



## Health, therapeutic experience and entrepreneurship: The Solana Saltworks as a wellness tourism hub in Croatia

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### Abstract

The Solana saltworks in Croatia constitute a contemporary example of the redefinition of a traditional productive landscape into a center of health, therapeutic experience, and wellness tourism. This study examines the transition from mono-functional salt production to a multidimensional model that integrates natural salt production with halotherapy, wellness practices, and entrepreneurial activities. Particular emphasis is placed on the distinctive characteristics of high-purity salt and its incorporation into mild therapeutic applications. At the same time, the role of the saltworks as cultural and ecological landscapes is highlighted, where the therapeutic experience is closely linked to the natural environment and local identity. The research demonstrates that the integration of health, wellness, and entrepreneurship at the Solana saltworks constitutes a sustainable development model with positive social and economic impacts on local communities.

**Keywords:** Health; Therapeutic Experience; Wellness Tourism; Saltworks; Halotherapy; Cultural Landscape; Ecological Landscape; Cultural Entrepreneurship; Sustainable Development; Solana Saltworks; Croatia

### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, saltworks are increasingly required to redefine their function in order to respond to the demands of the globalized market, environmental protection, and sustainable development (Maniou, 2023). The Solana saltworks in Croatia represent a characteristic example of this transition: from traditional salt-production units, they are evolving into multifunctional spaces that combine production, health, wellness, and tourism (Manola, 2023; Tsatalbasoglou & Maniou, 2023). The preservation of traditional salt-production techniques, combined with modern management and promotion practices, renders these saltworks not only productive units but also centers of cultural heritage, environmental education, and experiential tourism (Mitoula, 2023).

The present study focuses on investigating the ways in which the Solana saltworks integrate therapeutic practices, such as halotherapy and the use of inhaled salts, within the framework of their touristic utilization (Maniou, 2023; Manola, 2023). At the same time, their role as cultural and ecological landscapes is examined, where tradition, nature, and sustainable development coexist. Through this approach, the saltworks are transformed into spaces of holistic experience, offering visitors opportunities for learning, relaxation, and wellness, while simultaneously contributing to the economic and social strengthening of local communities (Tsatalbasoglou & Maniou, 2023; Manola, 2023).

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Saltworks constitute traditional sites of primary production with enduring economic, social, and cultural significance for the coastal regions of the Mediterranean. From antiquity to the modern era, salt was not merely a basic dietary product, but a strategic commodity, a source of wealth, and an element of cultural identity for local communities. Salt production is directly linked to human labor, natural resource management techniques, and adaptation to climatic conditions, creating a distinctive cultural landscape in which tradition and the natural environment coexist harmoniously.

Finally, we stress the significance of digital technologies in the field of education and in entrepreneur training, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [34], various ICT applications that are the main supporters of education [35-40], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that elevate educational procedures to new performance levels [41-45]. Additionally, the development and blending of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence cultivation [46-54], accelerates and improves the educational practices and results, particularly in entrepreneurship training and development.

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## 2. Salt for Medical Use and Halotherapy: A European Perspective from Antiquity to the Present

The use of salt for medical and therapeutic purposes constitutes a diachronic phenomenon in Europe, with examples extending from antiquity to the present day. The Solana saltworks, with their high-purity salt, are embedded within this long tradition, providing raw material for halotherapy and other paramedical applications.

In ancient Greece, the medical thought of Hippocrates and his followers included the use of saline baths and the inhalation of salty air for the treatment of respiratory and dermatological conditions (Maniou et al., 2025g). Similarly, in Roman times, salt was used not only for dietary purposes but also in *thermae salinae*, where citizens exploited its properties to relieve respiratory problems and enhance overall well-being (Rudenko, 2024).

During medieval Europe, saline baths and salt-based therapeutic facilities spread to regions such as Germany and Poland, where saltworks were closely associated with health and the social life of local communities. In areas such as Hallstatt and Wieliczka, salt extraction was accompanied by the creation of underground salt therapy chambers, where the inhalation of salt microparticles was employed to address asthma and other respiratory disorders (Roos, 2007).

