristic and social attractions based on their unique historic and heritage richness (P. Hembry, 1990; P. M. Hembry, 1997; Leboreiro Amaro, 1994; Moldoveanu, 1999; Pinto & Mangorrinha, 2009; Alonso Álvarez, Vilar Rodríguez, & Lindoso Tato, 2012).

But thermal heritage is much more than this. As we have already seen, we start with the relevance of a natural resource, mineral-medical waters, mainly in relation with the historic development of medical practice applied in health improvements for the users. Besides this, there is the historic construction of a thermal heritage allocated to meetings, rest and collective enjoyment of this resource and its setting, involving an obvious

benefit to the user. Therefore, we also refer to the creation of thermal landscapes that connect us to a contemporary vision of thermal heritage that sets up a cultural and therapeutic landscape (Pound, 1986, 2012).

We understand the thermal heritage as a singular heritage that integrates natural values (mineral-medicinal waters and territory. Baeza, López & Ramírez, 2001; Crecente, 2007; Balderer, Porowski, Idris, & LaMoreaux, 2014) and cultural values (archaeology, history, architecture, urbanism, art, etc. Leboreiro Amaro, 1994; Moldoveanu, 1999; González-Soutelo, 2011; Pound 2012; González-Soutelo, 2015; Crecente & González-Soutelo, 2016), obtaining as a result a mixed heritage in the sense published by the UNESCO (art. 1 and 2, *The 1972 World Heritage Convention*. UNESCO, 1989) as an integrating concept. Furthermore, this heritage may be physical (spaces, buildings, landscapes, etc.) and also immaterial (uses, rites, experiences, traditions, etc.), shaping a concept of heritage which is very rich, but also more difficult to manage.

As a consequence, the European spa heritage must be considered a unique reality with multiple shades that constitutes a first-rate European resource to promote a sustainable development (Crecente, 2007). Accordingly, this perception responds to the existence of a centuries old European spa culture that, undoubtedly, despite the existing variants and adoptions of each thermal town and that endow them with their own personality

and interest, belongs to the same heritage model, emerged and developed in Europe (A. d'Alessandr in Lee and Gillette, 2008, p. 5).

Studying those values and cultures, and setting out the opportunities created in each place is one of the main challenges of recent thermal investigation in order to urge researchers and thermal agents to recover this enormous European thermal heritage. However, despite its potential (Gilbert & Carnot, 1915; Négrier, 1925; Waring, 1965; Wechsberg, 1979; Mangin, 1994; Moldoveanu, 1999), thermalism as recognised as a European phenomenon is waiting for a global study that validates its role in social and cultural planning of this territory.

In this regard, among the challenges of health tourism pointed out in the report recently published by the European Parliament and, specifically, in connection to spa tourism (Mainil et al., 2017, p. 69), highlights, on the one side, the main strength of the 'long history and high status of wellness and spa tourism, including a firmly established supply of spas and wellness facilities throughout Europe'. Besides, on the other hand, it mentions its deficiencies, since its development has in many cases has failed due to the 'insufficient collaboration between destinations, enterprises and other stakeholders, as well as insufficient joint promotion within the EU'.

Based on what has been stated and taking the case of thermal towns as the starting point to solve the aspects set out above, we present the experience



FIGURES 03-04-05

EHTTA
General
Assemblies:
Acqui Terme,
Italy (2010); Evian,
France (2011);
Loutraki, Greece
(2017)

of the constitution and development of the EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association) as a proof of its interest for the history of thermalism and the derived thermal heritage, as a differentiating and singular element of cultural and natural reality in Europe, as well as the possibilities of creating links and a European cohesive framework to adopt the new investigation, protection and development strategies in the field of thermalism [FIGURES 03-04-05](#).



THE EHTTA. CONSTITUTION PROCESS, PURPOSES AND PROJECTS

The EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association) is an International non-profit Association representing historic thermal spa towns across Europe focused to encourage, protect and enhance the thermal heritage¹. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that this association is not related to all spas and health resorts in Europe², but it is focused in those places where the presence of mineral-medicinal waters meant the creation of a small / medium / big town where waters are strongly represented as an agent that generates urbanism, society and, consequently, heritage.

