

Opatija: Spa Tradition Transforming into Modern Health Tourism?

When it comes to tradition, there are few Croatian seaside resorts that could compete with Opatija. However, it would be wrong to think that the story about Opatija starts with tourism. Actually, the town had had a long and intriguing history before the first guests and caterers arrived. The first mention of the abbey of St. Jacob (the contemporary name of the town, Opatija, is a Croatian word for “abbey”) can be found in the *Liber civilium sive notificationum* of Rijeka notary Antonio de Renno de Mutina, and is dated May 1439 (1). For the next hundred years, the abbey was owned by the Benedictine order and protected by an agreement with the authorities of the nearby town of Kastav. After the abbey had passed into the hands of the Augustine order from Rijeka, at about the mid of the 16th century, Kastav allowed the first families to settle the margins of the abbey land. The inflow of settlers from the nearby hills, but also from Friuli, Istria, Dalmatia, Montenegro, Italy, Slovenia, and Austria has not ceased since (2).

The transformation of a fishermen’s and sailors’ village into a seaside health resort began in the late 1830s with the “discovery” of Opatija by Iginio Scarpa, a rich and influential merchant from Rijeka, who arrived to Opatija by the then new coastal road. Scarpa, amazed by the vegetation and peace, bought a terrain and built a villa (or reconstructed an existing building), called *Angiolina* after his

deceased wife. The guests of the Scarpa family included an Austrian ex-empress, Croatian viceroy Jelačić, and the botanist Noë, as well as some of the great medical authorities of the time, who gave their contribution to the spread of Opatija’s fame. Leopold Schrötter Kristelli, the founder of the first Laryngology Chair in Vienna, proved the beneficial effects of high concentrations of sea aerosol in the air of Opatija; Robert Virchow was amazed by its subtropical vegetation; Bavarian Max Joseph Örtel, the discoverer of diphtheria spore and laryngostroboscope, initiated the arrangement of a wide net of wood paths, intended and carefully gauged for cardiac rehabilitation patients; Theodor Billroth promoted Opatija in his famous letters and chose it even for his temporary residence and death; Julius Glax, the then European top authority in balneology, accepted the offer of Friedrich Schüler’s *Südbahn Gesellschaft* and became the president of the Opatija Health-Resort Committee. Opatija was officially proclaimed *Kurort* (spa) in 1889. The result of these promotion activities was that, within some thirty years, Opatija became the second most visited resort in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, ranked only after Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary). By 1914, seven sanatoria and two institutes became active, as well as five open sea baths, and several closed facilities offering the modern hydrotherapeutic procedures (3).

Even the first Opatija's hotel, the Quarnero (*Kvarner*, opened in 1884) was originally designed to be a sanatorium for the "chest-diseased" (4). Very soon, about 1888, the Quisisana of Ignaz Schwarz and the Army-Officers' Sanatorium (*K.u.k. Offizier-Kurhaus*) were opened in the Slatina area (5). Shortly before the end of the 19th century, the Hungarian doctor Kálmán Szegő opened a sanatorium on the other side of the town. The Szegő Sanatorium included four buildings – sanatorium for adults; children's sanatorium (with 30 rooms); building with medical studios, x-ray apparatus, laboratory and a play hall; and a gymnastic hall with sunbathing space (6). Other sanatoria were run by Dr Mahler (for heart diseased), Dr Schalk, and others. Dr Stephan Isor Stein, in his sanatorium, opened in 1904, offered something different – his Zander Institute, aimed for the therapy by specially designed system of muscular exercises (7).

The main therapy in the majority of the sanatoria and many private boarding houses, however, was based on hydropathic procedures. Five open public sea baths were arranged: Tomaševac (probably around 1883), Angiolina-Bad (lost in fire in 1989), Črnikovica (during the Italian era, Bagno dei Legionari), Slatina Bad (lost in a storm in 1979), and Quitta Bad (sacrificed in 1981 for the construction of the Admiral Hotel). In 1902, the first closed public bath, Ludwig Viktor Bad, was opened in the center of the town. The building was equipped with a 10 × 15 m swimming pool (connected by a glass corridor with the Stephanie Hotel – now the Imperial Hotel), combined-baths devices, such as Scotch shower and vibratory massage, baths with extracts (*Extract-Bäder*), two-cell baths (*Zweizellen-Bäder*), carbon-acid baths (*Kohlen-Säure-Bäder*), sitting baths (*Sitz-Bäder*), cold procedures, electric and light baths, and others. In the attic, the reservoirs with cold, warm, and sea water were stored (8).

