Spa Hotels and Facilities - a Comparison of Hotels in Budapest, Buxton and Piešťany

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Britain, health and leisure tourism seems primarily to mean leisure with health being normally merely a secondary consideration ranging from fresh air to diet. In central Europe Spas still draw tourists and patients for leisure and for treatments from their own as well as neighbouring countries. Indeed, whilst Buxton, Bath, Harrogate and Laramington draw day trippers to see their historic buildings, Carlsbad, Budapest, Piešťany and many of the other grand old Spas of central Europe are filled with longer-term guests seeking an improvement to their own chronic ailments. The reasons for this decline in British Spas and the continuing relative good health of Spas in central Europe are a complex mix that includes national characteristic, financial constraints and a disbelief by the British medical establishment in the efficacy of the water cure and related Spa treatments. This reluctance to acknowledge complementary health care is certainly not the case in Germany and the old Austro-Hungarian lands and Spa tourism presents a challenge as well as a promise of lucrative international tourism to the emerging "new" states of pre-communist Europe.

2 HUNGARY

Hungary has always been foremost in the exploitation of her natural thermal resources and as early as 1882, the Hungarian Balneological Committee was founded, followed in 1902 by the Hungarian Tourism and Travel company which decided to promote Budapest as a Spa city and recognise the potential for Spa tourism in the city (Vida 1992 pp. 21 & 29). Budapest was in the fortunate position that the Turkish colonial period had produced a number of thermal baths for the garrisoned foreign troops which were found to have both hygienic and leisure value. In particular they contain trace elements and radioactivity within the waters that could be beneficial for certain illnesses as well as general improvement of health. These ancient baths became property of the state, firstly the Rudas bath (1831), then the Gellert (1918) and Rac (1931) although some of the other baths, including Kiraly and Margaret Island
remained in private possession (Vida 1992 p. 23). In 1929, a Baths Law nominated three centres as official health resorts – the Gellert Hill complex (Gellert, Rac and Rudas), the Margaret Island and the Szechenyi Bath in Pest (Vida 1992 p. 24). Developments in spa tourism throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Budapest was showing little decline, even despite the interruption of the Great War – indeed, the new luxury Gellert Hotel was opened on the site of the Gellert Baths in 1918.

It is the Gellert Hotel, together with Miklos Ybl’s magnificent Grand Hotel of 1870 on the Margaret Island that became, and to this day remain, symbols of the elegance and luxury of the Spa Hotel. Unfortunately, Ybl’s original hotel, together with many other Villas and design structures of his on the Island, was destroyed during the second world war (Gal 1992 p. 10), but the hotel was rebuilt and is now part of the Ramada-Danubius joint venture group, the Gellert being similarly part of the Steigenberger-Danubius group.

2.1 Gellert Hotel

The Gellert baths date back to medieval times when, according to legend, St Elisabeth tended to the lepers of the city with the thermal waters springing from the foot of Gellert Hill in Buda. The bath is described more officially in 1615 by Ortelius (as quoted in Csonyeyi 1970 p. 9) and was in constant use from there under various names such as “Blocksbad” and “Jungfrauenbad” until the new Hotel and Bath complex, designed by the architects Hegedus, Sterk and Sebestyen was opened in 1918 under the name of Gellert Health Bath. The hotel, together with the Gresham Hotel on the island in Pest is one of the highlights of Hungarian Art Nouveau or Jugendstil architecture and was also the first hotel to have a thermal wave bath (an addition built in 1927) which in summer has its roof drawn back to provide open air swimming and sunbathing areas.

In 1948, the hotel management was separated from that of the baths and two separate companies were formed – a situation which exists to this day with both advantages and disadvantages for guests and management alike. The Spa Directorate see the advantages of keeping the entrance prices for the baths at a level affordable to the local population as well as trying to gain revenue from richer foreign tourists who stay in the hotel (Doughty 1994, Doughty & Zvirner 1994 - data based on personal interview with Tarnoczine Balogh, V. 1993). The present situation allows for free entrance at all times during opening hours for hotel guests as well as normal entrance, on a queue system for non-residents. Unfortunately, the Baths being run by the city Spa Directorate means that with loss of state grants since the fall of the communist regime, money is lacking for necessary improvements to the interior furniture, fittings and decoration of the baths themselves; there is a certain lack of the luxury that the adjoining hotel succeeds in providing.
Despite these management problems, the merger with the Steigenberger group has meant considerable improvements in the standards of the hotel proper, the latest of which included, not only refurbishment of bedrooms (although traditional furnishings and original features have been kept) but also a refit of the entrance lobby, a newly commissioned stained glass window on the main stairs and a modern business centre. The Gellert has managed to maintain its traditional elegance and style whilst keeping pace with the demands of the modern international business and tourist traveller (Gellert 1993 pp. 1, 7, 11, 26 & 42).

