

Design of Technological Infrastructures in Health and Wellness Tourism and their Effects on Hotel Hospitality: The Case of the Municipality of Lamia

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Abstract: - Health and well-being are increasingly pursued through prevention rather than treatment, creating demand for new tourism products and services. This paper examines how technological infrastructures can support health and wellness tourism and how they affect hotel hospitality, using the Municipality of Lamia, Central Greece, as a case study. After defining health, medical, spa and wellness tourism and the main types of spa facilities, the study analyses the area's geographical position, tourism resources, thermal springs, arrivals, overnight stays and hotel capacity, drawing on official statistics and planning documents. The findings show that Lamia has rich thermal and cultural resources but faces low occupancy, strong seasonality, dependence on domestic visitors and a fragmented tourism identity. The paper proposes the integration of thermal and medical tourism and the use of artificial intelligence, such as digital maps, personalized treatment programmes, visitor-flow management and VR/AR promotion, as levers for sustainable, tourism-driven development.

Key-Words: - Health Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Spa Tourism, Thermal Springs, Hospitality Services, Artificial Intelligence, Sustainable Tourism Development, Municipality of Lamia.

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1 Introduction

In the modern era, individuals are more interested than ever in personal, social and psychological well-being as a lifestyle choice, travelling significant distances to explore diverse health and wellness options, [1]. There is a notable shift towards a general philosophy of healthy living, which has created a growing demand for new tourism products and services related to health, environment, nutrition and sports. These tourism products and services are increasingly in demand and are often paired with treatments and body rejuvenation programmes.

On this basis, certain forms of tourism have emerged or been redefined, structured with distinct characteristics and shaped by the evolving demands and corresponding adjustments in tourism supply.

The definitions provided below for the forms of tourism under consideration aim to capture the realities of the tourism industry. More specifically:

Health tourism: This form of tourism combines vacations with the prevention and treatment of physical and mental-spiritual diseases. According to [2], health tourism encompasses all the relationships and phenomena that arise from individuals' temporary relocation to promote, stabilize or, if necessary, restore their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. This is achieved by utilizing services at a destination distinct from their usual place of residence or work. Health tourism encompasses three subcategories: medical tourism, spa tourism and wellness tourism, while the offered services span several categories as shown in Figure 1.

Medical tourism: This form of tourism primarily involves tourists seeking treatment for specific health issues, often referred to as health tourists or patient-tourists.

Spa tourism: This specialized tourism category focuses on the therapeutic use of thermal springs.

Thermal springs are defined as natural hot, hypothermic or cold-water springs containing beneficial elements for addressing various health conditions, [3].

The term “thermalism” is also used in international literature to describe an organized approach and complementary actions using thermal springs as a dominant element. The main objectives of this form of tourism include health prevention, maintenance and recovery.

Confirmed thermal resources are utilized in specialized facilities for treatments such as hydrotherapy, drinking therapy, inhalation therapy, nasal irrigation, steam baths and clay therapy, among other recognized methods. In addition, spa tourism services include thalassotherapy, where heated seawater, sand, mud, seaweed and other marine materials are employed for both preventive and therapeutic purposes, constantly under medical supervision.

Wellness tourism: This form of tourism encompasses all relationships and phenomena associated with the travel and stay of people whose primary motivation is to maintain and enhance their physical, mental and psychological health, as well as their social well-being, [4]. These individuals seek unique and authentic experiences, often rooted in the local traditions of the chosen destination. They tend to seek and utilize services related to fitness care, aesthetic body care, healthy eating (e.g., diet programmes), relaxation (e.g., stress management), meditation, mental and physical exercise, education (e.g., ecology courses), etc., [5].

In recent years, the international health tourism market has experienced rapid growth, characterized by three distinct yet interrelated segments, [6]:

- Health, hygiene and physical well-being tourism centres (health resorts).
- Spa-therapeutic tourism centres (spa resorts / balnearies / thermalism).
- Wellness resorts. These businesses provide comprehensive service packages, including fitness care, aesthetic care, healthy nutrition, relaxation, etc. They often combine activities associated with other specialized forms of tourism.

It is almost certain that the above-mentioned segments overlap strongly, particularly in light of the rapid development of technology and its applications. As the authors in [7] point out, the popularity of these categories is closely linked to broader social trends, as well as to those that will prevail in medical science in the future.

