

Thermal Tourism in Algeria: An Analytical Assessment

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Abstract

Algeria is endowed with numerous natural thermal baths, which constitute a valuable asset for the thermal tourism sector. These thermal establishments attract both domestic and international tourists due to their rich resources and the distinctive properties of their natural waters. Algeria possesses considerable thermal resources and potential that are distributed throughout the country. According to the official website of the Ministry of Tourism and Traditional industry, the latest inventory of thermal water springs, conducted in 2015, identified 282 thermal springs, of which 100 were considered suitable for development through new thermal tourism projects, including 34 thermal baths that were traditionally operated.

Keyword : Tourism, Thermal tourism, Thermal springs, Algeria

JEL Classification Codes : L83, Z32

I- introduction

Thermal tourism is a type of tourism that is based on benefiting from the therapeutic properties of natural thermal resources and springs, which vary from one region to another. This diversity has led to the emergence of different forms of thermal tourism. In some areas, radioactive sand is used for therapeutic purposes, while in others, seawater is used for healing and rehabilitation. Other regions are characterized by the presence of hot springs rich in beneficial minerals that contribute to the treatment of various diseases. In addition, thermal tourism may involve modern medical centers equipped with specialized medical and scientific expertise.

II- Theoretical Framework

1-Definition of Thermal Tourism

Thermal tourism is one of the most important types of tourism, where tourists seek it for the purpose of treatment and entertainment in exchange for the money they spend on various services at these thermal stations (Mesdoui & Gasbe, 2026, p. 364).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is defined as “the provision of health care, along with benefiting from the natural resources of the host country, particularly mineral waters and climate (Al-Najja & Al-Rumayma Yusuf, 2022, p. 198).

The European Union defined it as « tourism undertaken for therapeutic purposes, involving the use of natural resources and a period of convalescence under organized medical supervision. Tourists typically stay in sanatoriums or health resorts with therapeutic properties aimed at promoting and maintaining general health. This form of tourism is undertaken by patients seeking treatment for illnesses from which they suffer, by traveling to areas characterized by a

healthy climate and the availability of mineral baths, sand baths, and other therapeutic resources and facilities (**Bougroum, Muaizi, & Belhouchat, 2019, p. 283**).

According to the International Tourism Union, it is defined as « the full range of health facilities and services from which tourists may benefit through the utilization of natural resources, such as mineral waters, sand, and climate, for therapeutic and health purposes » (**Hassani & Guerfi, 2021, p. 379**).

Thermal tourism can also be defined as a form of tourism associated with physical and psychological therapy and the treatment or alleviation of various health conditions. It primarily relies on the therapeutic use of mineral and thermal springs, either through bathing or drinking, with the aim of achieving recovery or alleviating pain and other health-related symptoms. Accordingly, thermal tourism is essentially based on thermal baths and spa facilities that utilize the therapeutic properties of mineral thermal waters in the treatment of certain diseases. However, the role of these facilities is not limited to therapeutic purposes; they also serve recreational and relaxation functions, attracting tourists to destinations renowned for their therapeutic properties and their potential to treat or alleviate certain health conditions, particularly cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, rheumatism, as well as stress-related psychological and nervous disorders. These destinations are characterized by the availability of various natural therapeutic resources, including mineral and sulfur springs, mud baths, and hot-water springs and fountains.

2- The Importance of Thermal Tourism

Thermal tourism plays a significant role as an important economic pillar due to its contribution to social and economic development in general. The use of natural thermal waters for therapeutic purposes helps preserve the traditional way of life of local communities and encourages populations to remain in their regions while promoting the preservation of their available natural resources. Thermal tourism also contributes to job creation and expands employment opportunities in the industrial and tourism sectors, particularly for the local population of tourist destinations.

