

# To infinity and beyond

## Advances in accessibility in the tourism industry

Tourism is dedicated to catering for the preferences of a wide range of customers, but genuinely inclusive travel, whether for business or for leisure, can be hard to find. Ivor Ambrose is Managing Director of the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), a not-for-profit association which promotes accessible tourism. Here he sets out key issues and case studies showing inclusive tourism in action. Meanwhile Sandra Cooper's description of her stay in an exceptional destination illustrates some of the possibilities available

### Accessible tourism: Is there a blueprint for success?

by Ivor Ambrose, Managing Director, European Network for Accessible Tourism

It is a sublime contradiction that the tourism sector, which aims to offer warm hospitality and exemplary customer service, is a relative latecomer with regard to serving people who require a good standard of access. A broad-brush analysis of tourist businesses in any country shows that mainstream providers are generally underperforming in terms of the accessibility of their buildings, facilities, transport and customer services. Moreover, the information published on the majority of travel and tourism websites, where many tourists start planning their trips, is difficult to read and to navigate for many potential visitors.

This lack of provision can be ascribed partly to the historical socio-economic status of disabled people. Segregation of disabled people from work, education and leisure has persisted until comparatively recent times, and equal opportunities are still not available to all people

in all sectors of social and economic life. Ensuring participation in tourism, sport and leisure has lagged behind other policy sectors, priority being given to activities such as education and work, which can lead to economic independence.

A lack of disposable income has traditionally restricted disabled people's ability to participate in leisure pursuits and travel. Being relatively poor, economically inactive and restricted in their travel options due to inaccessible infrastructure and transport, disabled people were not considered a significant market by the tourism sector. So infrastructure like hotels and resorts built over the last half century or more were hardly ever constructed with disabled people in mind, leaving a legacy of facilities which are difficult or impossible to access. Historic sites also often present barriers which only comparatively recently have begun to be addressed, as legislation has begun to take effect.

However, despite these historical issues, the accessible tourism market today is growing. In 2009 the UK Tourism Survey included, for the first time, a number of questions about the access requirements of guests staying in various types of overnight accommodation. The figures showed that the accessible-tourism market amounted to

11 per cent of all visitors, who spent £2 billion in England alone. With growing proportions of older people both in the UK and in the countries from which visitors to Britain typically come, these numbers are on an upward trend.

Yet the provision of accessible destinations is in short supply. The imbalance between increasing demand and lack of supply across the sector does not work to anybody's advantage, yet it seems hard for providers to make the changes necessary to match profitable enterprises with satisfied customers.

### The importance of customer satisfaction

Tourist businesses are proud of what they offer; and whether it is a unique venue, like Stonehenge, or a fairly ordinary place with a special facility or service, such as a beach with ramped access to the sea, every managed tourist site and every tour manager aims to provide visitors with a memorable, exceptional and, above all, enjoyable experience.

Holidaymakers and business travellers are on the lookout for experiences and places that suit them. Tourism managers seek to impress with attractive packages and offers at the best possible prices; but they are also cautious about promising too much. Customers are valuable, not only for the money they spend today but also for future business, thanks to recommendations that may be given to others. Yet the opposite is also true: income may suffer should visitors report unsatisfactory experiences. Balancing the tourism offer with the customer experience is at the heart of any tourism enterprise, affecting customer numbers, turnover and, ultimately, profits.

### A whole-service approach

When considering how to make tourism more inclusive, it must be remembered that the industry is inherently complex and its delivery systems are fragmented. Perhaps this partly explains why the industry falls into more than its fair share of traps concerning access. Delivering an inclusive service typically depends on the sum of many actions, involving several aspects of the business and numerous service providers.

Working for ENAT brings me into contact with thousands of tourism enterprises around the

world, and learning from their successes and failures facilitates the sharing of good practice. Taking a 'helicopter view' of inclusive tourism in practice in Europe and further afield, I would highlight five success factors in the provision of accessible tourism. Typically, a successful accessible tourism business or destination combines all of these actions.