In the broader tourism industry, the term “spa” encompasses a wide range of products. According to [8], the main types of spa facilities can be categorized as follows:

- **Club Spa.** Evolving from traditional sports centres, these facilities focus on enhancing physical fitness.
- **Day Spa.** They are the modern evolution of beauty salons, often combined with luxury cruise experiences.
- **Destination Spa.** High-quality accommodations providing tailored programmes for health improvement and a healthy lifestyle. They are classified into:
 - a. New Age and Holistic Emphasis, featuring alternative healing methods, vegetarianism and macrobiotic nutrition.
 - b. Weight Loss Emphasis, specializing in weight reduction programmes.
 - c. Sports and Adventure Emphasis, featuring outdoor sports activities.
- **Medical Spa.** Facilities offering medical treatments.
- **Mineral Springs Spa.** Located near areas with thermo-metallic or sea water, these facilities utilize such resources as a basis for treatments like hydrotherapy, spa therapy, clay therapy, etc.
- **Resort/Hotel Spa.** These offer aesthetic care and physical fitness maintenance services, often as part of a larger tourism package.
- **Other types of Spa facilities.** Examples include thematic facilities that develop treatments and activities based on specific themes (e.g., historical or cultural features).

Regarding the first two categories, these are mainly found in urban centres and are considered a way of using leisure time. In any case, they do not combine key elements of tourism activity such as travel and accommodation, [9]. 1 (see Appendix) presents the scale of health, wellness and spa tourism services, [10].

2 Design of Technological Infrastructure in Health and Wellness Tourism: The Case of the Municipality of Lamia

The development of technological infrastructures and the integration of services related to health tourism, spa tourism and wellness tourism into the overall tourism offering of a destination constitutes a main goal for Greece. Achieving this goal

necessitates the establishment of numerous sustainable businesses that can leverage thermal springs and wellness areas distributed across the Greek territory.

On this basis, this study examines the dynamics of health and wellness services, along with the associated infrastructure of the wider area of the Municipality of Lamia. More specifically, this study firstly assesses the potential and added value that health and wellness tourism brings to the region and, secondly, evaluates the impacts of these activities on the hospitality sector within the wider area.

2.1 Basic Characteristics of the Municipality of Lamia

The Municipality of Lamia is one of the seven (7) Local Authorities that fall administratively under the Regional Unit of Fthiotida, the largest in area and second in population subdivision of the Region of Central Greece. The city of Lamia hosts the headquarters of the Region of Central Greece and is also the capital of the Prefecture of Fthiotida.

On January 1, 2011, the current Municipality of Lamia was established through the merger of the pre-existing Municipalities of Gorgopotamos, Lianokladi, Ipati and the Community of Pavliani. This reorganization aimed to include the immediate and wider area of the city, as it develops in all directions and creates the urban complex of Lamia and its wider urban area (Law 3852/2010). The current Municipality is composed of five (5) Municipal Units (Lamia, Gorgopotamos, Lianokladi, Ipati and Pavliani).

The broader region of Lamia is characterized by its demographic and development trends, social characteristics, environmental status, cultural heritage and its overall strategic position in the geographical and economic space. Distinctive attributes of the region include the existence of national and international tourism resources, the composition of a multidimensional tourism product, the enhancement of regional mobility through the connection of secondary and tertiary hubs to TEN-T (Trans-European Transport Network) infrastructure (including multimodal hubs), valuable ecosystems with rich biodiversity, and protected areas and landscapes.

The Municipality of Lamia occupies a “nodal” position within the national geographic space and holds a “critical” role in the Greek geopolitical space, shaping development policies and axes, especially during the past three decades.

Lamia serves as an urban and freight hub, an international gateway and a crossroads connecting

the Region with the secondary Trans-European Transport Network. The kilometric and temporal distances of the Municipality of Lamia from other major cities, as well as from Athens and Thessaloniki, are presented in Table 1 (Appendix), [11].