Furthermore, thermal tourism can contribute to the development of an entire geographical area through investment in this sector and the provision of essential complementary services associated with the presence of thermal baths. These include the establishment of hotels and restaurants, the provision of transportation services, and other tourism-related facilities. Such developments contribute to improving the image and attractiveness of the destination. In addition, thermal tourism represents a sector capable of generating foreign currency by attracting international tourists seeking treatment through mineral and thermal waters at spa and thermal establishments. Consequently, it can contribute to increasing both individual and national income in the destination country (**Zaid & Touiza, 2014, p. 168**).

The importance of thermal tourism also lies in its strong interconnection with other productive sectors, such as agriculture, industry, and services. Consequently, it contributes to increasing domestic and gross production through the development of rural and local industries aimed at meeting domestic demand. Thermal tourism also plays an important role in promoting domestic tourism and stimulating economic activity in tourist destinations. Furthermore, it contributes to attracting new categories of tourists and generating higher levels of tourism expenditure,

thereby increasing occupancy rates in existing and newly established tourism projects and stimulating the overall tourism economic cycle (Barseem & Khalidiya, 2017, pp. 172-173). In addition, thermal tourism contributes to stimulating both the healthcare and hospitality sectors, given the close interconnection between complementary services, particularly hotels, and the core therapeutic service provided by thermal baths. Thermal tourism also serves as an effective means of promoting local products and other tourist attractions, as it provides visitors with the opportunity to explore cultural and natural landmarks and enjoy other tourism experiences during their therapeutic journeys (Khalil, 2016, pp. 229-230)

3- Types of Thermal Tourism

Studies and research have differed in their classification of thermal tourism, resulting in a variety of categories. However, most of them include the following types (Amrani, 2022, p. 89) (Bougoum, Muaizi, & Belhouchat, 2019, p. 284):

A. Recreational Thermal Tourism:

This type of tourism is found in areas where thermal baths are surrounded by gardens, extensive open spaces, and other recreational facilities. The primary purpose of such trips is recreation, relaxation, and leisure during free time and holidays.

B. Cultural Thermal Tourism:

This type aims to satisfy tourists' desire for knowledge and broaden their understanding of cultural, historical, and civilizational heritage. Visits are made to thermal baths that are distinguished by their ancient and renowned archaeological remains associated with different civilizations. Through these visits, tourists seek to enrich their cultural knowledge and experience.

C. Therapeutic Thermal Tourism:

This type involves traveling to meet the needs related to treatment, convalescence, recovery from diseases and their associated pain, or seeking psychological relaxation through the use of mineral waters. Thermal therapy is generally considered complementary to conventional medical treatment provided in hospitals. This type of tourism relies heavily on the natural therapeutic characteristics of the destination. Therapeutic thermal tourism can be further divided into two types:

- Artificial Therapeutic Tourism:

This type is human-made and involves artificial thermal baths and swimming pools. It also makes use of technological equipment and specialized facilities to treat certain diseases, particularly muscular and dermatological conditions. Such facilities may also include gardens, green spaces, and various recreational amenities.

- Natural Therapeutic Tourism:

This type relies on natural therapeutic resources that can contribute to the treatment or alleviation of various diseases. These include a healthy climate, mineral waters, medicinal herbs, sand baths, and other natural therapeutic resources available in these destinations, as presented in the following table :

Table 01: Natural Therapeutic Resources

Mud Baths	Sand Baths	Mineral or Sulfur Baths
They refer to baths in which lake mud, also known as volcanic mud , is used for therapeutic purposes. The treatment involves covering or immersing the affected body parts of the tourist in the mud. Mud has recognized therapeutic benefits due to its physical properties, as well as its organic, mineral, and biologically active composition.	They are considered among the traditional therapeutic methods and rely on the practice of burying the body in naturally heated or radioactive sand. They are primarily used to alleviate rheumatic pain and disorders affecting the joints and back. This type of therapy is commonly found in oases and desert regions, such as those in Biskra and El Oued in Algeria .	These are natural baths that emerge from the earth in the form of springs. Their waters contain various elements that contribute to the treatment of numerous diseases. They can be classified into three types: cold-water baths, warm-water baths, and alternating cold- and warm-water baths .

