

## ACCESSIBLE TOURISM – THE IGNORED OPPORTUNITY

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*To create a positive visitor experience, a key factor in obtaining economic benefits, the tourism industry must pay attention to all the elements that contribute to it, especially to accessibility. Visitor accessibility encompasses all tourism markets including seniors and people with disabilities, who have been defined through accessible tourism. This article offers a short presentation of the term accessible tourism, the existing research in the field and the main reasons why the worldwide tourism industry is seemingly unaware of this particular market.*

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### **Introduction**

There is a large and profitable market out there that the tourism industry has been largely ignoring for a long time. This market is as big as over 650 million people worldwide and it's estimated that by the end of 2020 it will reach an approximated 1.2 billion people (Darcy, 2008). It has a huge potential for growth and what's more, research shows its members are more easily converted into regular costumers and on average they spend more per trip than the usual tourist. So who is this market? They are the ones that "accessible tourism" – a rather new concept – primarily targets.

### **What is "accessible tourism"?**

#### **Definition**

Accessible tourism enables people with access requirements including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed products, services and environments. This definition is inclusive of all people including those travelling with children in prams, people with disabilities and seniors.(Darcy and Dickson, 2009, p.34). Therefore it can be said that accessible tourism targets any segment of the market that prefers accessing a tourism experience with ease, whether is the seniors that may prefer walking up a gentle ramp than going up a large number of steep stairs or those with any type of disability, who will appreciate more tourism facilities with continuous pathways, tactile surfaces and clear and bright signage.

According to ENAT, the European Network for Accessible Tourism, accessible tourism includes:

- Barrier-free destinations:** infrastructures and facilities.
- Transport:** by air, land and sea, suitable for all users.
- High quality services:** delivered by trained staff.
- Activities, exhibits, attractions:** allowing participation in tourism by everyone.
- Marketing, booking systems, Web sites and services:** information accessible to all.

#### **Situation Overview**

Is the tourism industry worldwide adapted to the needs of those requiring accessible tourism? Despite the fact that modern society is increasingly aware of the need to integrate people with any type of disabilities the answer is a resounding "no". And while it can be argued that in order to function many tourism facilities comply with legislative requirements like accessible parking space and accessible toilets, clearly a step in the right direction, unfortunately that can't be called true accessible tourism as there are no further developments to include requirements like: professional staff capable of dealing

with accessibility issues, wheelchair accessible vehicles, adapted hotel rooms and many more. The reasons to that are numerous and stem from two directions:

**-there is very little research** that shows how the tourism industry can benefit from making changes in the tourism product development and delivery so that it can become more accessible. Only recently the European Union has commissioned research that shows insight into the complexities of accessible tourism (Buhalis et al., 2005) and in 2007 The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the International Day for People with Disabilities has internationally reinforced the language of disability thus helping define concepts like: accessible destination experiences, accessible tourism, access precincts, continuous (accessible) pathways and disability. Another important contributor to the accessible tourism research is the Australian Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center which funded an Accessible Tourism Research Agenda that sought to create a sound research base on which the tourism industry and government marketing authorities can make more informed decisions. (Darcy, 2008)

**-there is a perception that accessible tourism is “low yield”** due to the stereotype that people with disabilities have significantly less disposable income and are more likely to be dependent on a pension. This argument has been used in the past as a deterrent to investment in accessible tourism and as long as there are too few case studies that can be given as examples of successful tourism enterprises offering accessible tourism experiences, it will continue to carry weight. Yet, according to the latest statistics the market for accessible tourism is continuously growing making it clear that to ignore its potential is to actually ignore fruitful business opportunities, a fact that several companies in Europe and US have counted on when designing offers clearly meant for this market niche. These pioneers can show through their example that accessible tourism can become a competitive edge, just like the case of Divi Hotels Resort on Bonaire Island, in the Caribbean Sea, which became “famous for being completely accessible”, their presentation brochures including images with the access ramp for those who need a wheelchair.

### **Market size and Economic value**

In 1983 E. D Mills noted that “provisions for the disabled in any type of holiday situation can no longer be regarded as an optional extra” (Mills, 1983, p.81). Yet, several decades later researchers (Darcy, 2006) have noted that despite the large numbers of people with disabilities living independently, their growing financial wealth and their desire to travel, this segment continues to be largely ignored by the tourism industry worldwide.