1. Statute of EHTTA. <http://www.ehtta.eu/>.

2. Spas and health resorts, usually private, that have constituted on their own the European Spas Association (ESPA), defined like 'an umbrella industry organisation representing 20 members from 19 European countries' (www.espa-ehv.eu, viewed 05/12/2017).

TABLE 1

Date	Meeting
1999	1 st International Congress on Thermal Tourism (Mondariz-Balneario, Spain)
2000	1 st Thermal Towns Meeting (Leiro, Spain)
2002	Commission of the Municipalities Section with thermal and Mineral-Medicinal Waters (FEMP)
2003	1 st Thermal Towns Meeting. Termatalia 2003
2007	Inventory of thermal towns in Spain
2007-2009	Thermal Towns Meeting
2007	<i>Thermae Europae</i> project meeting in Varberg (30-10-2007). Celebration of the 20th anniversary of the 1 st European Cultural Route (Saint James' Way, 1987)
2009-09-04	Meeting in Vichy to reissue the <i>Thermae Europae</i> project. 7 cities present: Vichy, Spa, Bath, Acquiterme, Salsomaggiore, Bagni di Lucca, and Ourense
2009-12-10	EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association) constitution in Brussels
2009-12-18	Meeting in the European Institute of Cultural Routes in Luxembourg
2010-01-22	EHTTA Meeting in Paris

Result and new members

The foundations of the definition of thermal tourism are laid down

Selection of the concept 'Thermal Town' instead of 'Thermal station' to designate municipalities with strong interest in thermal tourism

– European vision of Thermal Heritage – Collaboration strategies in terms of thermalism among European thermal towns – New proposal to create a thermal European Association

Database and web to make a national inventory (Spain)

Presentation of the European project *Thermae Europae*. Culture 2000 EU programme, devoted to the valuation and preservation of European thermal culture and forestate of the idea of creating a European Cultural Route.

Idea of creating a European Thermal Route.
The project is led by the city of Karlovy Vary, with five promoters: Varberg (Sweden), Velingrad (Bulgaria), Piešťany (Slovakia), Acqui Termi (Italy), Eurotec Consulting (B) + 6 associated states.

Proposal of creating a European Historic Thermal Towns Association and the possibility of applying for the recognition of a European Cultural Route (Lee & Gillette, 2008)

First President: D. Christian Corne. Initial Headquarters: Brussels. Creation of the Articles of Association

Quality Letter of the Association Thermal Cultural Route proposal

Sending of the Thermal Cultural Route proposal

TABLE 1

Date	Meeting
2010-06-10	
2010-11-25	Meeting in Vichy
2011-01-20	Meeting in Paris
2011-06-07	
2013	
2014	
2015	
2016	
2017	

Result and new members

Notification of approval regarding the European Cultural Route of Historic Thermal Towns by the Director of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage at the Council of Europe, Robert Palmer

Issuance of the European Cultural Route title, including the cities of Vichy, Spa, Bath, Acqui Terme, Salsomaggiore, and Ourense.

10 new places added to the association: Bagnères-de-Luchon (France), Budapest (Hungary), La Bourboule (France), Cauterets (France), Châtel-Guyon (France), Evian (France), Fiuggi (Italy), Le Mont-Dore (France), Montecatini Terme (Italy), and the region Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic)

Another 10 new places added to the association: Baden-Baden (Germany), Bagni di Lucca (Italy), Bagnoles D'Lorne (France), Chaves (Portugal), Daruvar (Croatia), Enghien Les Bains (France), Royat (France), Techirgiol (Rumania), Varadinske Toplice (Croatia), and Wiesbaden (Germany)

Incorporation of: Ancot (Italy), FCTF (France), governorship of Bursa (Turkey)

Bad Homburg (Germany)

Caldas da Rainha (Portugal), Chianciano Terme (Italy), Loutra Pozar (Greece), Loutraki-Perachora (Greece), Montegrotto Terme (Italy), Chaves-Verín (Portugal-Spain), Hellenic Association of municipalities with thermal springs (Greece), Region of Galicia (Spain)