Despite the creature comforts of an international hotel, the Gellert also has to serve its health patients and although, as a hotel, it now caters almost exclusively for the richer members of home and foreign society, it remains an economical alternative to private treatments in western Europe. Room prices in the hotel vary enormously according to season, length of stay, package or private tour etc., but a beauty/fitness holiday through the official agent - Danube Travel - can be had from LStg 572-00 for eight days, including air fares from London, meals, treatment and use of baths facilities, considerably cheaper than similar packages available in health farms in the UK or Spa Hotels in France or Germany. (NB: although this is an area little acknowledged by UK tourism and British travel agents, the German firm TUI produce a brochure of Spa, health and fitness holidays where comparative package tour prices can be seen to show the financial advantages of treatments/cures in eastern and central Europe).

2.2 Grand Hotel & Thermal

The therapeutic sections of the Grand and Thermal Hotels on the central Margaret island, in the middle of the Danube, offer treatments for locomotive disorders, mental exhaustion, obesity and dental problems. Guests are faced with a choice of staying either in the superbly renovated Grand (known officially today as the Ramada Grand), based on the original Ybl designs and restored to a grandeur that even the Gellert is unable to match, or in the modern Thermal Hotel. Both hotels are interconnected and guests can go to the modern thermal bathing complex in their bath robes (provided as part of the hotel service) without having to leave the hotel. Unlike the Gellert baths, the Margaret island waters are specifically for treatment and not leisure, for that there is the nearby open air Palatinus baths on the west bank (Csornyey 1970 pp. 97-16). Indeed, immersion in the thermal basins is not recommended for any period exceeding twenty minutes. Unlike the Gellert, this is a functional bathing area with treatment rooms next to the pools and none of the exotic design and decoration of the Gellert baths. What the Grand does promise and deliver is luxury and relaxation in the magnificent surroundings of the Margaret Island - a park devoted to leisure within minutes of the city centre but with no traffic and one of the largest landscape gardens in Europe (Doughty 1996).

Not surprisingly, such luxury has its price and rack rates for the best rooms/suites
overlooking the park and furnished uniquely with antique furniture and paintings can be in the region of L'sig 300-00 per night, although Danube Travel can offer the same type of package for eight nights in the less spectacular five star Thermal part of the complex for as little as L'sig 530-00 for eight days (or L'sig 488-00 in the Grand without treatment but with free use of the thermal baths).

3 SLOVAKIA

Within the last five years, changes in the old area of Czechoslovakia have taken place at almost record speed, although it should be remembered that Slovakia has more in common with Hungary, having been under Magyar sovereignty in the Hapsburg Empire, than with her Czech neighbours. Slovakia in fact, has already had a period of autonomy during the twentieth century during the Nazi period when Bohemia and Moravia became protectorates and Slovakia was something of a showcase state for Hitler's allies. This instability has had effects on the Slovak economy and tourism industries, although almost half a century of post-war socialism has left a considerable mark on health care (Horvath 1989 pp. 9-19). Slovakia's main thermal Spas (the High Tatra mountains can also be considered to be a health cure area because of its pure mountain air resorts) lie in the valley of the Vah river and close to one of the country's busiest arterial roads. If the river valley has been offered up to the grime and noise of industry, at least two Spa towns have retained some of the importance they had at the close of the last century - Trencianske Teplice (Trentschin Teplitz) and Piestany (Pistyan). Whereas the former has changed almost out of recognition from its days as a flourishing Spa town, regularly linked to Budapest by train, the latter has retained much of its charm and even some of its elegance (Nieh 1984 pp. 95-109).

3.1 Piestany

The waters of Piestany are mentioned as early as 1745 by a medic from the Imperial capital of Pressburg (today Bratislava) and even earlier by an Imperial messenger returning from Russia in 1551 who remarked on the hot waters issuing from the ground near to the Vah (Vah) river (Nieh 1984 pp. 96-97). Indeed, even in the sixteenth century, the town was famous as a Spa and its beneficial waters for the treatment of rheumatic disorders, obesity and, much later Bechterov's disease, put Piestany in the top league of health resorts. Today, the town is filled with patients not only from Slovakia and the neighbouring German speaking countries but also, most noticeably, by guests from the Middle East.

Of the two Spa towns mentioned, it is Piestany that has potentially most to offer in the way of tourism. Trencianske Teplice has all but totally degenerated into a mass state sanatorium or hospital with only one public hotel in town - the distinctly run-down, post war Jalta hotel, home more to swallows on its balcony and the new youth culture in its weekend basement disco, than to the elegant clientele of the last century.
Little can be done to improve on the debased building plans of post war Trencianske Teplice, but Piešťany has remained much more intact and contains, along with its modern health hotels and tourist skyscrapers, not only a Spa island reminiscent, albeit in miniature, of the Budapest Margaret island, but also a hotel equal in its potential splendour to the Gellert in Budapest.