Water was not used only to dip in it; the ancient practice of drinking spa water was also continued. The Bavarian Professor M. J. Örtel

launched the idea that "one has to drink cold water until he has too much, and bath in it until he becomes blue" (*Kaltwassertrinken bis zum Übermaß und Kaltwasserbaden bis zum Verblauen*). Dietetic cures, advertised in Opatija were the kefir cure (against constipation), the milk cure (in acute and chronic renal diseases), and the grapes cure (*Traubenkuren*: up to 3 kg grapes per day, as a diuretic and purgative, as well as a cure for intestinal and gall-bladder diseases (2).

Pneumatic inhalation was also applied, as well as inhalation of oxygen, sea aerosol, and etheric oils. Facilities in Opatija also provided treatment with thorium- and radium-isotope rays, x-rays, UV and blue light, Finsen phototherapy, darsonvalization, gymnastics, and all kinds of massage. The concept of "walking therapy," designed by Munde and Örtel, was introduced, consisting of short walks, which were sometimes combined with swimming but never too exhaustive or taken immediately after meal. The paths all around Opatija were precisely marked, graded, and various itineraries recommended to various categories of heart disease convalescents (9).

There were also those who invented "cold water," such as the Opatija practitioner Geza Fodor, Assistant Professor at the Pest University. Fodor prepared a commercial cocktail of an attractive name – Marina – actually made of nothing but filtered, sterilized, and CO₂-impregnated sea water. An entire "philosophy" was developed on how Marina should be diluted with sweet water, added to milk, how long it should be drunk before or after meal, how it can be used warm to treat diarrhea, or at room temperature in other cases, or how it is efficient in treating diabetes or tuberculosis. Other Opatija's original preparations were mostly promoted by pharmacists, like Erenyi's *Diana Franzbranntwein*, Sternbach's *Ovol* tablets, or the *Lauro* preparation (10).

Altogether, about sixty physicians, mostly highly specialized professionals from Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, Germany, Poland, Bohemia, and Romania started their medical prac-

tice in Opatija. Emergency service (*Rettungsgesellschaft*) was organized in 1894, thanks to Dr Jaromir von Mundy, only eleven years after such practice was established in Vienna. The Opatija Golden Book of Guests testifies on the visits of emperors, kings, dukes, Nobel-prize winners, and dozens of well-known names from politics and arts (5).

The “Italian Era,” lasting from 1918 until 1943, brought significant stagnation to Opatija. The 1930s showed signs of the restoration of tourism, but these lasted too briefly. After the Second World War and post-war difficulties, other type of guests started arriving to Opatija. A second golden era in the health resort came in the 1960s with Prof. Čedomil Plavšić’s cardio-rehabilitation programs, which once again attracted the world medical authorities to Opatija’s new hospital institution – Thalassotherapie. In 1998, this institution became the Croatian Ministry of Health Referral Center for Health Tourism (2).

A general opinion prevails that tradition is a blessed source of wealth and ideas, but tradition can also be viewed as a burden imposing architectonic, economic, and many other limitations, and often (too) high quality standards. Modern Opatija is faced with precisely this kind of dilemma and it will depend on the visionary capacities of local planners whether the richness of Opatija’s tradition will be used as the foundation for the town’s future, or the heritage will perish, opening place for new, developmental strategies which are not based on tradition. Both modern

marketing and modern medicine impose the need for quick and continuous re-adjustments in health tourism. Tradition, on the other hand, offers an inexhaustible source of ideas and solutions that make the crucial difference between a successful and an unsuccessful destination.

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