

Strategic Innovation and Responsible Tourism: A Competitive Improvement Model for Regional Spas in Mexico.

Innovación Estratégica y Turismo Responsable: Un Modelo de Mejora Competitiva para Balnearios Regionales en México.

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Abstract:

This research aims to develop a comprehensive competitive improvement proposal for a spa and hotel located in Atotonilco el Grande, Hidalgo, Mexico. This will be achieved by integrating principles of responsible tourism and innovation strategies to address the identified gaps in its hotel classification and operational management. A case study methodology with a mixed-methods approach was applied, combining interviews, documentary analysis under NOM-010-TUR-2001 standards, and a benchmarking – based diagnosis. The diagnosis revealed a 58% compliance rate, highlighting critical weaknesses in organizational integration (45%) and significant gaps in digitalization, specialized training, accessibility, and sustainability. In response, a strategic plan comprising 30 innovation actions was formulated, classified into processes, organization, marketing, and products and services. The study concludes that regional tourism competitiveness is based on the synchronization of regulatory compliance, technology, and sustainability. The proposal positions benchmarking and systemic innovation as central tools for the transition towards a responsible and resilient business model, offering an applicable and essential framework for the growth of tourism SMEs in the current landscape.

Keywords:

Competitiveness, tourism innovation, benchmarking, sustainability, spa and hotel.

Resumen:

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo desarrollar una propuesta integral de mejora competitiva para un balneario y hotel ubicado en Atotonilco el Grande, Hidalgo, México, mediante la integración de principios de turismo responsable y estrategias de innovación, para superar las brechas identificadas en su clasificación hotelera y gestión operativa. Se aplicó una metodología de este estudio de caso con un enfoque mixto, combinando entrevistas, análisis documental (NOM-010-TUR-2001) y un diagnóstico de benchmarking en cuatro dimensiones. El diagnóstico arrojó un cumplimiento del 58%, destacando debilidades críticas en integración organizacional (45%) y brechas en digitalización, capacitación especializada, accesibilidad y sostenibilidad. Como respuesta, se formuló un plan estratégico de 30 acciones de innovación clasificadas procesos, organización, comercio y productos y servicios. El estudio concluye que la competitividad turística regional se basa en la sincronización de cumplimiento normativo, tecnología y sostenibilidad. La propuesta convierte al *benchmarking* y la innovación sistémica en herramientas centrales para la transición hacia un modelo responsable y resiliente, ofreciendo un modelo aplicable y esencial para el crecimiento de las Pymes turísticas en el escenario actual.

Palabras Clave:

Competitividad, Innovación turística, benchmarking, sostenibilidad, balneario y hotel.

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Introduction

The global tourism industry is undergoing an unprecedented structural transformation, marked by the convergence of post-pandemic factors, accelerated technological advances, and growing demand for sustainability. According to recent research, the sector is at an inflection point that is redefining the parameters of international competitiveness. This scenario is particularly relevant for Mexico, where tourism is one of the most dynamic economic activities, having contributed 8.7% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021. However, the country faces the paradox of quantitative growth accompanied by structural problems, such as informality, marked seasonality, and a geographic concentration that leaves many regional destinations in a state of underutilized potential. 1,2

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a health crisis but also a turning point that exposed the vulnerabilities of a system dependent on mass traveler volume, forcing a re-evaluation of traditional management models. As Gössling and Schweiggart point out, the spa and hot spring resort segment, traditionally characterized by family-run operations and limited innovation, now faces a forced reconversion in response to the demands of increasingly sophisticated customers who require visible health certifications, digitized processes, and personalized experiences. 4,3

It is within this framework that responsible tourism emerges as a key paradigm for the sector's recovery and transformation. Defined by the UNWTO as tourism that respects the destination in its environmental, cultural, social, and economic dimensions, this approach not only mitigates negative impacts but also generates competitive advantages through the creation of authentic and sustainable experiences. However, the transition towards this model faces structural barriers. Higgins-Desbiolles warns that the traditional market-driven logic, which prioritizes short-term economic growth, conflicts with the principles of responsibility, fostering mass consumption without considering socio-environmental impacts. This tension is palpable in regional tourism establishments like this spa and hotel, where the pressure to quickly revive the local post-pandemic economy can lead to prioritizing visitor volume over the quality of the experience and the integrity of the natural and cultural capital that underpins its offer. Overcoming this dichotomy therefore requires not only political will or isolated initiatives, but a structural change in destination management that integrates responsibility as a central pillar of its long-term competitiveness. 3, 5, 6