With regard to the development prospects and evolution of the wider area of the Municipality of Lamia, the spatial organization and planning directions of tourist activity are strategically aligned with the cultural and natural assets of the Region. These resources act as focal points for diverse tourism activities across individual villages and municipal units. In addition, the following strategic initiatives are essential for advancing health and wellness tourism:

- Immediate utilization of public properties surrounding the thermal springs, preserving their unique architectural and urban heritage as Areas of Special Character, especially in the case of Kamena Vourla and Thermopylae (Archaeological Park – Thermal Baths Complex).
- Integration of thermal tourism with medical tourism, mainly through the utilization of the Lamia Regional Hospital serving the wider areas of the Baths of Ipati, Thermopylae, Kamena Vourla and Edipsos.

2.2 Tourism in the Wider Area of the Municipality of Lamia

In terms of visitor traffic, the advantages and disadvantages of tourism in Central Greece are closely linked to the Region’s proximity to Attica, which hosts nearly half of the country’s population and receives the majority of the country’s tourist arrivals. This proximity has two primary effects:

- First, Central Greece, along with nearby Regional Units, becomes an “accessible” tourist destination for the residents of Athens, but also for visitors to Athens. Typical examples are Edipsos in Northern Evia and Kamena Vourla in Fthiotida, which rely heavily on domestic visitors, predominantly from Athens.
- Second, the proximity to Attica contributes to Central Greece becoming a Region characterized by diverse destinations and attractions. Typical examples of the segmentation of tourist interest in the Region are the development of seaside tourism in Evia, ski tourism in Evritania or spa tourism in Fthiotida. Also of great interest are the growing visitor trends for related activities in the Region’s mountainous areas.

Thus, there are many strengths and challenges for tourism in the Region of Central Greece and also in the Regional Unit of Fthiotida. On the positive side, the Region has developed a variety of alternative forms of tourism, offering significant potential for balanced tourism development. On the downside, the fragmentation of these diverse forms of tourism results in the lack of a cohesive and recognizable identity for the Region as a tourist destination.

According to the official statistical data for 2018, [12], useful conclusions emerge for the tourist traffic of domestic and foreign tourists at the level of the Region and the Regional Unit (P.E.) of Fthiotida. More specifically:

- The P.E. of Fthiotida receives 14.74% of the total number of arrivals of the Region of Central Greece. More specifically, for 2018, visitor arrivals in P.E. Fthiotida amounted to 89,919 compared to 609,729 in total in Central Greece.
- Of the 89,919 arrivals in P.E. Fthiotida for 2018, 21.32% are foreign arrivals (19,170 arrivals) and 78.68% are domestic arrivals (70,749 arrivals).
- The arrivals of foreigners in P.E. Fthiotida for 2018 constitute only 6.67% of the total arrivals of foreign visitors in Central Greece. On the contrary, the arrivals of domestic visitors in Fthiotida constitute 21.95% of the Region's total.
- The overall trend of arrivals in P.E. Fthiotida showed a slight decrease during the five-year period 2014–2018, falling from 17.86% of arrivals in the Region in 2014 to 14.74% in 2018.
- P.E. Fthiotida holds only 12.40% of the total number of overnight stays of the Region of Central Greece. More specifically, for 2018, overnight stays in P.E. Fthiotida amounted to 214,290 compared to 1,728,160 in total in Central Greece.
- The overall trend of overnight stays in P.E. Fthiotida showed a slight decrease during the five-year period 2014–2018, falling from 15.23% of overnight stays in the Region in 2014 to 12.40% in 2018.
- Finally, the occupancy rate in P.E. Fthiotida remains low, at only 20.4% compared to 29.5% for the whole of the Region of Central Greece.

Regarding tourist accommodation capacity, Fthiotida has 121 hotel units, representing 23.13% of the total in Central Greece. These units have

2,834 rooms and 5,442 beds, respectively. Most of the units (78) are two-star hotels, which account for 64.46% of the total. Next, 26 units (21.48%) are one-star hotels, while there are only 5 four-star units and only one large five-star hotel (Table 2, Appendix), [13].

In the Municipality of Lamia there are 38 hotels and accommodation units, which have been assessed in categories B to D and have a total of 450 rooms and 800 beds. Most of the large hotels are located within the city of Lamia, but there are a large number of smaller hotels and accommodation facilities in the area of the Baths of Ipati, a site that attracts hundreds of visitors annually due to its thermal springs. There is also accommodation available in the community of Pavliani, which is an attraction as a mountain destination for “daily excursions” throughout the year.