### Five success factors for inclusive tourism

- **Work out a policy and strategy**  
A policy and an implementation strategy will guide the long-term development of any project. Having a set of principles and a clear understanding of desired outcomes and the reasons why things are done in a certain way will enable those who take the initiative to lead others to a successful result. Policies work best when they are clearly stated, allowing them to be used to evaluate services and to identify where changes need to be made.
- **Use networks and form partnerships**  
Networks with multiple stakeholders, including international networks such as ENAT as well as local, regional and national networks, are vital for developing the necessary knowledge and building an understanding of how to meet customers' requirements. Online and face-to-face networking allows useful partnerships to develop, as businesses, NGOs, decision makers, public-sector managers and researchers mix, crossing sector boundaries. Being part of a network also opens up opportunities for training, knowledge transfer and innovation.
- **Address the whole access chain**  
Fundamental to delivering an inclusive tourism service is the need to consider the whole access chain. As customers' requirements are central to the design of any tourism operation, the connections between every place, service and activity must be thoroughly planned and tested in order to succeed.

Staff also play an important role in bridging possible access gaps or smoothing out unforeseen difficulties, and their training in disability awareness and customer care

should not be overlooked. Equipment hire companies and other specialists are also important for providing adequate services.

- **Develop and market the destination**  
Inclusive tourism requires destinations to be developed with the necessary facilities, infrastructure and transport to make up a varied, stimulating and well-functioning environment. However good the accessible accommodation, attraction or venue, it cannot deliver an optimal visitor experience if it is an 'accessible oasis' within an inaccessible area, served only by inaccessible transport. The public sector clearly has an important role in providing or encouraging local accessible services which, in turn, will support businesses in their efforts to attract customers.

It is important to remember that destinations have greater capacity than individual businesses. They must lead the way by marketing themselves boldly as being welcoming towards disabled and older visitors, as well as families. Destinations may develop their own

accessible destination 'brand marks' to enhance their visibility, as well as using existing recognition schemes such as the Open Britain certificate or the ENAT Code of Good Conduct mark.

- **Deliver accessible tourism experiences**  
Delivering accessible experiences must be at the heart of the business model for any enterprise which aims to succeed in this market. This means ensuring that activities, facilities and services are designed as closely as possible to visitors' requirements. There are a number of techniques which can be used to develop inclusive packages, such as training tourism managers to design a plan which takes account of all the stakeholders involved in the service, including management, employees and customers.

The visitor experience can then be broken down into a series of outcomes which the destination aims to fulfil. Gathering feedback from visitors is also essential to understanding outcomes of the visitor experience.

Below is a selection of case studies illustrating some of these concepts in practice.

**Case study: Policies and strategies**

The small mountain village of Lousã near Coimbra, Portugal is developing into an accessible tourism destination specialising in adventure tourism, nature experiences and gastronomy.

With the help of funding from European Union and national sources, the Mayor, municipal staff, the local disability ombudsman, businesses and NGOs have established a network to promote and improve the destination.



Assisted tours are available around Lousã, a mountain village in Portugal

Working with accessible tourism specialists, the Lousã Accessible Network has introduced new infrastructure, urban regeneration and improved marketing, with training courses in disability awareness and service for owners, managers and staff of accommodation providers, restaurants, shops and other facilities. Travel operator Accessible Portugal acts as the destination's main promoter.

[www.accessibleportugal.org](http://www.accessibleportugal.org)  
[www.cm-lousa.pt/turismo/turismo\\_accessible\\_ing.htm](http://www.cm-lousa.pt/turismo/turismo_accessible_ing.htm)

### Case study: Networks and partnerships

Planning ahead is essential for those who need haemodialysis on a regular basis. Global Dialysis is an online directory to which dialysis centres around the world can add their details, allowing dialysis users to access this information when planning a trip.