The state of Hidalgo, and in particular the Spa and Hotel located in Atotonilco el Grande, constitutes a paradigmatic case study of these challenges. Despite having

competitive infrastructure at the regional level and unique natural resources, such as its thermal waters, the establishment operates with a functional-intermediate category that reflects critical gaps. Specialized literature identifies that the factors most limiting advancement in hotel classification include a lack of standardized processes, deficient technological integration, insufficient staff training, and limited sustainability management. 7, 8, 9

Faced with this problem, innovation stands as an indispensable vector for competitiveness. Far from being mere technological adoption, innovation must be understood as a multidimensional process encompassing product, process, organization, and marketing. Bowie and Buttle, and Kotler emphasize that the value proposition in hospitality must align with the expectations of the target customer, where competitiveness depends on innovation in marketing and experience management. 10, 11, 12

Therefore, this research proposes to develop a comprehensive improvement plan for the Spa and Hotel, integrating the principles of responsible tourism with a strategic framework for innovation. Using a case study methodology that includes interviews, documentary analysis, and the application of benchmarking as a tool for improvement, this work seeks to demonstrate that the synergy between regulatory compliance, sustainability, and systemic innovation is not only viable for tourism SMEs but is the only way to ensure their resilience and positioning in the new global tourism paradigm. The expected impact transcends the case study, offering a replicable model for regional destinations seeking to transition from informality and stagnation towards excellence and sustainable competitiveness. 13

Methodology

For the development of this research, an instrumental case study design was adopted, focusing on a Spa and Hotel located in Atotonilco el Grande, Hidalgo, Mexico. This case was selected through purposive sampling because it represents a paradigmatic example of regional tourism SMEs that combine lodging and spa services, and which face typical post-pandemic competitiveness challenges. 14, 15

The implemented methodological approach combined qualitative and quantitative strategies in a sequential mixed-methods design. During the period from August to September 2025, four data collection techniques were applied. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the general manager, head of human resources, chief accountant, and area supervisors. These were designed to explore in depth the dimensions of regulatory compliance, operational processes, personnel management, and business strategies. Concurrently, a

benchmarking evaluation checklist system was developed and applied, adapted from the frameworks of Kheddache & Djadli, and STR. This tool allowed for the quantitative measurement of four critical dimensions: planning and selection of benchmarks, data collection and analysis, implementation of improvements, and organizational integration. 16, 13,17

Furthermore, a comprehensive documentary analysis was performed on tourism service contracts, internal regulations, reservation slips, and registration forms. This information was cross-referenced with the requirements established in NOM-010-TUR-2001 and the Regulations of the General Tourism Law. Finally, direct observation of operational processes and staff-guest interactions was conducted, enabling the triangulation of information gathered through the other techniques. 18

Data analysis followed a systematic procedure of methodological triangulation. Qualitative data from the interviews and observations were processed using thematic content analysis, identifying emergent categories such as technological deficiencies, innovation opportunities, and training gaps. Quantitative data from the checklists were tabulated to calculate percentage compliance rates per dimension, establishing a precise diagnosis of the level of implementation of benchmarking practices. The integration of findings from all four information sources allowed for the construction of a robust and well-founded diagnosis, which served as the basis for designing the improvement proposal presented in this work. 19

This mixed-methodological design, with its focus on the triangulation of sources and techniques, provided a holistic understanding of the case study. It enabled not only the identification of existing problems but also a solid foundation for the proposed intervention strategies aimed at enhancing the establishment's competitiveness.

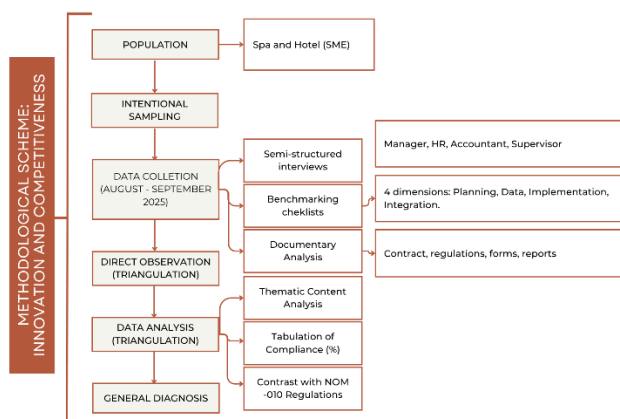


Figure 1. Mixed- Methods Research Design.