In contemporary Europe, halotherapy has acquired a more structured character as a wellness method, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. Saltworks in Croatia, such as Solana Nin and Solana Pag, utilize high-purity natural salt for inhalation therapies and relaxation programs, combining traditional knowledge with modern approaches to respiratory health support (Valentine, 2016; Solana Nin, 2025).

In parallel, in countries such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic, historic saltworks and salt caves have been transformed into therapeutic spaces where visitors inhale air rich in salt trace elements, enhancing well-being and reducing respiratory symptoms. In these contexts, halotherapy is embedded within a broader framework of natural experience, where contact with nature, relaxation, and experiential learning reinforce the therapeutic effect (Luković & Stevanović, 2020; McKinley et al., 2020).

At the Solana saltworks, this practice follows a similar philosophy: the production process, the visual experience of the natural landscape, the coastal microclimate, and the gentle engagement of visitors create an integrated wellness environment. Salt thus functions not merely as a natural product but as a carrier of culture and history, enhancing the overall experience and offering a combination of natural therapy and cultural participation (Valentine, 2016; Solana Nin, 2025).

In summary, halotherapy at the Solana saltworks represents the contemporary continuation of a European tradition that extends from antiquity to the present, linking the medical use of salt with recreation, experiential learning, and wellness tourism, and creating a multidimensional therapeutic experience of high added value.

**Table 1** Timeline: Use of Salt for Medical and Halotherapy Purposes in Europe

| Period                                    | Location / Region                                          | Use of Salt / Therapeutic Practice                                    | Notes / Examples                                                                                           | Sources                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ancient Greece (5th–4th c. BC)            | Greece, Knossos, Attica                                    | Salt baths, inhalation of salty air for respiratory issues            | Hippocratic approach: preventive and therapeutic use for respiratory and skin problems                     | Maniou et al., 2025g                                          |
| Roman Era (1st–4th c. AD)                 | Italy, Rome                                                | Thermae salinae: heated salt baths                                    | Combination of recreation and therapy, salt as medicine and food preservative                              | Rudenko, 2024                                                 |
| Medieval Europe (10th–15th c.)            | Germany (Hallstatt), Poland (Wieliczka)                    | Underground salt therapy chambers for asthma and respiratory issues   | Controlled salt inhalation, linked to salt mining activities                                               | Roos, 2007                                                    |
| Renaissance & Early Modern (16th–18th c.) | England, France                                            | Salt baths and spa treatments                                         | Therapeutic use for respiratory, skin, and nervous system conditions; salt considered a “natural medicine” | Roos, 2007                                                    |
| 19th Century                              | Germany, Czech Republic                                    | Halotherapy in caves and underground chambers                         | Focus on inhalation of salt microparticles; gentle therapy for asthma and rhinitis                         | Valentine, 2016                                               |
| 20th Century                              | Central & Eastern Europe                                   | Therapeutic spas, wellness resorts                                    | Use of natural salt in baths, steam rooms, inhalation therapies, combined with natural environment         | McKinley et al., 2020                                         |
| 21st Century – Modern Europe              | Croatia (Solana Nin, Solana Pag), Slovenia, Czech Republic | Halotherapy, salt inhalation, wellness tourism, experiential programs | Holistic experience: salt, nature, relaxation, education, wellness tourism                                 | Solana Nin, 2025; Luković & Stevanović, 2020; Valentine, 2016 |

### 3. Case Study: The Solana Saltworks

The historical development of the Solana saltworks is inextricably linked to the formation of Adriatic coastal societies and their long-standing relationship with the marine environment. Salt production in the region forms part of a broader Mediterranean model of saltwork utilization that emerged as early as antiquity, when salt constituted a strategic commodity for nutrition, trade, and food preservation. The presence of significant ancient and medieval settlements in the wider Dalmatian region, such as ancient Salona and the coastal cities of Croatia, confirms the enduring importance of salt production for local economic and social organization (Adriatic, 2025).