Kavala (Greece), S. Pedro do Sul (Portugal), Distretto turistico Selinunte (Italy), Ministry of Culture in Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan), Province of Ourense (Spain)

Mondariz-Balneario (Spain), Pamukkale (Turkey), Imereti Region (Georgia), and Kislovodsk (Russia)

The first steps of the idea that motivated the EHTTA project [TABLE 1](#) are based on the reflections developed due to the 1st International Congress on Thermal Tourism (1999, Mondariz-Balneario, Spain) [FIG 06](#) with the support of UNWTO, Tourspain, Xunta de Galicia and Anbal ([Crecente, 2001](#)). This meeting joined experiences related to the recognition of the importance of wellness and health tourism in the touristic sector, focused on a responsive and heritage and environmentally friendly thermalism.

This first initiative was followed by other equally significant for the conception of an association that may unite such originally disparate aspects as thermalism, tourism, heritage or innovation. Thus, after the 1st Thermal Towns Meeting held in Spain (Leiro, Ourense, Spain) in 2000, that specified the concept of thermal town, and after the first Thermal Towns Meeting [FIGURE 07](#) held in the Termatalia international fair (2003), it was specified the need of establishing a new view of thermal heritage in Europe based in the collaboration among European thermal towns in order to create common analysis and development strategies.

Another significant landmark took place a few year later with the European project *Thermae Europae* from the Culture 2000 (2007-2009) programme ([Lee & Gillette, 2008](#)) [FIGURE 08](#), that reinforced the links to stablish common actions in terms of diffusion and experience exchange, as well as the suggestion of new development proposals, such as the creation



FIGURE 06
Minute book
of the
1st International
Congress on
Thermal Tourism
(2011)



FIGURE 07
Logo of the
thermal cities
meeting
(Termatalia)



FIGURE 08
Thermae Europae
Project

of the Xunta de Galicia initiative, a European Cultural Route related to thermalism, in the 20th anniversary of the designation of the Saint James' Way as the first Cultural Route [FIGURE 09](#).

Then, after trying to renew the project *Thermae Europae* in the thermal towns meeting in Vichy (4th September 2009) [FIGURE 10](#), 7 cities (Vichy, Spa, Bath, Acqui Terme, Salsomaggiore, Bagni di Lucca, and Ourense) met and proposed the creation of the subsequent European Historic Thermal Towns Association, initially gathered to evaluate the possibility of aiming the recognition of a European Cultural Route, as a cohesion and sustainable development instrument based on the European spa heritage.

In this process, on 10th December 2009, the EHTTA (European Historic Thermal Towns Association) was created in Brussels [FIGURE 11](#) to work on the development of the Thermal Cultural Route after a meeting with the European Institute of Cultural Routes in Luxembourg.

After less than a year, the proposal was presented and, recognising its interest, the Director of Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage at the Council of Europe, Robert Palmer, announced the approval of the European Cultural Route of Historic Thermal Towns on 10th June 2010, made official on 25th November 2010 in Vichy [FIGURES 12-13](#), with the accrediting certificate [FIGURES 14](#) issued to the founder member cities of Vichy, Spa, Bath, Acqui Terme, Salsomaggiore, and Ourense.

Nowadays, the association is made up of 41 valid members in 2017³ [FIGURES 15-16](#) divided in three categories: active members (including founder members) such as member towns which are historic thermal towns or cities represented by the local authority or municipality which runs the town; associated members, typically Associations of spa towns, geographical or political regions, and other organisations which are committed to the aims and objectives of EHTTA; and a new category International Members, related to non-European thermal towns that, taking into account that the European thermalism model was also exported to other continents during 19th and 20th centuries, have concerns and features similar to those of European thermal towns.