Source: Author's own elaboration

Results

The diagnostic process allowed for the precise identification of the current state of the Spa and Hotel, revealing a scenario of contrasts between its basic operational strengths and significant gaps that limit its competitiveness and classification potential.

Diagnostic of Regulatory Compliance and Operational Management

The documentary analysis and interviews evidenced a "partial compliance" with the requirements established in NOM-010-TUR-2001 and the Regulations of the General Tourism Law. While it was identified that service contracts include the essential elements and that the internal regulations are visible and updated annually, critical deficiencies persist. The management of these documents is performed manually, using spreadsheets and physical records, which impedes traceability, version control, and generates risks of omitting mandatory fields. Likewise, although cancellation and refund policies exist, their communication to the guest is not standardized, as they are sometimes notified verbally or via images through instant messaging, contradicting the principle of transparency and legal certainty promoted by the regulations.

Regarding quality management, a complaint system was identified that, while recorded in writing, lacks a closure protocol to measure response times and post-management satisfaction levels, limiting organizational learning and continuous improvement.

Benchmarking Evaluation: Gaps in Organizational Integration

The application of the benchmarking checklist yielded an overall implementation level of 58%, placing the establishment in the 55% compared to industry standards, slightly below the average for similar establishments. The analysis by dimension revealed a marked disparity:

- **Planning and Selection of Benchmarks (72% compliance):** Identified as the main strength. The establishment demonstrates a clear understanding of its market position and its regional reference competitors.
- **Data Collection and Analysis (65% compliance):** Basic operational data (occupancy, complaints) is collected, but it is not systematized nor used proactively for external comparative analysis.
- **Implementation of Improvements (50% compliance):** Specific corrective actions are observed, but without a formal process for adapting and implementing the best practices identified through comparison.

- **Organizational Integration (45% compliance):** This constitutes the most critical weakness. Benchmarking is not formally integrated with the hotel's overall strategy, nor are there structured mechanisms to institutionalize learning or link findings with staff training or budgetary planning.

Qualitative Findings by Key Area

The thematic analysis of the interviews and observation allowed for a deeper understanding of specific problems:

- **Technology and Digitalization:** This is the most significant gap. Operations fundamentally depend on spreadsheets and instant messaging. The absence of a Property Management System (PMS) and a Channel Manager prevents the automation of reservations, centralized rate management, and integration with global distribution platforms, limiting its commercial visibility.
- **Sustainability:** Environmental practices are limited to basic waste separation. There are no programs for measuring water or energy footprints, nor a comprehensive efficiency plan, which is particularly critical for an establishment whose value proposition is based on a natural resource like thermal waters.
- **Accessibility:** Although ramps have been installed, they do not comply with the technical specifications for slope and width established by regulations. Accessible restrooms are still in the project phase, excluding potential market segments such as inclusive tourism.
- **Human Capital:** Training, while existent, is sporadic (annual) and focuses on basic customer service and safety. There is no formal, continuous program addressing tourism regulations, complaint management, accessibility, or responsible tourism practices.

Proposal for Innovation Strategies

Based on the diagnosis, a comprehensive plan with over 30 innovation strategies was formulated, classified according to Hjalager's typology. Table 1 summarizes the main proposed actions. 20

Table 1.

Key innovation strategies for the Spa and Hotel

Innovation Strategy	Type	Expected Impact
Implementation of an integrated online booking system and	Process	Automation of operations, reduction of manual errors, and

Property Management System (PMS)		enhancement of the booking experience.
Obtainment of health and ISO certifications	Organizational	Generation of trust, assurance of regulatory compliance, and positioning as a quality establishment.
Deployment of a digital menu platform and 360° virtual tours	Marketing	Improved user experience, increased service transparency, and attraction of digitally-oriented market segments.
Integration of contactless payment and electronic transfer systems	Process	Perception of heightened safety and hygiene and streamlining of financial transactions.
Development of niche specialization programs (e.g., wellness tourism)	Product / Service	Diversification of the service portfolio, capture of new market segments, and increase in average customer spending.

Note. Innovation strategies formulated based on the diagnostic results obtained from the company.