As a general statement, within the city of Lamia and the wider region of Fthiotida there are some of the most important archaeological monuments, integral to Greece's cultural heritage. Places of interest such as Thermopylae, Alamana and Gorgopotamos attract thousands of visitors every year and generate robust tourist flows. This effort seeks to combine cultural tourism with diverse activities and tours within the city and surrounding areas. Nearby, there are places with direct access to the intervention area which host some of the most important springs in Greece, whose thermal waters are of high quality, without residues or industrial effluents, such as the thermal springs in Kamena Vourla, the Thermae Thermal Baths, the Baths of Ipati and the springs of Ekkara, which attract the most domestic tourism, while Platystomo, Paleovracha and Kaitsa also see significant visitor traffic.

The Municipality anticipates a substantial increase in tourist flows to Lamia and the broader area, supported by rising numbers of international visitors and extended overnight stays in the Regional Unit of Fthiotida. This increase in tourism is expected to provide a significant boost to local businesses. By effectively leveraging these assets, the region can achieve a marked increase in tourists, who visit the city and the surrounding area as potential customers of the businesses in the intervention area, promoting mainly local products.

Moreover, the city of Lamia has special features which, in combination with the creation of the necessary infrastructure, can make it a city-break destination. In addition, its short distance from nearby destinations such as Delphi, Parnassos, Velouchi, Meteora and Pelion further enhances its appeal as a major tourist hub.

Urban tourism enables the Municipality to exploit the advantages of a strengthened tourism sector, ranging from the creation of new jobs and increased revenues to the substantial upgrading of the quality of life.

The expected boost of economic activity, driven by the promotion of the tourist sector and the influx of visitors, can be the core of the revitalization and development of the entire city of Lamia and the broader Fthiotida region.

2.3 Forms of Tourism in the Wider Area of the Municipality of Lamia

The alternative forms of tourism in the wider area of the Municipality of Lamia include: (a) religious tourism, (b) cultural tourism, (c) educational tourism, (d) business-conference tourism, (e) industrial and commercial tourism, (f) agrotourism and (g) gastronomic tourism. Among these, health and wellness tourism (specifically spa and thermal tourism) emerges as a particularly noteworthy and strategically significant segment.

Thermal tourism is primarily centred on the therapeutic purposes of thermal springs. The term “thermalism”, widely recognized in international terminology and practice, encompasses all actions for the treatment of the human body using thermo-metallic waters and thermal springs.

In recent years, new technologies have been added to spa baths, so spa tourism has evolved into health tourism, a modernized form of therapeutic tourism.

Lamia and the wider region of Fthiotida have many thermal resources, which favours the development of health and wellness tourism. This potential underscores the strategic importance of positioning the region as a leading thermal tourism destination, thereby capitalizing on its natural assets to foster sustainable economic and social growth.

2.4 Health and Wellness Tourism – Utilization of Thermal Springs

The organization of tourism activity in the Municipality of Lamia relies on the cultural and natural tourism resources of the Region, which serve as attractions for various types of tourism across spatial and municipal units. Simultaneously, broad priority zones are defined for the promotion of internationally appealing attractions. A significant focus is placed on integrating tourism planning with the quality of life and cultural recreation for both visitors and residents through the interconnection of tourism services and the enhancement of the settlement network. This target is addressed by

linking tourism services with infrastructure upgrades and expanding the tourism portfolio to attract global audiences.

Improving access to tourist attractions via the main transport network and/or transport hubs, including maritime and rail connections, is very important. This development is expected to contribute significantly to the increase of tourist flows, to promote the thermal springs as a focus of tourist activity in the wider region and to establish a recognizable identity for the area.

3 Prospects and Potential for the Development of Health and Wellness Tourism in the Municipality of Lamia

The prospects and potential for the development of health and wellness tourism in the Municipality of Lamia are a key priority in the planning of the tourism policy of the Regional Unit of Fthiotida. The area boasts rich potential in the cultural heritage sector. A comparative advantage is the abundance of thermal and mineral springs and a long-standing tradition of providing services in the field of wellness tourism, complemented by a wide variety of alternative tourism forms.

However, the tourism sector in the region faces significant weaknesses. The main characteristics are: (a) the share of the national tourism market attributable to Central Greece is extremely limited, and (b) most visitors come from the domestic market.

