



SpaMania

unemployed but clean

By Kai Jonas The State of Thuringia, a part of former East-Germany, has roughly 300 km (180 miles) in diameter. Within this state a citizen can reach at least one Spa, in most cases even select from two, within a half an hour drive. One is lead to believe that the Thuringians, without being in Rome, “do as the Romans do”. In other words, one could get the impression they are avid visitors of Spas, pools, and saunas. In fact, they are sportive, but they are a rather traditional, type of German in being stolid. In addition, the Spas are way below their break even. Today, one can count at least 20 Spas and “Fun-Pools”, among them the critically acclaimed “Toskana-Therme” in Bad Sulza and there are more to come. The rationale behind this inflation of wellness is simple yet striking. In the 1990ies, the European Union offered large sums of subsidies to build the facilities. Plus, up to date the State of Thuringia has pitched in roughly €60 million (approx. \$ 75 million) over the last ten years. Once the pool is full of water, and the inauguration ceremony is over, the economic risk is transferred to the local community. Thus at least a minimum of jobs are guaranteed, because no mayor of any town of ten thousand and an unemployment rate of up to 17% dares to close the deficit generating Spa. Besides that he has probably already closed standard indoor pool beforehand.

The generic Spa-type is using some sort of hot water spring, being more or less good for your health and in many cases offers wellness hotels in the vicinity, too. There are one or two curvy pools, bubble baths, a Sauna & recreation areas with industrial ceilings. All this is usually decorated with 30 percent faux and 70 percent real plants, with the Baywatch team being recruited from not very healthy looking locals. All is catered more towards the elderly, with no room for kids or a normal adult who is interested in swimming more than two breast strokes (no free-style, please!).

The so-called “Fun-Pool” doesn’t look much different. Just add two slides, one being high speed and the other a family-type, more teenagers and families with children, more faux and less real plants, a within facility ice-cream & pizza parlor and you’re all set. If you swim, it is at your own risk, most likely you are going to be jumped on by an overweight pubescent.

In general, regular fees start at €8 per person for two hours, not including food or drinks, a tan or towel rental – in case you forgot to

bring your own, as always...

In most cases the new pools are somewhat outside of the town, to allow for a spacious setting and enough parking spaces. At the same time, the old pool in town is closed and vacant, with at least two failed investment concepts to its records and none in view. It's so easy to generate another nasty spot in town.

Government officials heavily defend the Spa and Fun-Program as a cornerstone for the tourism development and quality of urban life. This clearly holds true for certain gems in water landscape of Thuringia. The New York Times has rated the "Toskana Therme" as one of the Top-Five Spas in the World. Indeed its concept is intriguing. Having been part of the EXPO 2000 program, the Spa offers a unique underwater "liquid sound" system. The salty water lets you float, just dip in and listen to ambient beats or Bach's Goldberg Variations. You get addicted easily. On full-moon nights the Spa is open until midnight, and special concerts are offered underwater. This is innovative wellness at its best and the queues at the entrance (the Spa only allows a max number of visitors at time to ensure collision-free floating) are proof for the success. On the other hand the "GalaxSea" in the thriving local metropolis of Jena with 693 guests per day is way short of the necessary daily 1000 needed for being the desired economic success. Naturally, it situated less than have an hour drive away from the other Spa. This year, in rising fees (3€ for 1h; just the pool and if you want to use the sauna it's an additional 3€ more) the city officials hope to reach the net gain zone. A nice side effect would be cutting down the €2.2 million (approx. \$ 2.75 million) of subsidies the city has to pitch in every year.

In theory, the idea to both generate jobs and tourism attractions sounds fine and easy, and obviously was comparatively cheap with all the European Union money. But in practice it has many downsides. Indoor pools for sports and training have been closed for the sake of the new "Fun Pools" or are left in horrible conditions. Old inner city facilities form new dead spots in already beaten towns. And the new "Fun-Pools" pose a heavy burden on the battered funding schemes of the cities. Clearly, the former East of Germany was in desperate need for development after 1989, but 15 years later the mistakes of the early West German colonial times become obvious, especially, since they are still being carried out. EU money did not create a land of milk and honey where the thermal waters float, but a burden on community funds hence restricting possibilities for future development. And what about the Thuringian swimmers? The sportive Thuringians miss their good old lap-pool.

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