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (Ben Chayeb, 2022, pp. 441-442)

III- Thermal Tourism in Algeria: Statistical Indicators

Algeria possesses considerable thermal resources, which constitute one of the main assets for the development of thermal tourism, given the widespread distribution of thermal springs and mineral baths across different regions of the country and their distinctive natural and therapeutic properties. According to data from the Ministry of Tourism and And Traditional industry , Algeria had 282 thermal springs in 2015, including 100 springs suitable for development through new thermal projects, among which 34 mineral baths were traditionally operated. These natural resources reflect Algeria's significant potential to develop this form of tourism and attract both domestic and international tourists.

1- The Thermal Tourism Sector in Algeria

The following table presents the development of the thermal tourism sector in Algeria over the period 2015–2024.

Table 02: Thermal Tourism Activity in Algeria (2015–2024)

Suspended Projects	Projects Under Construction	Operating Establishments				Number		Year
		Thalassotherapy Center		Thermal Complex		Therapeutic Water Exploitation Concessions	Therapeutic Springs	
		Private	Public	Private	Public			
10	25	1	1	10	8	55	282	2015
9	30	1	1	13	8	62	282	2016
16	34	1	2	13	8	74	282	2017

19	38	1	2	15	8	83	282	2018
20	43	1	2	18	8	92	282	2019
20	44	1	2	18	8	93	282	2020
20	44	1	2	19	8	93	282	2021
22	25	1	2	21	8	92	282	2022
18	25	1	2	24	8	93	282	2023
22	21	1	2	24	8	97	282	2024

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Traditional industry (2026).

The updating of the national inventory of thermal resources, conducted in 2015 across the entire national territory, identified 282 thermal springs, occurring either as natural springs or boreholes. As shown in the table, the number of thermal springs remained stable throughout the study period (2015–2024).

The table also presents the operating establishments in Algeria's thermal tourism sector, including thermal treatment complexes and thalassotherapy centers, which provide direct therapeutic services based on mineral and thermal waters. The number of therapeutic water exploitation concessions increased from 55 concessions in 2015 to 97 concessions in 2024.

Regarding public thermal treatment complexes, their number remained stable at 8 establishments throughout the study period, up to 2024. In contrast, the number of private thermal treatment complexes increased significantly, from 10 establishments in 2015 to 24 in 2024. This increase may be attributed to the growing private-sector involvement in this type of therapeutic tourism, despite the substantial resources and investment requirements associated with establishing and operating thermal complexes.

With regard to public thalassotherapy centers, there was only one center during the period 2015–2016, after which the number increased to 2 and remained stable from 2017 through 2024. Conversely, the number of private thalassotherapy centers did not record any increase throughout the study period.

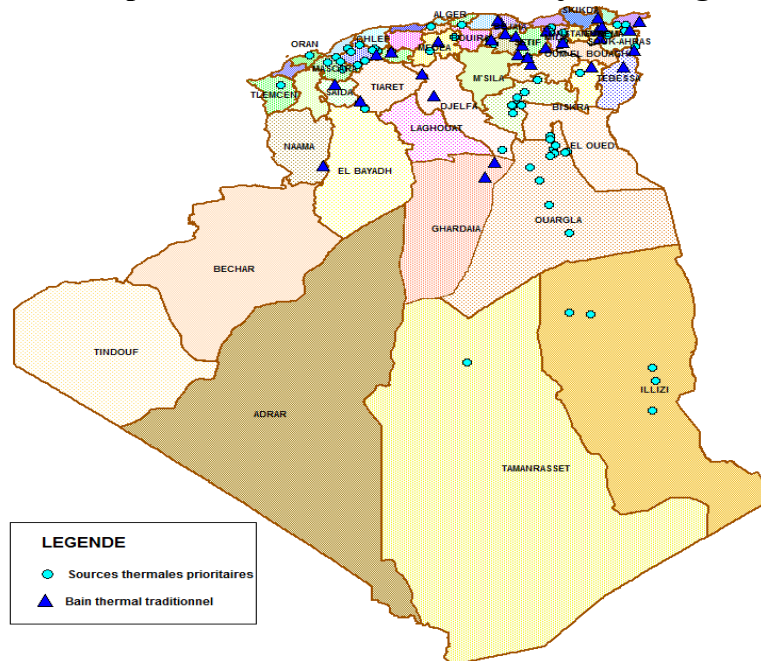
As for projects under construction, their number stood at 38 projects in 2015 and subsequently increased, reaching 44 projects in 2021. However, this figure declined considerably to only 21 projects in 2024. Meanwhile, the number of suspended projects increased from 10 projects in 2015 to 22 projects in 2024. This situation can be attributed to several factors, including the substantial financial resources required for investment in therapeutic tourism projects, administrative complexities associated with investment in this field, and the relatively high level of risk involved in the success or failure of such projects.