The key challenges related to the development of health and wellness tourism in the Municipality of Lamia primarily concern: (a) the pronounced seasonality affecting both the tourist season and the overall product, and (b) the need to enhance the tourism offering through the promotion of specialized forms of tourism, such as thermal tourism.

Another innovative perspective in efforts to increase tourist flows is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) as a modern tool for the promotion of thermal springs. More specifically, AI can play a very important role in highlighting thermal springs and enhancing their tourism potential through technological innovation, data analysis and service optimization, [13]. Thermal springs, as health and wellness resources, can benefit from AI applications across various domains, for example in research and development, as well as in tourism promotion and management. In addition, in relation to the hospitality of visitors in accommodation in the

wider region, AI can help to improve services, personalize visitor experiences and enhance operational efficiency. More specifically:

- Creation of digital maps and routes.
- Promotion of thermal springs.
- Analysis and evaluation of thermal springs.
- Personalization of treatment programmes.
- Optimization of infrastructure and visitor management.
- Evaluation and improvement of the visitor experience.
- Development of digital therapeutic tools.
- Research and innovation in thermal springs. AI can enhance research and scientific understanding of thermal springs. Through advanced algorithms, the chemical composition of the waters can be analysed, historical and geological information about the springs can be studied, and new methods for their safe and sustainable exploitation can be developed.
- VR/AR applications for promotion. Using augmented (AR) and virtual reality (VR), AI can create virtual tours of spas and resorts, allowing users to digitally “visit” various destinations and learn about their healing properties before they choose to visit them.

4 Conclusion

Health and wellness tourism is a growing sector in Greece. With the support of appropriate investments aimed at improving the relevant infrastructure and redefining the product, health and wellness tourism can be successfully repositioned in international markets. However, regarding the Municipality of Lamia, there has been little interest from large private investors in this direction. Individual investment efforts and piecemeal small-scale improvement projects in hydrotherapy facilities are not sufficient for an overall transformation of the tourism offering, as they lack a parallel network of supportive actions to further promote spa tourism.

The Municipality of Lamia occupies a “nodal” position in the national geographic space and a “critical” position in the Greek geopolitical landscape and the development policies and axes that have historically shaped it, especially in recent decades. Moreover, Lamia is an urban and freight hub, an international gateway and a crossroads linking the Region with the secondary Trans-European Transport Network.

Regarding the development perspective and evolution of the wider area of the Municipality of Lamia, the spatial organization and planning directions for tourist activities are based on the

region’s cultural and natural resources as attractions for various types of tourism. The case study of the present research highlights tourism planning directions according to the form of tourism considered. These directions primarily concern: (a) the direct utilization of public property in the perimeter of the thermal springs, preserving the building and urban heritage as “Areas of Special Character”, especially in the case of Kamena Vourla and Thermopylae (Archaeological Park – Thermal Baths Complex), and (b) the integration of thermal tourism with medical tourism.

Tourist traffic in the broader area of the Municipality of Lamia mainly concerns different and alternative forms of tourism, which provide great potential for the balanced tourism development of the wider area. It should be emphasized that the fragmentation among the various forms of tourism, which largely operate in isolation from one another, constitutes a significant weakness in establishing a coherent and recognizable identity for the Region as a tourist destination. The alternative forms of tourism of particular relevance within the wider area of the Municipality of Lamia include: (a) religious tourism, (b) cultural tourism, (c) educational tourism, (d) business and conference tourism, (e) industrial and commercial tourism, (f) rural tourism, (g) gastronomic tourism and, of course, health and wellness tourism, especially spa tourism.

The principal challenges associated with the development of health and wellness tourism in the Municipality of Lamia primarily relate to: (a) the pronounced seasonality of the tourism product, and (b) the need to enhance the existing offering through the promotion of specialized forms of tourism, such as thermal tourism. The use of artificial intelligence as a modern tool for the promotion of thermal springs is also a crucial aspect of this process. AI can play an important role in promoting thermal springs, as well as in enhancing their tourism potential through technological innovation, data analysis and service optimization. Indicative examples include: (a) the development of digital maps and thematic itineraries, (b) the promotion of thermal springs, (c) the analysis of tourist behaviour and market trends, (d) the assessment and evaluation of thermal spring resources, (e) the personalization of therapeutic programmes, (f) the optimization of infrastructure and visitor-flow management, (g) the evaluation and enhancement of the visitor experience, (h) the development of digital therapeutic applications, (i) research and innovation related to thermal springs, and (j) the use of VR/AR

technologies to promote the destination through this specific form of tourism.

