

# ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: BIG BUSINESS, YET UNDISCOVERED



What is accessible tourism in the 21st century, and how is it designed? Do the products and services currently available really cater for the demands and needs of a constantly evolving market? Is there a concrete dialogue between users and service providers that has developed sufficiently to guarantee an effective response? Is it possible to measure the accessibility of tourism services? And, ultimately, is this the sort of investment that pays? These are questions that still confront us - is the tourism industry listening - I am not sure that it is!

Is accessible tourism a viable size market to entice tourism providers to confront?

At the end of 2008 it is a fact that accessible tourism was the fastest growing business opportunity in the tourism industry. It is also a fact that the tourism industry needs to recognise that this business opportunity also includes the world-wide growing older population, and see this unique market of people with disabilities as being very profitable.

More than 54 million U.S. residents, or about 19% of the population of the USA, have some sort of disability, the U.S. Census Bureau reported in December 2008. In Europe there are approximately 50 million people with a disability. 63% of people with disabilities are older than 45 years. Nearly 30% of people in the age group 55-54 report a disability. Is this a big enough market for the tourism industry to come to terms with?

70% of people with disabilities are able to travel, but because of the lack of accessible tourism accommodation and other venues such as restaurants, museums, theme parks etc, they do not. There is an enormous mismatch between demand and what is offered by tourism providers in the way of infrastructure and services, neither of which are meeting the needs of people with disabilities. All stakeholders in the tourism industry, including transport companies, need to make more effort to improve the quantity of accessible tourism facilities. People with accessibility needs have the desire and the right to travel like everyone else. However, their travel experiences are still highly restricted by physical barriers such as transport, inaccessible accommodation and other tourism sites as well as other barriers such as a general lack of information or poorly designed web sites.

A recent study undertaken by the Balearic Islands School of Catering in Spain found that 90% of hotel chain websites and 75% of individual hotel web sites were inaccessible to certain groups of users. As a result tourism providers lose market share. A survey carried out by Viajes 2000 in Spain found that people with disabilities nearly always return to the place they initially found accessible

With these figures in mind it is obvious that this cannot be termed a 'small niche market'. Accessible business is big business and the market is growing fast - partly because the world is growing older.

The tourism industry should realise that open access benefits all customers - accessibility is a competitive and economic advantage, not just a social or legal responsibility.

Various providers in the tourism industry, both private and public, have started, although too slowly, to be aware of the importance that a substantial portion of potential customers pay for products and

accessible services.

In many countries legislation is in place, but its implementation is not mandatory, but this does not mean that accessibility should be ignored by the tourism industry.

Returning to our question: "Is the tourism industry listening?

It is very clear in relation to world-wide accessible tourism the demand is increasing very rapidly. The demand is not only coming from people with disabilities, but also from elderly tourists, who do not see themselves as being in any way disabled, but who appreciate the fixtures and fittings in accessible accommodation, to aid their balance. There is also a lesser, but increasing, demand from families with young children for accessible facilities.

So the answer to the question posed is "I fear not".

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