Discussion

The analysis highlights a fundamental interrelationship between innovation, regulatory compliance, and competitiveness in regional tourism establishments. The diagnosis of the Spa and Hotel demonstrates that non-compliance and deficiencies in benchmarking implementation are not isolated problems, but symptoms of a deeper strategic disconnect.

As indicated by the 2024 Hospitality Benchmarking Report, hotel establishments that systematically implement benchmarking practices report a significant increase in performance: approximately 81% experience revenue improvements, while over 50% of guests perceive a more satisfactory experience, reflecting the positive influence of these strategies on operational profitability and customer satisfaction.

The fact that the Spa and Hotel shows a 58% overall implementation rate, with a critical gap in organizational integration (45%), explains its stagnation in a functional-intermediate category and its limited growth in an increasingly competitive market. 21

The relationship between innovation and regulatory compliance manifests as a virtuous cycle. The implementation of integrated digital systems (PMS, electronic invoicing) not only constitutes a process innovation but also facilitates compliance with NOM-010-TUR-2001 by ensuring standardization, traceability, and transparency in contract management. This synergy corroborates the findings of Xu and Xiao regarding the dual advantage of digitalization in tourism SMEs: operational efficiency and strengthened regulatory adherence. 22

The expected impact of the proposed strategies aligns with the specialized literature. The implementation of international certifications (ISO) responds to the growing demand for safe and responsible tourism identified by Gössling and Schweiggart, while specialization in niches such as wellness tourism allows for an escape from competition based solely on price. As demonstrated by Widiatmaka, establishments that invest in organizational and service innovation show greater resilience to crises and an enhanced capacity to capture higher value-added markets. 4, 23

Regarding the feasibility of implementation in regional contexts, the results suggest that the main challenge is not technological but cultural and organizational. The resistance to change and limited staff training identified in the Spa and Hotel coincide with the findings of Gómez & Rivero on implementation barriers in tourism SMEs.

However, the gradual nature of the proposal, starting with low-threshold innovations like digital menus and progressing towards integrated systems, increases its feasibility. The mixed financing model, combining initial investment with efficiency-generated savings, follows the "smart investment" logic that Ortega & González identify as key to success in resource-limited contexts. 24, 25

A comparison with the study by Montañés-Del-Río and Medina-Garrido on tourism entrepreneurs reveals similar patterns: establishments that implemented incremental innovations in digitalization and certification achieved significant improvements in operational efficiency and service quality. Nevertheless, the Mexican context presents particularities, such as higher informality and marked seasonality, which require specific adaptations of the management model to maximize the benefits of these innovations. 26

The results demonstrate that competitiveness in regional tourist destinations depends critically on the ability to systemically integrate innovation with regulatory compliance. The gaps identified in the Spa and Hotel are not insurmountable but require a strategic intervention that transcends isolated improvements to build a business model coherent with the demands of contemporary tourism. The proposed plan offers a viable roadmap for this transformation, the success of which will depend on

consistent implementation and the capacity for continuous adaptation.

Conclusions

The analysis indicates that strategic innovation and responsible tourism are decisive elements for the competitiveness of regional tourist destinations, as evidenced by the case of the Spa and Hotel. The implementation of the proposed strategies, from digitalization to certifications, has the potential to substantially improve its categorization, reputation, and profitability, positioning it as a benchmark in sustainable tourism.

The diagnostic results reflect a widespread reality among Mexican tourism SMEs: the coexistence of underutilized potential with structural gaps in management, technology, and sustainability. The benchmarking evaluation, which revealed a 58% overall compliance rate and only 45% in organizational integration, underscores the need to transition from a reactive operational focus to a strategic and systemic one. The proposal of 30 innovation actions, classified into processes, organization, marketing, and products/services, seeks not only to close these gaps but also to build dynamic capabilities that allow the establishment to adapt proactively to the demands of an ever-evolving tourism market.

This research reinforces the premise that competitiveness in 21st-century regional tourism does not depend solely on natural resources or location, but on the ability of businesses to systemically integrate innovation, responsibility, and continuous learning into their organizational structure. The proposed transformation is not merely technical but cultural, demanding a firm commitment to quality, sustainability, and the customer experience.

While the study offers a replicable model for tourism SMEs, its main limitation lies in its single-case study approach. Future research should develop comparative analyses, evaluate the specific impact of each type of innovation, and explore the critical factors for the digital transition in resource-limited contexts, thereby contributing to strengthening the competitiveness of the regional tourism sector based on robust empirical evidence.

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