

25 thermal towns choose their european strategy in Bath (United-Kingdom)

Looking back into history, water cures are linked to religious ceremonies. That which is true of the Greeks celebrating their athletes is also true of the Romans who spread the practice from the center of Italy throughout the entire Empire. The idea of the purifying nature of thermal baths can also be found in Andalusian Spain, under the influence of the Arab-Berber world, and in the Ottoman Empire whose influence can be seen in Budapest. But it was not until the 18th century up to the beginning of 20th century that the most well-known sites were built, where new medical treatments were developed based on the bath, the absorption of water and the manipulation of the body.

The spas of Western and Central Europe have long been frequented by the political and cultural elite, creating centres of cultural exchanges in numerous cities and it could be said that they launched health tourism as a form of modern tourism. These celebrities were at the origin of the prestigious image of these resorts and gave birth to a great success which generated prestigious hotels and a series of leisure activities, with people going from the first casinos to musical theatres, to landscape gardens and promenades where tourists could show off the latest fashions. This is the story, but also the shared heritage and memory that the European Historical Thermal Towns Association (EHTTA) decided to promote and valorize when inaugurating a **European cultural route which received the prestigious certification of the Council of Europe in year 2010.**

The general Assembly of EHTTA Association

The general Assembly of this Association took place in Bath, United Kingdom on 21 and 22 March last.

This thermal city, one of the highlight destinations in England with a constant increase of tourists, offers a remarkable unity in the Georgian architectural style, and the entire City has now been a World Heritage Site for 25 years. The Roman Baths which have been rediscovered and perfectly restored attract some one million visitors a year. “



EHTTA members in Bath

Bath is not only known for its prestigious heritage but also for its innovation in new technologies. It of course helps visitors interact in their visits. But innovation means also constant improvement in water quality and pumping techniques” said the Leader of Bath & North East Somerset Council, Cllr Paul Crossley.

At this strategic meeting, a series of decisions were **made in order to firmly settle a successful common communication policy:** design of a web platform to achieve better exchanges between members, creation of a common leaflet and launching of a Facebook page, among others. Beyond that, the Association, on the basis of a previous co-operation of some of its member cities, will answer a multiannual cultural call for proposals from the European Commission next October. It will aim to improve communication towards

public at large, **to create a Festival of festivals with a series of events**: theatre, cinema or musical shows, contemporary art exhibitions and encounters of travel diaries' writers. It will also focus on professional training of guides who act also as actors during visits, sharing best experiences in building restorations and establishing a research and resource center. Another aim is to help small and medium enterprises working in craft industries linked to gifts and souvenirs to adopt a contemporary design line.

The lively development of the high society of thermal towns brought a perspective to the European interpretation of societies which succeeded each other in thermal cities. Joseph II, after his stay in 1781, named Spa the "Café of Europe". **The Association plans to benefit from some the best Congress Centres of the member cities to launch a kind of "Davos European Cultural Forum" travelling from one city to another along the year.** These encounters with personalities who exist in a shared European history and memory, as well as in the future of common European identity should attract various categories of visitors and bring to life, in a democratic and contemporary approach, the very origin of cultural Grand Tour.

Christian Corne, deputy Mayor of Vichy and President of the EHTTA announced his optimistic convictions about the quality and future developments of a network which now involves nine European countries. He insisted on the great potential of increase, especially in Greater Europe. "We have received proposals from cities in Turkey and Armenia" he said. "The great chance for our members is certainly the rapid changes that occur today for thermal cities. The future will be based on a Europe without borders. Europeans could choose the place for their care in the country they prefer, but tourists will also face new offers in a Union of Countries which will benefit of a quality policy and common branding "Destination Europe" keeping the continent at first rank in the world."

His conclusions underlined that the strategy of the network will have to closely link health and tourism and that the actions have to be based on four pillars:

- a **diversification of wellbeing offers in a new dynamic vision of water cures** and on a renewed approach of quality gastronomy involving local producers ;
- an **interactive valorization of thermal heritage**, of prestigious buildings, as well as of the immaterial heritage carried by creators and intellectuals who were iconic to the resorts;
- a contemporary and innovative answer to cultural demands not only those of adults but also for youngsters through actions which will help **a better understanding of the past and a vivid involvement of contemporary creation;**
- a proactive policy facing needs of new cultural and multi-sensorial tourism's trends based on **active visits in search of lesser-known places and unusual events."**

He ended by the assertion: "If we want to deserve and challenge the prestigious label of the Council of Europe we certainly have to involve **innovation on all fronts.**"