

Conference Highlights Potential of Health and Wellbeing Tourism

Sofia, Bulgaria, 5 June 2023 - Wellness and health tourism stands ready to offer significant benefits for destinations worldwide – but will need coordination, investments and a skilled workforce to fully deliver on its potential. That was the key takeaway message as leaders from the public and private sectors met for the UNWTO Conference on Education and Skills in Medical and Wellbeing Tourism in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Health and Wellbeing Tourism: Growing in Size and Relevance

In organizing the conference within the framework of its 68th Regional Commission for Europe, UNWTO made clear the growing importance of health and wellbeing tourism as a pillar of growth and opportunity.

- UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili joined Ilin Dimitrov, Minister of Tourism for Bulgaria, in opening the conference, applauding Bulgaria for identifying the potential of health tourism for economic diversification
- Participants in the conference included Deputy Ministers of Georgia and Lithuania, other high-level government representatives from Czechia and Ukraine, Vice-Chair of the TRAN Committee of the European Parliament and, representing the private sector, the leaders of the European Spa Association, as well as expert academics and figures from leading business groups.
- Reflecting the growing importance of this part of the tourism sector for destinations everywhere, participants joined from across Europe, as well as from China and the United States.

UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili said: "Health tourism helps destinations diversify, creating jobs, supporting businesses and extending these benefits to rural communities. However, this part of our broad sector is especially reliant on skilled workers. As tourists' expectations rise, so too must the level of service destinations can provide."

Key Challenges: Education and Skills

In line with one of UNWTO's priorities for the sector as a whole, the conference focused on the vital importance of education and training in health and wellbeing tourism.

- A panel discussion welcomed expert inputs from leading academics, as well as private sector stakeholders.
- Main takeaways included making training attractive, accessible and empowering so as to encourage workers to return to the tourism sector following the loss of personnel experienced during the pandemic. Speakers also emphasized the importance of government support for the tourism sector, with particular reference to investing in health and wellbeing infrastructure and in training personnel.
- UNWTO updated participants on its leading role in advancing tourism education, including through the creation of a first Undergraduate Degree in Sustainable Tourism Management, and innovation competitions designed to find new ways of identifying and supporting new talent.

Recognizing the growing importance of health tourism in Europe and globally, UNWTO prioritizes the work in this field on acknowledging cultural and regional differences in taxonomy and understanding, implementing regulatory and ethical measures, measuring the impact of health tourism at national and domestic levels, promoting investments and cooperation, ensuring harmonized data collection, considering technological advances, involving governments to foster public-private collaboration, and generating knowledge at the intersection of tourism and health.

Masterclass for National Tourism Stakeholders

To conclude the conference, national stakeholders benefitted from a Masterclass focused on identifying the 'destination Unique Selling Point', with the cases of Czechia and Slovenia showcased as examples of effective marketing. The masterclass was followed by an interactive discussion.

Health and Travel & Tourism

In the wider context of health and tourism, UNWTO has been working closely with the World Health Organization to coordinate the measures and messaging throughout the pandemic. Recognizing that health, travel and tourism are deeply interconnected in the globalized world, UNWTO is currently establishing the UNWTO Global Working Group on Health and Travel & Tourism with the aim to draw the lessons from the COVID crisis to generate greater resilience within travel and tourism and to ensure preparedness in the face of future threats.

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