It is also noteworthy that 2020 and 2021 witnessed stability in most of the variables presented in the table, including exploitation concessions and thermal treatment complexes. This can be explained by the exceptional circumstances prevailing during this period, particularly the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on the tourism sector in general and on thermal tourism in particular. During this period, thermal complexes, treatment centers, and their associated facilities and services, including hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related establishments, were closed, resulting in a substantial disruption to thermal tourism activity.

2- Geographical Distribution of Thermal Resources in Algeria

Thermal springs and mineral baths in Algeria are distributed as illustrated in the following map:

Figure 01: Map of Thermal Springs and Traditional Mineral Baths Suitable for the Development of Thermal Tourism Projects in Algeria



Source: Ministry of Tourism and And Traditional industry (2026).

The previous map illustrates the distribution of a number of thermal baths across Algeria, representing potential opportunities for the development of thermal tourism projects and investments. The map indicates the presence of 34 thermal springs across several provinces, including El Tarf, Guelma, Batna, Khenchela, Sétif, Bordj Bou Arréridj, Béjaïa, Médéa, Tissemsilt, Tiaret, Relizane, and Saïda, among others.

In addition, there are 57 traditional mineral baths distributed across various provinces throughout the country, including Souk Ahras, Khenchela, Batna, Skikda, Blida, Oran, Mostaganem, Mascara, Tlemcen, Ouargla, Biskra, Djelfa, El Bayadh, and Illizi, among others. These thermal resources constitute significant potential for attracting new investments and developing the thermal tourism sector in Algeria.

Thermal tourism establishments in Algeria offer a wide range of services, generally characterized by satisfactory quality and prices that are accessible to their target clientele. These services can be broadly classified into therapeutic services and recreational services. Therapeutic services vary according to the specific healing properties and characteristics of the thermal spring waters available at each establishment, while recreational services depend largely on the financial and material resources of the thermal complex. Nevertheless, all these services pursue a common objective: to promote thermal tourism in the region by meeting the needs and expectations of visitors, whether they seek treatment and rehabilitation or relaxation and leisure.

Among the main services provided by thermal tourism establishments are:

- The provision of thermal pools, traditional and modern baths, and natural swimming pools.

- The provision of treatment rooms equipped with the necessary medical facilities, including rehabilitation equipment, massage facilities, electrotherapy devices, and other medical equipment.
- The availability of specialized medical staff trained in therapeutic treatments based on natural thermal spring waters.
- The provision of recreational facilities, relaxation areas, and gardens.
- The provision of various accommodation services, including hotels, inns, chalets, and annexed accommodation facilities.
- The provision of food and beverage services, including restaurants, fast-food outlets, and cafés.
- The availability of shops selling local and Traditional industry and traditional products specific to the region.

Collectively, these services play an important role in ensuring a positive and enjoyable experience for visitors and tourists by meeting both their therapeutic and recreational needs within a natural environment conducive to relaxation, comfort, and well-being.

3- Thermal Accommodation Capacity in Algeria

The table below illustrates the development of accommodation capacity in the thermal tourism sector from 2019 to 2024.