In this regard, heritage criteria that may prove the applicants to the association are presented in the articles of association and they establish the definition of a spa town as ‘any local authority,

3. Since 1st September 2017, the EHTTA has 41 members, among which, besides the 6 founder members (Acqui Terme, Bath, Ourense, Salsomaggiore Terme, Spa, and Vichy), congregates 21 active members (Bad Homburg, Baden Baden, Bagnoles de l’Orne, Caldas da Rainha, Chatel Guyon, Chianciano Terme, Daruvar, Enghien-les-Bains, Kavala, La Bourboule, Le Montdore, Loutra Pozar, Loutraki – Perachora, Luchon, Mondariz-Balneário, Montecatini Terme, Montegrotto Terme, Pamukkale, Royat - Chamalières, São Pedro do Sul and Wiesbaden) and 14 associated members (Ancot, Budapest spas, Chaves - Verín euro-territory, Distretto turistico Selinunte, FTCTF, Governorship of Bursa, Hellenic association of municipalities with thermal springs, Karlovy Vary region, Kislovodsk, Ministry of culture in Azerbaijan, Province of Ourense, region of Galicia, region of Imereti, and route des villes d’eaux du Massif Central).

All these partners represent 15 countries across Europe (Azerbaijan, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, England, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Turkey).

FIGURE 09

Celebration of 30 years of Cultural Routes during the General Assembly of EHTTA in Loutraki (2017)



FIGURE 10

Meeting in Vichy, France, to propose the creation of EHTTA (2009)



FIGURE 11

Meeting in Vichy, France, to propose the creation of EHTTA (2009)





FIGURES 12-13-14

Approval of the
European Cultural
Route of Historic
Thermal Towns in
Vichy (2010)



FIGURE 15-16

Maps of EHTTA
members
(July 2018)

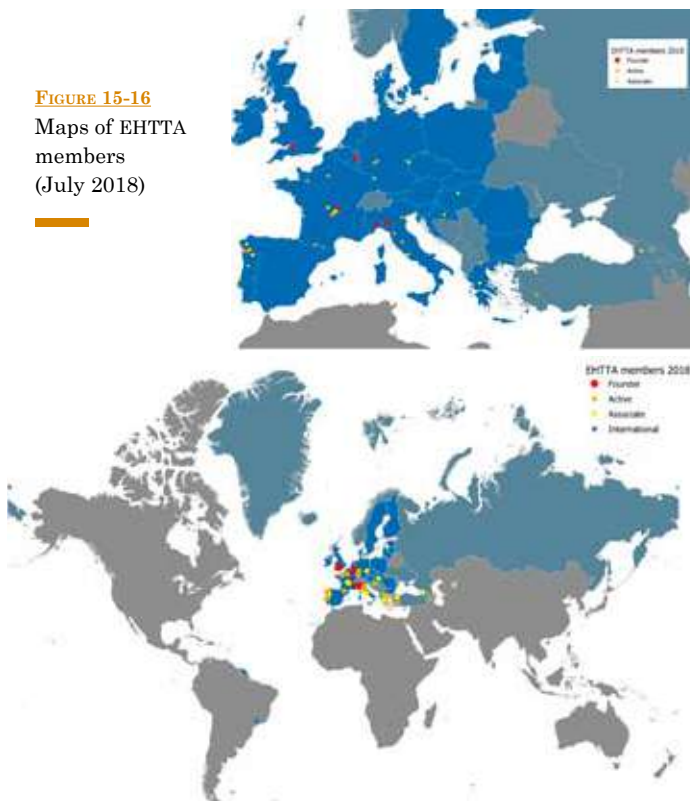


FIGURE 17

EHTTA General
Assembly in
Karlovy Vary,
Czech Republic
(2017)





FIGURES 18

EHTTA General
Assembly in
Loutraki (2017)



FIGURES 19

EHTTA General
Assembly
in Galaalti,
Azerbaijan (2018)



FIGURES 20

Logo The European
Cultural Route
of Historic
Thermal Towns



FIGURES 21

Logo of The thermal
heritage of europe
atlas

regardless of size or number of inhabitants, which has been acknowledged since its foundation spa town, having historically deployed activities linked to water cures with its effects on the development of the town, its architecture, tourism and cultural and socio-economic initiatives. The water cures are linked to the exploitation of spa and mineral waters’.