Salt production at the Solana saltworks has historically been based on a deep understanding of natural processes and local climatic conditions. The evaporation of seawater through solar radiation and wind action constituted the primary production mechanism, shaping a system of basins and channels that precisely regulated water flow and salinity. These practices align with broader patterns observed in coastal saltworks and salt marshes, which are characterized by a dynamic balance between natural processes and human intervention (Frey & Basan, 1985; Townend et al., 2011).

Traditional salt-harvesting techniques, transmitted from generation to generation, shaped a distinctive cultural landscape in which human labor was harmoniously integrated into the natural environment. Manual collection, the seasonality of production, and dependence on weather conditions rendered the salt worker a bearer of specialized knowledge and experience. The saltwork landscape thus functioned not merely as a production site, but as a living

system of social relations, labor practices, and cultural meanings, comparable to other European saltworks and salt marshes (Lefeuvre et al., 2000; Pandža et al., 2007).

At the same time, the Solana saltworks are embedded within ecosystems of high ecological value. Salt marshes and evaporation basins host specialized halophytic vegetation and diverse fauna, contributing to the preservation of biodiversity in Croatia's coastal regions (Dítě et al., 2019; Luković & Stevanović, 2020). When practiced using mild methods, traditional salt production does not disrupt these ecosystems but often functions as a factor in their conservation, as highlighted in international studies on coastal saline landscapes (Schwarz et al., 2022).

Today, the preservation of traditional practices at the Solana saltworks is not merely a matter of production continuity, but a fundamental element of cultural identity and collective memory. In a European context where many saltworks have been abandoned or industrialized, the continuation of traditional salt production acquires particular significance as an example of sustainable management and cultural resilience (Petanidou & Dalaka, 2009; Kortekaas, 2004).

This historical heritage now serves as a foundation for the development of alternative forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism, ecotourism, and wellness tourism. The Solana saltworks are transformed from purely productive spaces into experiential cultural landscapes, where visitors can understand the diachronic relationship between humans and nature, learn about traditional techniques, and perceive salt not only as a product but as a carrier of history, culture, and sustainable development (Bacon, 1987; McKinley et al., 2020).

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#### 4. From Salt Production to Therapeutic Experience

The transition of the Solana saltworks from purely productive extraction sites into multifunctional spaces of experience, health, and tourism can be interpreted through the lens of cultural entrepreneurship and the sustainable utilization of cultural and natural heritage. As demonstrated in corresponding studies on Spanish saltworks, the transformation of an extractive landscape into a cultural and natural resource is based on the creation of experiences that combine history, landscape, and contemporary social demand for wellness and authenticity (Maniou et al., 2025c).

In the case of the Solana saltworks, the concept of “experience” extends beyond a simple visit and is directly linked to physical and mental well-being. Salt production, as a traditional practice, now functions as a cultural substrate upon which therapeutic and paramedical applications are developed, such as halotherapy, relaxation within natural landscapes, and experiential interaction with the environment. This approach aligns with contemporary perspectives emphasizing the diachronic relationship between medicine, culture, and technology, in which health is perceived not only as a biological condition but also as a cultural experience (Maniou et al., 2025g; Maniou et al., 2025h).

The Solana saltworks may thus be viewed as “landscapes of healing,” where the natural environment, historical memory, and modern wellness practices coexist. Similar to literary parks and cultural landscapes in Europe that function as models of cultural tourism with an entrepreneurial dimension, the saltworks are transformed into spaces where visitors actively participate in processes of learning, relaxation, and cultural understanding (Maniou et al., 2025f). This experience acquires a therapeutic character, as it is linked to mental health, stress reduction, and enhanced well-being—elements also highlighted in studies on the role of cultural festivals and activities in mental health (Pagkalos et al., 2025e).

At the same time, the development of the Solana saltworks as spaces of health and tourism is embedded within a broader framework of cultural entrepreneurship, where heritage utilization extends beyond preservation to the creation of new economic and social values. As studies from the Mediterranean region demonstrate, the connection between culture, local production, and tourism can function as a driver of sustainable development, particularly in areas with strong historical and cultural identities (Maniou et al., 2025). Within this framework, the Solana saltworks utilize salt not only as a product but also as a symbol of culture and health, enhancing their international competitiveness.