Table 03: Accommodation Capacity of Thermal Tourism (2019–2024).

2024		2023		2022		2021		2020		2019	
N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds	N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds	N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds	N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds	N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds	N° of Hotel Establishments	N° of Beds
55	4147	34	5339	33	5189	27	4598	27	4598	25	4502

Source: Ministry of Tourism and And Traditional industry (2026).

Table 03 presents the accommodation capacity dedicated to thermal tourism in Algeria. The data indicate a slight increase over the period 2019–2024, with the number of establishments remaining stable in 2020 and 2021, at 27 hotel establishments with an accommodation capacity of 4598 beds. In 2022, accommodation capacity increased to 5189 beds, distributed across 33 hotel establishments. This relatively modest growth may largely be attributed to the health crisis experienced by Algeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly affected tourism investment and activity.

In 2023, the sector recorded its highest accommodation capacity during the study period, reaching 5339 beds across 34 hotel establishments. However, in 2024, the number of beds decreased considerably to 4147, despite an increase in the number of hotel establishments to 55. This apparent discrepancy may be explained by the relatively small capacity of the newly established establishments.

It can therefore be observed that the thermal tourism sector suffers from a shortage of accommodation infrastructure. Based on the above data, the increase in the number of hotel establishments and beds remains relatively limited and appears insufficient in relation to the potential demand for this type of tourism. Furthermore, the existing accommodation capacity does not adequately reflect Algeria's considerable investment potential in its abundant thermal resources, particularly thermal springs and mineral waters. This situation highlights the need for greater investment in accommodation infrastructure and complementary tourism facilities in order to enhance the development and competitiveness of thermal tourism in Algeria.

4-Statistics on Beneficiaries of Mineral Water Therapy

The following table presents statistics on beneficiaries of mineral water therapy in Algeria during the period 2018–2024.

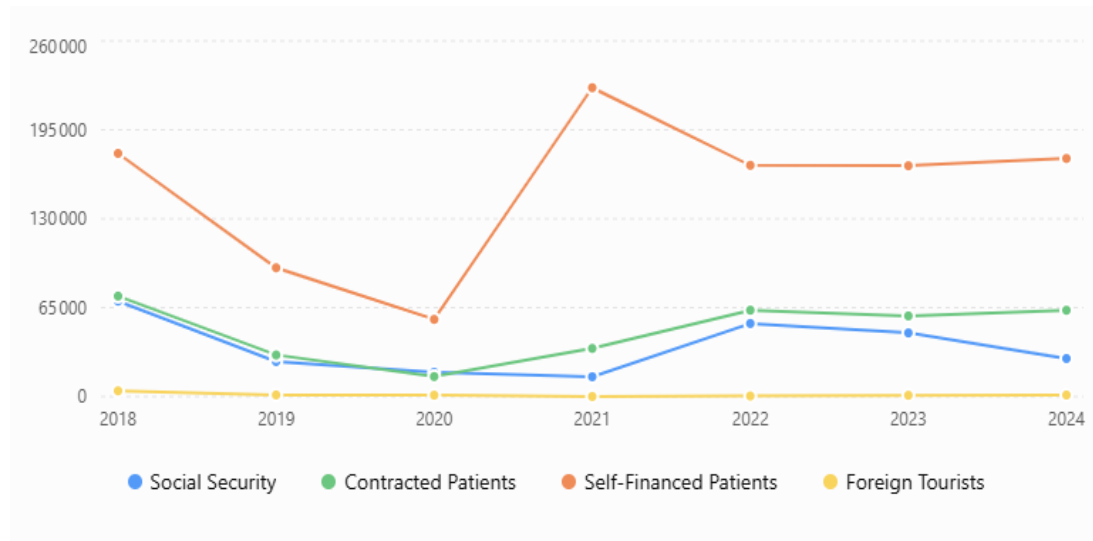
Table 04: Statistics on Beneficiaries of Mineral Water Therapy in Algeria (2018–2024)