The Spas island is surrounded by the river Vah but connected to the town centre by a colonnade bridge at the far end of which stands a statue of a young man breaking his crutches and an inscription praising the powers of the waters and the possibility of health for all under socialism. On the island is a modern complex of hotels and baths - the Balnea Palace, Splendid and Grand, each with varying degrees of service and comfort. The highlight of the peaceful, almost traffic free island, is however the art nouveau Thermia Palace because of its location within the park and proximity to the town bridge. It is, perhaps even more imposing than its Budapest counterpart, the Gellert.

The Thermia Palace predates the Gellert by some six years, being completed in 1912 (see Piešťany undated pp 9-10) and is the oldest hotel in town. Unlike the Gellert, the hotel remains in state hands and lacks, as yet, the input of western capital to turn its somewhat faded grace and charm into a luxury commercial enterprise. Also, like other health resorts in Slovakia, the accent here is upon treatment rather than leisure; the hotel, despite its Grand Hotel atmosphere, is first and foremost a centre for medical treatment. Guests are expected to sit at their table in the dining room, to eat set meals (dietary if necessary) and conform to a strict regime of bathing and treatment.

Slovakia has learned little from her neighbours of the needs of western travellers, apart from a few new restaurants and bars that have sprung up in the town centre. It is difficult to persuade hotel staff to change the rules or accommodate the individual, but nevertheless, Piešťany proves to be popular with German and Austrian visitors - particularly the Germans from the former GDR who still find prices here advantageous and affordable. Category A hotel rooms are spacious, have televisions, fridges (albeit on the outside loggia and totally unstocked), bathrooms and telephones. Treatments and an open air thermal pool are all available and a great degree of success has been reported (albeit by the state authorities) in the therapies offered. Prices too are extremely attractive at present (meals in Slovakia are generally available for ridiculously small amounts of western currency - usually around five pounds for two no matter what is chosen from the menu) with the Thermia as the top of the range hotel charging less than L50-00 for luxury double room to short stay western tourists (package tour rate via TUI is from DM 1.674 for two weeks full board and treatment). The hotel, like the Grand/Thermal complex in Budapest, is joined to treatment centres and mirror thermal baths by a corridor and the surrounding therapy centre retains a turn of the century charm that is extremely winning and conducive to relaxation. Added to all this, the town centre, small but
lively as it is, is only a few minutes walk away, across the covered bridge.

4 ENGLAND

The traditional Spa towns of England have dwindled over the years with a particular decline following the boom of the late nineteenth century. Rail travel may well have opened up towns like Llandrindod Wells, Harrogate and Buxton, but it also saw the development of the more proletarian seaside resorts. A fashion for sea bathing and fresh air led to development of an affordable holiday culture which grew even more with passing of the Bank Holiday Act of 1871 and the introduction of workers' holidays such as the Wakes weeks in industrial northern England. Spa treatment despite making an attempt at revival in certain towns was finally dealt its death blow after the second World War when medical science discovered cheap drugs which could cure the ailments that once were alleviated by taking the waters. The Edinburgh University report on Harrogate (Davidson 1944) and the gradual withdrawal of the National Health system from any Spa treatments in the 1960's finally led to the closure of Spa facilities throughout the country. Today, only one working Spa hospital remains, the privately run Droitwich establishment.

4.1 Buxton

British Spa towns generally went into decline in the years following 1945. Lack of money and a wartime culture of rationing and restraint meant that the culture of luxury at these resorts had been lost. Many of the towns became genteel retirement spots for the elderly and many fell into disuse and decline. It is a sad sight to see the architecture of these towns at the end of the century where the grand buildings of Harrogate, Cheltenham and Buxton have been left to rot away so that many are now almost beyond repair both physically and economically. Buxton was the Spa resort for Manchester but has now become almost a commuter town for the Manchester area.

The Buxton Crescent with its baths is now under partial restoration but the baths themselves are firmly closed behind the locks of the tourist office. Buxton Water does have its source here and visitors to the tourist office can catch a glimpse through closed doors of the plastic covered that eventually will end up on their supermarket shelves. Behind that source lie the baths closed for many years, overgrown with weeds, plundered of their fitments and now, in part, used as storage space for leaflets and magazines.