Therefore, the EHTTA member cities, as active members, fulfil the following requirements: being a historical town, at least since the 19th century; having a working mineral-medicinal water exploitation in a spa and health resort; possessing a Historic thermal heritage declared by the corresponding administration and having equipment and infrastructures for cultural activities; and offering a significant volume of quality accommodation⁴.

This association therefore meets the need of looking for defining common elements that allow, on the one side, to determine the terminology and the role of medical spas and spa tourism in Europe at an international level; and on the other side, to create a unique European product that claims the relevance, not only medical, but also historic, cultural, economic and social, of a valued resource that is also unique of European culture: thermalism.

Consequently, the main targets of the EHTTA (as indicated on the articles of association) are oriented to create a strong network of partnerships

4. To see the detailed descriptions, check the documents available on www.ehtta.eu.

between towns and spas, promoting exchanges of experience among the different cultural operators of the cities; to study, at a European level, their heritage, discussing and identifying the needs for its preservation and valorisation; to encourage, promote and develop analytical research and statistics within the spa industry, focusing primarily on the cultural and natural heritage, as well as legal and legislative aspects linked to it [FIGURES 17-18-19](#).

With all this, it is intended to achieve, as we pointed out in the previous sections, the recognition of the specificity of European spa towns toward the European Union in order to assist with thermal sustainable development and the protection of the heritage.

According to this principle, the creation of the European Cultural Route of Historic Thermal Towns [FIGURE 20](#) has generated links among the cultural and historic heritage of the spa towns and promotes the quality of their spa waters, reinforcing their differentiating aspects, but also those common aspects that connect them as part of the European culture ([Lloyd, 2016](#)).

The European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, one of the 30+ routes certified by the Council of Europe, helps the thermal towns incorporated into it to emphasise the relevance of their history and their heritage, since, far from being an unsubstantial element, it is a living and powerful testimony of their significance. All this is based on the long-

lasting tradition and the prestige of a practice that, despite the course of time, has actively maintained the memory of its use and exploitation for more than 2,000 years of development, being adjusted to current times without forgetting the origins of its legacy.

In this regard, the association has launched many lines of work to recover part of this cultural, natural, and immaterial heritage⁵. Basically, these are focussed on the project The Thermal Heritage of Europe Atlas –THE Atlas–, that is expected to meet the need of knowing the singularities of the European thermal heritage from different points of view.

THE Atlas [FIGURE 21](#) will become the most significant database concerning the distribution of thermal resources throughout Europe (as defined by the Council of Europe), based on new technologies, investing in the future of European thermal heritage, and available for anybody interested in the subject. Consequently, its elaboration will provide a solution to the issues raised in the recent report of the European Parliament on health tourism mentioned above ([Mainil et al., 2017, p. 69](#)). This database will contain all known data on all aspects concerning the quantity, quality and value of its thermal heritage and will serve many different sectors to find out possible future opportunities represented by this thermal heritage ([Crecente Asociados, 2017](#)).

5. This is the case, for example, of Cafes of Europe, included in the SOURCE project, devoted to create places for cultural meetings among different countries, remembering thermal rooms from 18th and 19th centuries (Lloyd, 2016, p. 10).



CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, we believe that, inside thermal tourism, it is necessary to identify: firstly, the natural resource, mineral-medicinal water and its by-products, as a scarce and valuable good with curative properties that must be protected and valued, in search of a genuine environmental, economic and social sustainability, making access easier for the whole population; but also the tangible and intangible heritage derived from this use and exploitation as a product originated in the European continent that can offer an opportunity for the development of many cities and their setting.

Working on the existing precedents from the Ancient world (González-Soutelo, 2012), we consider that social movements emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries around spas creating an original thermal tourism that acted as a precedent for what has become known as the present-day tourism industry (Alonso Álvarez et al., 2012; Jarrassé, 2002, 2012), since, to a

great extent, it promoted the creation of transport infrastructures (mainly railways), as well as different hotel categories (from high quality luxury hotels to guest house accommodation), and a complete cultural and entertainment offer (theatre, concert halls, casinos, etc.). All these generated traditions, industry, architecture, literature and other genuinely thermal arts.

