

ACCESSIBLE TOURISM - PROFITABLE, YET FAR FROM PERFECT



Accessible tourism is gaining ground worldwide. It is a type of tourism inspired by the need to provide destinations, products, and services accessible to all people regardless of age, gender or disability. While there are millions of travelers with special needs, they still face numerous obstacles on the road.

The origins of accessible tourism go back to the 1980s when the whole industry expanded its horizons by combining elements related to business opportunities. It was also the time that favored the economic and technological development and social inclusion of people with disabilities.

A key study to understand the obstacles of people with special needs was the World Report on Disability (WRD), published in 2011 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, **which recognized the existence of more than 1 billion persons in the world with some form of disability.**

Back then, the number corresponded to 15% of the world's population, with almost 200 million people experiencing very significant difficulties in functioning.

In the coming years, Margaret Chan, who served as Director-General of the WHO at that time, and Robert Zoellick, President of the World Bank, highlighted that disability will become a much pressing concern due to population aging.

Given the seriousness of the situation, both directors called for immediate action, requesting the empowerment of those with disabilities and the removal of barriers that prevent them from taking part in their communities so they can receive a quality education, secure decent jobs and have their voice heard.

Accessible Tourism, an Attractive Market

In order to assess the economic impact of travelers with special access needs in the tourism industry of the European Union (EU), the European Commission (EC) carried an investigation between 2012 and 2013. The study found that more than 50% of those with disabilities in the EU traveled during the 12 months between mid-2012 and 2013, with an average of 6.7-day trips, and 6.7 overnight stays, mostly in Europe.

In total, the report stated that these people made 170 million day trips with a similar number of stays within the EU, compared to a slightly lower number of individuals who are 65 years or older and made more than 225 million day trips and 217 million trips with a longer stay.

The research concluded that by 2020, the demand for accessible tourism in the EU would amount to 862 million annual trips.

From an economic point of view, both people with disabilities and the elderly spent 80 euros a day per trip within the EU, 700 for trips made in their countries of origin and 1,100 in member countries of the regional integration organization.

Physical and Attitudinal Barriers

In the planning phase of the trip, the study identified that having little to no information available on accessible services is the main barrier, in particular for individuals with mobility, sensory and mental impairments.

Once travelers have made the decision to travel and transportation obstacles have been overcome, the discontent of the travelers focused on obstacles on board of the plane, such as the difficulty of access and use of restrooms.

The research found numerous physical barriers in transport, rooms, food services, recreational areas and activities, although the ones that those with special needs commonly face are attitudinal ones.

In 2014, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) referred to these subjective obstacles in its 'Manual on Accessible Tourism for All', when it called for a change of mentality and the way tourism services are provided.

The UNWTO stated that tourism needed to work in five areas to achieve universal accessibility: drafting of laws and regulations against discrimination in access to facilities, products and services; staff awareness and training; research on the current situation of accessibility and future trends; marketing with the goal of promoting sales initiatives and strategies to encourage consumption in terms of accessible tourism; and management to maintain the measures adopted in such a way that they are long-lasting and assessable in terms of quality.

While the number of destinations accessible to tourists with disabilities is gradually increasing as well as the amount of information provided on the internet to potential travelers, the range of services on offer is still insufficient.

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