In olden times, the Old Hall Hotel adjoining these baths had been a Spa hotel. Most famously, Mary Queen of Scots had stayed there and taken the Buxton waters (Dembigh 1981 p. 37). Now it is a rather impoverished local hotel boasting a wine bar and a night club but with no pretensions to being a treatment centre. At the time of writing the future of the crescent is still unsure and restoration of the baths (and
Indeed the adjacent former poor baths) looks unlikely.

Buxton's "grand" hotel lies a few steps away on top of a small hill, bounded on two sides by the railway station and the Devonshire Hospital, where a limited amount of hydrotherapy treatment still takes place. However, National Health cuts and the decline in hydrotherapy treatment have left the hospital with only a small water pool in the basement and an attitude that the local water is neither more nor less efficient than the water available from the tap. It is even possible that the hospital may be closed down and facilities transferred to the nearby Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport (Bryant 1995). Unlike the hotels in Hungary and Slovakia, this Palace Hotel, despite its proximity to the Devonshire hospital, has no connection with the treatment centre.

The Palace Hotel was built in 1868 by Henry Currey, the architect for the seventh Duke of Devonshire, the local major landowner whose family had also commissioned the hospital (originally albeit as stables). After passing through Forte management and being left in a state of disrepair for many years with water dripping through the roof and rotting windows, it was revived with the coming of the Buxton festivals and a general recent refurbishment of the town in the last few years. The hotel is now in private management and a massive refurbishment programme is still in process. Unlike its European counterparts however, the Palace management are apparently unsure of the function of such a large hotel. Buxton has now become a centre for touring the beauties of the local countryside, for family weekend getaway breaks and for conferences with widely differing room rates. Conference hotels demand, as do star ratings for hotels, some sort of leisure facilities and the Palace has its own Oasis leisure club boasting a swimming pools, gym, beauty therapy, hairdresser, masseur, solarium, snooker table, snack bar, sauna and changing rooms. The reality of the club is less impressive than its description may seem and difficult even to access.

Buxton needs to think about a policy for tourism in the twenty first century if it is to survive. The area of the north West of England is no longer the major international production centre that it once was. Manchester has centres of major urban decline and the rich middle classes who used Buxton as a Spa now no longer exist. If the Devonshire Hospital were to be closed by the state system, Buxton would have a chance for a major investment in using the hospital facilities as a private treatment centre which could easily be linked by underground tunnel to the Palace Hotel. A similar, more modest alternative could be done with the Old Hall hotel, or a new hotel in the Crescent, with the baths there. It seems however that, despite some efforts by individuals, the attitudes of hotel managements and therapists in the area will never see such a scheme put into action and Buxton, outside festival times is liable to continue its slow decline.

4.2 Comparisons and Conclusions
Whereas Budapest has the advantage of capital city status, Pieštany is the more likely candidate for a relaxing health and leisure holiday. What, however, has been achieved by the Hungarian and Western joint venture system favoured by the hotels cited in Budapest is the creation of a world class pair of hotels where the rich or semi-rich can indulge themselves in anti-stress treatments and therapies for certain chronic illnesses. This both creates new sources of wealth for the local population and the state and city without the exclusion of locals from those much valued facilities. The Grand/Thermal complex may well rely more on foreign guests than locals, but this is inherent in its secluded position within the city and its type of medical therapies. The Gellert provides an example of luxury hotel and open policy health baths and thermal swimming pool which seems to be a model that the Hungarians might accept for future developments, finances being available - there are plans mooted for similar projects within Budapest (see Tarnoczine Balogh 1993).

Market forces have not yet taken hold in Slovakia and, indeed, one of the reasons for the “velvet divorce” with the Czech Republic was to slow down the process towards a fully western market economy. What this has meant for Pieštany and for other Slovak Spas is an even cheaper form of health cure, but one that lacks the hedonistic aspect of the old Hapsburg (k. and k.) Spas and indeed the atmosphere that the new European rich find to their taste on the terraces of the Gellert or the restaurants of the Grand. The Therma Palace Hotel in Pieštany is possibly and potentially one of the great luxury hotels of central Europe; it awaits a Steigenberger or a Ramada group to transform it.

The situation in Buxton meanwhile remains that of a typical British Spa town in decline and although efforts are being made by the British Spas Federation to re-inject some of the old spirit of “taking the waters” back into their designated Spa towns (Cluckie 1995), little real progress has or will be made. Britain retains its distrust and somewhat puritan attitudes to Spa therapies and the new leisure complexes for the middle classes remain the only real water treatment alternative. In Britain, health and fitness is seen as leisure or at best preventative therapy whereas central Europe still retains its trust not only in the preventative therapies of its Spa resorts but also the possibility of a cure for mind and body.

Note: Where tourist prices have been quoted they are based on prices per person sharing a twin room during low season, except for rack rates which are quoted per room/suite.

5 REFERENCES

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