At the same time, this original thermal tourism has to be linked to the attainment of new liberties and social changes, such as holiday entitlement, public socialising based on the creation of huge hotel buildings, opera houses, casinos, parks and gardens, etc.; and eventually to the creation of the first European touristic industry, available to the general public (Alonso Álvarez et al., 2012; Hembry, 1997).

Lastly, the European thermal culture singularly involves, in addition to entertainment related aspects, basically all those related to the conception of medical discipline as the value of natural resources and their properties, inducing the creation of a new treatment and health model that will be highlighted by new commercial products, as will be the case for the flourishing bottled water industry (Vilar Rodríguez & Lindoso Tato, 2015).

Thus, Heritage is inseparable from the meaning of thermalism and, illustrates the opportunities that exist to develop and attract new, sustainable markets to thermal tourism in the future whilst at the same time becoming an agent in heritage regeneration.

In this regard, the examples of the European thermal towns we have already introduced shows how a touristic demand generated a series of buildings, settings, and thermal towns and cities, that nowadays have become heritage goods and have recently received a specific consideration in the Council of Europe as example of Cultural Route.

Conscious of this reality and coinciding with the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (2017) and with the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, we believe that thermal tourism must assume a more leading role in European strategic planning, developing new strategies for, not only medical and wellness tourism, but also to historic heritage, landscape and natural tourism, with a huge potential to create new sustainable destinies. In this regard, three aspects of thermal tourism should be pointed out:

— In the first place, it represents the creation of responsive and environmentally friendly tourism, through the management of a natural resource (thermal and mineral-medicinal water) that aims at user health by means of water (medical hydrology) and its enjoyment in its setting (therapeutic landscape), using in most cases clean energies (water thermality and geothermics). To this, we must add the interest in recovering, protecting and preserving the heritage generated around this resource at least since the Roman period.

- In the second place, Thermalism, since it is linked to a specific natural resource that depends on its location, contributes to the dispersion and distribution of the offer over the territory (rural in many cases), with the desired touristic decentralisation, as it is not exclusively conditioned by the sun (baths and treatments in indoor spaces).
- In the third place, thermal tourism involves the creation of quality employment (doctors, physiotherapists, technicians, etc.), with a staff/room ratio that doubles that of traditional hotels industry through SMEs directly related to territory and that efficiently contribute to its dynamism, with better results than other modalities (rural tourism).

According to the European Spas Association official website⁶, it was estimated that, by 2016, there would be approximately 1,400 spas in Europe, which, in general terms, already in 2002 could mean more than 31 million clients (English Tourism Council, London, 2002)

Even though this data are hardly ever collected, analysed and studied, it indicates the real status of this sector, as well as the heritage richness it symbolises and the touristic potential it possesses. Consequently, a global study on the scope and relevance of thermalism as an economic

6. <http://www.europeanspas.eu/members/>

and social factor in Europe would be a top priority (Lieber, 2001; Pérez Menzel, 2001).

In this regard, the EHTTA is working on the creation of an atlas about European thermal heritage (THE Atlas) in order to know the value and meaning of thermalism in Europe, as well as identifying related resources and recognising all existing and lost thermal heritage.

Likewise, given the singular value of thermal heritage as a historic and social factor that creates crucial places in European history and culture, the transnational candidature of European Thermal Towns (Great Spas of Europe) has been prepared to be declared as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO (Lloyd, 2016, p. 8).

We think that the conception of European thermalism as a cultural phenomenon is indispensable against the pressing ‘spatisation’ (Crecente, 2007), and which ignores natural and cultural resources, with a false globalising vision that is causing the loss or abandonment of the singularities related to original thermal resources in search of franchises or ‘amenities’ that are cloned throughout the world.

Facing this option, we back the valuation of these resources through innovation and investigation, but also through the disclosure of these contents in collaboration with the responsible body of tourism in the UN, the UNTOWTO, the UNESCO, and the WHO, together with the corresponding institutions in

the European Union. It is in this context that the original thermal phenomenon must be prioritised. Thermal tourism should be recovered as a sustainable tourism model laid down over centuries of history and with an even more promising, if not critical future for Europe.



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