Total Treatment Attendance	Day-Use Thermal Bath Beneficiaries	Total Beneficiaries	Types of Inpatient Treatment Beneficiaries				Year
			Foreigners	Self-Financed Patients	Contracted Patients	Social Security	
3368853	3043635	325218	4183	177782	73464	69789	2018
1030686	879312	151374	1192	94151	30400	25631	2019
828536	738684	89852	1025	56437	14631	17759	2020
1335734	1060159	275575	59	225812	35222	14482	2021
2904465	2618371	286094	431	169076	63162	53425	2022
3243709	2968518	275191	934	168759	58958	46540	2023
3065252	2799137	266115	1138	174064	63094	27819	2024
-	/	/	8962	1066081	338931	255445	المجموع

Source: Ministry of Tourism and And Traditional industry (2026).

To provide a clearer illustration of the data presented in the table, a line graph is used, as shown in Figure 04 below.

Figure 04: Evolution of the Number of Beneficiaries Receiving Mineral Water Therapy in Algeria (2018–2024)



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the data presented in Table 04 above.

The table and figure above show that beneficiaries of mineral water therapy in Algeria are divided into several categories: social security beneficiaries, contracted patients, self-financed patients, and foreign visitors. During the study period (2018–2024), the self-financed category recorded the highest number of beneficiaries, with a total of 1066081 beneficiaries, followed by contracted patients with 338931 beneficiaries, then social security beneficiaries with 255445 beneficiaries, and finally foreign visitors, with 8962 beneficiaries.

Regarding total treatment attendance, the number reached 3065252 visits in 2024, which remains lower than the figure recorded in 2018, when total attendance reached 3368853 visits. It is worth noting that day-use thermal baths recorded the highest level of activity compared with thermal stations and complexes, reaching 2799137 visitors in 2024. This can be attributed to visitors' preference for using thermal baths during the same day without requiring accommodation, thereby reducing the overall cost of the treatment stay. In contrast, thermal complexes generally involve overnight accommodation and consequently entail higher costs. Finally, the data indicate a marked decline in attendance across all beneficiary categories during 2019–2020 compared with 2018. This decline can be attributed primarily to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected tourism and thermal treatment activities. Attendance subsequently began to recover gradually as the health situation improved during the following years, particularly 2021 and 2022.

5- Thermal Tourism Development Plan in Algeria

In this regard, the project entitled “Strategy for the Development and Promotion of Thermal Tourism in Algeria” was developed. This initiative led to the formulation of a development plan for the thermal tourism sector in the short, medium, and long term. The plan identified the main objectives, strategic priorities, and priority actions according to their importance and urgency, while also specifying the relevant stakeholders responsible for their implementation. The Thermal Tourism Development Plan was established in response to several key considerations, notably the State’s strong commitment to diversifying the national economy through various sectors, particularly tourism. In addition, thermal tourism is characterized by its relatively non-seasonal nature compared with other tourism products. Furthermore, the natural dimension of thermal tourism is consistent with the principles of sustainable

development, enabling Algeria to develop thermal tourism into a highly competitive and strategic tourism sector.

According to the methodology adopted by the relevant ministry, namely the Ministry of Tourism and And Traditional industry , the development of thermal tourism is based on two main dimensions:

A. Giving priority to the domestic market, through:

- Ensuring economic sustainability by developing expertise and improving the quality of thermal tourism products.
- Achieving economic sustainability, which would subsequently facilitate the expansion of thermal tourism products into international markets.

B. Developing thermal tourism around two main pillars:

- The health and therapeutic pillar, through the establishment of ambitious objectives and the implementation of new measures and actions.
- The recreational pillar, by expanding thermal activities to include a broader range of leisure and recreational practices.