In conclusion, artificial intelligence constitutes a key enabler for advancing innovation within the domain of thermal and wellness tourism. The integration of AI-driven technologies can yield significant benefits for both visitors and service providers by enhancing the quality and efficiency of tourism services, enabling the personalized design of therapeutic experiences, optimizing the management of infrastructure and resources, and supporting data-informed promotional strategies aimed at broadening the sector's international appeal.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors wrote, reviewed and edited the content as needed and they have not utilised artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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APPENDIX

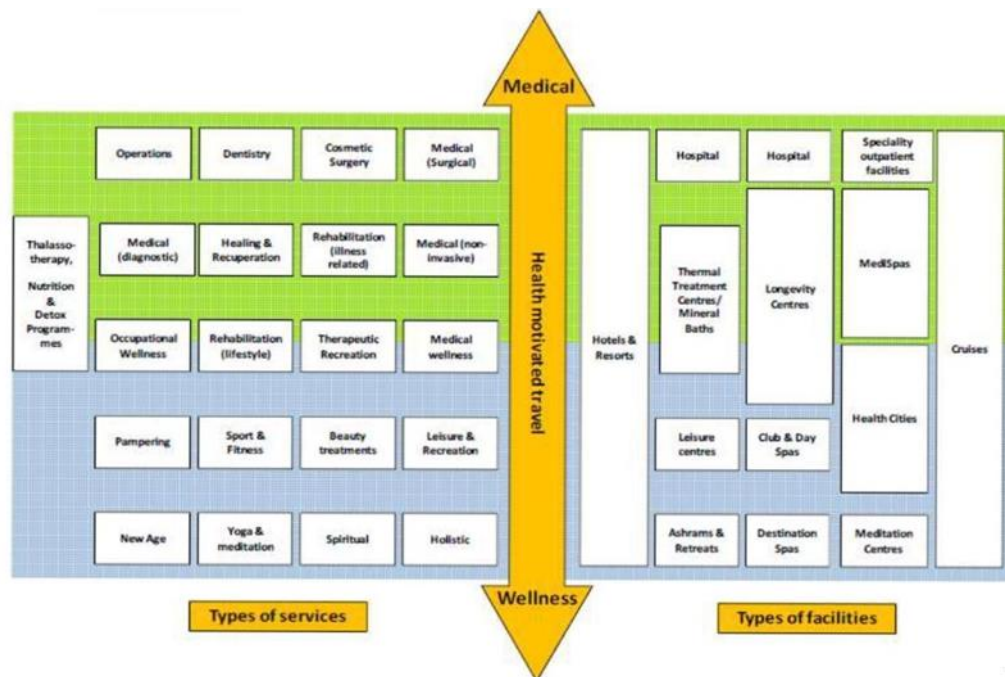


Fig. 1: The scale of health tourism services, wellness and spa tourism
Source: [10]

Table 1. Distances of Lamia in kilometres and time from the Administrative Seats of the Region of Central Greece, Athens and Thessaloniki

Administrative Seats	Distance (km)	Travel time
Athens	214	2 hours
Amfissa	72	1 hour
Thessaloniki	303	2.5 hours
Karpenisi	78	1 hour
Livadia	94	1 hour
Chalkida	157	2 hours

Source: [11]

Table 2. Hotel capacity in the P.E. of Fthiotida and in the Region of Central Greece (Stereia Ellada), 2019

		5*	4*	3*	2*	1*	Total
P.E. Fthiotida	Units	1	5	11	78	26	121
	Rooms	226	197	367	1,598	446	2,834
	Beds	493	420	707	2,994	828	5,442
Total Region of Central Greece	Units	8	47	157	249	62	523
	Rooms	685	3,008	4,982	5,622	1,088	15,385
	Beds	1,511	5,933	9,460	10,630	2,046	29,580

Source: [12]

Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

The main author and contributor was N. Theocharis while Helen C. Leligou supervised the research and reviewed the manuscript, which was conducted in the framework of N. Theocharis post-doc research in University of West Attica.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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