The therapeutic experience offered by the saltworks is not detached from knowledge and scientific grounding. On the contrary, it incorporates contemporary perspectives on the relationship between medicine, technology, and culture, where natural therapies and mild wellness practices coexist with scientific approaches to health (Maniou et al., 2025). In this way, the Solana saltworks act as a bridge between past and present, linking traditional salt production with contemporary societal needs for quality of life, prevention, and cultural experience.

Overall, the case of the Solana saltworks highlights a model of integrated utilization in which production, health, and tourism function not competitively but complementarily. The transition from salt production to therapeutic experience

confirms that traditional productive spaces can be transformed into modern hubs of cultural entrepreneurship and wellness, contributing both to sustainable development and to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage.

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## 5. Wellness Tourism and Therapeutic Experience at the Solana Saltworks

The integration of the Solana saltworks into the wellness tourism sector constitutes a characteristic example of the transformation of traditional productive spaces into multifunctional destinations of experience and health. Wellness tourism, as internationally recognized, is characterized by increasing demand for mild, experiential, and holistic forms of recreation that incorporate natural products, therapeutic practices, and cultural elements (Valentine, 2016).

At the Solana saltworks, halotherapy forms the core of this experience. Visitors participate in organized activities such as inhalation therapies with salt particles, walks through evaporation basins and the coastal environment, and workshops on traditional salt production. Interaction with the natural environment enhances mental relaxation and physical well-being, while the educational dimension of these activities enables visitors to understand the importance of natural resources, biodiversity, and traditional knowledge (McKinley et al., 2020; Luković & Stevanović, 2020).

The transformation of saltworks into spaces of holistic experience is based on the concept of experiential tourism, where participation, education, and interaction with place are combined with recreation and wellness (Kortekaas, 2004). Thus, the saltworks no longer function solely as production units but as living experiential spaces in which health, cultural learning, and environmental engagement coexist. This approach creates an alternative model of tourism development that differs from mass tourism, reduces seasonality, and enhances the sustainability of the local ecosystem (Explore Dalmatia, 2025; Adriatic, 2025).

At the same time, the wellness experience at the Solana saltworks is closely linked to local culture and traditional practices. Participation in activities such as the harvesting of *fleur de sel* or the preparation of specialized salt products offers visitors a sense of authenticity and strengthens local identity. The connection between natural therapy and cultural heritage renders visits to the saltworks a multidimensional experience, supporting the preservation of both productive and cultural heritage (Valentine, 2016; Schwarz et al., 2022).

Overall, the integration of halotherapy into the tourism planning of the Solana saltworks highlights the potential for creating a comprehensive wellness tourism model in which therapy, education, and recreation coexist. This model offers a sustainable alternative for local development, enhances the differentiation of the tourism product, and promotes the preservation of the region's natural and cultural resources (Bacon, 1987; McKinley et al., 2020; Luković & Stevanović, 2020).

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## 6. Conclusions

The connection between salt production, culture, tourism, wellness, and sustainable development highlights an alternative development model that resists the logic of mass exploitation and focuses on quality, experience, and local identity. Saltworks function as living cultural landscapes in which human labor, the natural environment, and collective memory coexist harmoniously and mutually reinforce one another, creating a framework within which tradition becomes a resource for contemporary development.

In an era of intense environmental and economic change, the example of Croatian saltworks demonstrates that the preservation of tradition does not constitute an obstacle to development, but rather a prerequisite for creating a more resilient and meaningful relationship between people, place, and production. The Solana saltworks emerge as models for the redefinition of traditional productive spaces, transforming them into modern centers of health, wellness, and tourism.

The integration of halotherapy and the linkage of salt production with wellness tourism underscore the value of a sustainable development model that respects the natural environment, safeguards cultural heritage, and responds to contemporary social needs. The example of the Solana saltworks offers valuable insights for other regions with traditional natural and cultural resources, indicating pathways for their sustainable utilization through integrated strategies that combine production, tourism, health, and culture.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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### Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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