The Thermal Tourism Development Plan was formulated based on the following principles:

- ✓ Developing a clear strategy for thermal, therapeutic, and recreational tourism in accordance with the National Tourism Development Master Plan (SDAT 2030).
- ✓ Conducting a diagnosis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) associated with thermal tourism.
- ✓ Defining the main objectives, orientations, and strategic priorities.
- ✓ Proposing an action programme for the development of thermal tourism based on progressive strategic scenarios for the short term (2016–2020), medium term (2021–2025), and long term (2026–2030).
- ✓ Furthermore, the development plan is based on five strategic orientations:
 - Identifying, inventorying, and protecting thermal resources.
 - Developing the supply of health and recreational tourism services.
 - Establishing the foundations and regulatory framework for structuring the thermal tourism sector.
 - Transforming thermal tourism into an effective instrument for social and economic development.
 - Enhancing the visibility of thermal tourism through the development of a specialized communication and promotional strategy.

6- Challenges and Potential Solutions for the Development of Thermal Tourism in Algeria

Thermal tourism in Algeria faces several challenges and constraints that limit its development and growth. The most significant of these challenges include (**Ben Chayeb, 2022, pp. 444-445**):

The absence of a clear and well-defined strategy for the development and future prospects of thermal tourism.

- The limited integration of thermal tourism into national development plans, which reduces its strategic importance and is reflected in the relatively small number of completed or planned projects.

- The insufficient number of specialized educational and training institutions, combined with inadequate qualifications and training among a significant proportion of tourism service employees.
- Limited tourism awareness and insufficient public understanding of the importance and potential of thermal tourism.
- Inadequate maintenance and development of areas hosting thermal springs, as well as poor standards of cleanliness and environmental management.
- The lack of integrated thermal tourism programmes, which limits opportunities to extend tourists' length of stay.
- Insufficient hotel accommodation and complementary services capable of meeting visitors' needs during their thermal tourism stays.
- The relatively high cost of tourism services, particularly transportation, accommodation, and food services, in relation to the purchasing power of Algerian citizens.
- Insufficient support for private-sector investment projects and, in some cases, administrative obstacles that hinder investment in the sector.
- The limited or complete absence of effective promotional and marketing plans for thermal tourism, as many travel agencies tend to focus primarily on outbound tourism rather than promoting domestic tourism.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a significant decline in demand for thermal tourism and disrupted the activities of thermal establishments.

To address and overcome the aforementioned challenges and constraints, several requirements should be met to promote the development of thermal tourism in Algeria, including **(Suleimani & Ben Amara, 2019, p. 415)**:

Giving greater attention to areas with tourism potential, particularly thermal springs and mineral baths, by providing the necessary facilities, ensuring proper cleanliness and maintenance, and delivering high-quality services to visitors.

- Promoting economic stability in the pricing of goods and services, ensuring that tourism-related prices remain reasonable and affordable for a wide range of visitors.
- Establishing appropriate laws and regulations to encourage and support thermal tourism development, particularly in relation to hotel establishments, restaurants, recreational facilities, and other complementary services.
- Encouraging investment in the thermal tourism sector by providing incentives and facilitating access to financial support and funding through relevant financial institutions.
- Ensuring security and political stability and addressing negative social phenomena, such as public disputes and verbal violence, which may negatively affect tourists' perceptions and sense of safety.
- Promoting tourism awareness and culture among the population, particularly by increasing awareness of the importance and therapeutic benefits of mineral water therapy, while reinforcing positive social values and traditions such as hospitality, welcoming attitudes, and respect for visitors.

7- conclusion

In conclusion, Algeria possesses significant potential for the development of thermal tourism, owing to its numerous thermal sites and hot springs, which offer both therapeutic benefits and opportunities for relaxation and recreation. Beyond its contribution to visitors' health and well-being, thermal tourism can play an important role in promoting local economic development and preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the regions concerned. However, the effective development of this sector requires greater attention to the improvement of infrastructure and the quality of services, including accommodation, recreational facilities, and specialized therapeutic and medical services. Strengthening these elements would enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of Algeria's thermal destinations and contribute to the sustainable development of thermal tourism in the country.

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