What are the exact numbers? In Australia, for example, 20% of the population, or 4 million people, identify as having a disability. Of these people 520,000 have a mobility disability, 480,000 are blind or vision impaired, and 1 million are deaf or hearing impaired (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Still Darcy’s research (2008) estimates that in the 2003-2004 period the tourists with disabilities spent in Australia between \$8034.68 million and \$11980.272 million, contributed between \$ 3075.5243 million and \$4580.219 million to Tourism Gross Value Added (12.27%–15.60% of total tourism GVA), contributed between \$ 3885.168 million and \$5787.435 million to Tourism Gross Domestic Product (11.02%–16.41% of total) and sustained between 51 820 and 77 495 direct jobs in the tourism industry (11.6%–17.3% of direct tourism employment). And Australia is not an isolated case.

In the US alone there are more than 54 million people with disabilities, a market larger than that of African American or the Hispanics, representing almost 1 billion dollars in buying power (Kotler, 2009), while the European Union countries’ OSSATE research (Buhalis et al.,2005) estimates that tourists with disabilities contribute €80 billion to the economy using gross demand estimates. Globally there are over 650 million people with disabilities (Fujiura and Rutkowskikmitta, 2001; Mercer and MacDonald, 2007), equating to about 10% of humanity.

And this isn’t all of it. There is a direct link between aging and disability as a person is 14 times more likely to have a disability by the time they reach 65 years old than a four-year-old(Darcy, 2008), a trend shared by all western developed countries with a noticeable difference in Asian countries where the

ageing is occurring at a faster rate. (World Health Organization, 2007). What's more, this generation of seniors, unlike past generations of older people, is seeking an active and adventurous experience for their post work lives, and tourism is seen as an important component of their quest of life experiences. Yet, the tourism industry continues to ignore this market as shown by the results of a study involving senior travelers which has proven that despite the fact that seniors greatly value security and support elements in the bathrooms, visible signage in the halls, restaurants menus with big readable fonts and extra heating sources (more blankets available per bed), this type of information is not generally included in the advertising materials used by tourism enterprise, making it harder for them to choose old-age friendly destinations.(Howey et al., 1992).

### **Accessible tourism consumer behavior**

People with disabilities are very appreciative of products that are adapted to their needs. According to Jim Tobias, the president of Inclusive Technologies, a consulting company specialized in "accessible products", "people with disabilities have the tendency to become **brand evangelists** for the brand they love; if usually a consumer would tell another 10 people about their favorite product, people with disabilities could tell 10 times more people." (Hsu, C.H.C., Powers, T., 2002).

This point of view is also shared by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS for short, of the British Government, who has taken active steps for changing the British tourism industry in preparation for the Olympics and Paralympics Games of 2012. According to their statistics (DCMS, 2010), disabled people:

- **become regular clients** after finding a tourism facility that suits their needs;
- **tend to take longer holiday breaks** than the average – 4 days as opposed to the average length of stay of 3 days – therefore spending more money per trip (£216 as opposed to £197 overall);
- **tend not to travel alone**, as they are often accompanied by caregivers, family and friends: over 50% travel with a partner, 20 % with a child and between 21-25% with a companion.

Combining these behavior characteristics with the great potential for growth, presented in the chapter before, makes the market containing senior and persons with disabilities a very attractive one. That's why the mystery remains of why the tourism industry is still largely ignoring it. Fortunately, there are more and more case studies that show the fact that accessible tourism can be profitable: for example Holiday Inn and their specially targeted offer for hearing impaired people. According to their data the hearing impaired people segment includes from people with no hearing to people with different hearing problems, a number that in the US means 21 million persons. To approach this market Holiday Inn promoted their message through special magazines designed for those hearing impaired. And their strategy has paid off, in the first year after making the special offer Holiday Inn gained between 40000 to 50000 travelers staying the night, from this segment alone. (Hsu, C.H.C., Powers, T., 2002)

### **Conclusion**

Is ignoring the opportunity presented by accessible tourism a mistake? One quick look at the facts should show that the obvious answer is "yes". The only fact that still remains uncertain is how the situation can be remediated. There are several things that can be done:

1. **Doing more research in the field.** While the statistics presented in this article are relevant to the developed western countries, there almost none regarding the situation in the developing countries, such as Romania, who could benefit very much from identifying a tourism niche. Unfortunately, in the case of Romania, there is also a lack of official information regarding the situation of disabled people: by 2003, there were 414.620 people with disabilities in the official statistics, or 1.97% of the population, far lower the average 10% for the EU countries, as estimated by UN statistics. (CNDP, 2004).
2. **Creating a business model** that can be successfully put into practice.
3. **Involving the tourism industry.** No matter how great the theoretical model is, until it's put into practice and it has proven its efficiency, it won't become a good argument. That's why tourism industry

needs to be involved in the research, and only by seeing actual numbers and successful case studies, they will change their attitude and give accessible tourism the place it rightfully deserves.

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