The site, which was started as a voluntary project, has over 500,000 visits per year. Now managed by Marketing Medicine, the site

offers a wide range of travel- and health-related advice to those who need dialysis and their carers. Global Dialysis also continues to provide business development opportunities for the network of healthcare and travel sector providers who specialise in this area of 'care tourism'.

 [www.globaldialysis.com](http://www.globaldialysis.com)

### Case study: The access chain

Not all access barriers are visible: a fear of flying is a barrier to many people. Holidays can be spoiled due to a fear of flying so intense that recovering from the outward flight is immediately followed by fears about the return flight. Flying Without Fear is a UK company

which addresses the anxiety which comes from having to fly. They also run the LOGBOOK 24 / 7 social network where like-minded people can offer support.

 [www.flyingwithoutfear.com](http://www.flyingwithoutfear.com)

### Case study: Destination development and marketing

The resort town of Arona in Tenerife has a history of providing good access for physically disabled tourists since the first Scandinavian visitors arrived there in the 1950s. Access guide books, accessible hotels, shops, promenades, taxis, minibuses and island tours make up the total accessible destination concept. On the beach, access into the water is possible thanks

to the availability of special ramps, floating wheelchairs and mobility aids. Trained assistants are also on hand, making sea bathing possible for everyone.

 [www.tenerife-aronas.com](http://www.tenerife-aronas.com)



### Case study: Accessible tourism experience

Perhaps the ultimate accessible tourism experience is offered by the company, Zero-G, based in Texas, USA, which allows customers to experience weightlessness on board a specially designed plane.

 [www.gozerog.com](http://www.gozerog.com)



Professor Stephen Hawking takes a weightless flight with Zero-G

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## Work in progress

Today inclusive tourism is undoubtedly a 'work in progress' in Europe. Tourist boards and public authorities in some countries are supporting the tourism sector towards improved accessibility through networking, venue auditing and certification schemes, publications and marketing initiatives. In 2010 the first European Access City Award was presented to the City of Ávila in Spain,

a well-known attraction thanks to its medieval walls and historical buildings. The future presents great possibilities, but the challenge of establishing Europe as the number one accessible tourism destination still lies ahead of us. ●

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## Access East-German style

by Sandra Cooper

As a wheelchair user, I found the hotel HausRheinsberg Hotel am See in Germany the perfect holiday location. Having been collected from Berlin airport, albeit at extra cost, the hotel offered all the equipment I needed. Level access and automatic doors were provided throughout and the lifts were sizeable. There was step-free access from my bedroom to the accessible pool, and the hotel benefited from a gym and accessible games area. There were accessible toilets dotted around, and the dining area had plenty of space for manoeuvring complete with height-adjustable tables. My room had a level-access shower, electric hoist and personal balcony with enough space to turn my sizeable electric wheelchair, while, at additional cost, a carer and physiotherapy were available. Little wonder that my husband / carer came home without backache.

The hotel feels fresh and light with corridors resembling those in an art gallery. It is situated beside one of the 500 lakes in the area which have cycle paths fit for any wheels, and there are specialist bicycles for hire.

The nearby castle, or Schloß, was a clinic until the Berlin wall came down; it is now a museum with magnificent 18th-century-style gardens and extensive woodland. Several boats available for hire on the lake are wheelchair friendly and we even had an afternoon trip on a horse and cart with six wheelchairs on board. With this, the lovely theatre attached to the Schloß, and the Tucholsky Museum, dedicated to a great satirist and friend of Kafka, there was quite a bit to do.

Walking in the woods was a strange experience at times, as we were reminded of post-war films of



Accessible activities included a ride on a horse and cart

German uniforms charging out of the gloom and scores of young men being killed. Fortunately this holiday expanded our limited celluloid experience to encompass undulating wild flowers, fungi and endlessly calling cuckoos.

Being in the former East Germany added flavour to our holiday: there are still grim reminders of Russian occupation in the graveyards, and in the fact that most people over 25 do not speak English. Other traits of East Germany included characteristic buildings and people's attitudes. Everyone seemed to consider others first; even the supermarket did not sell toiletries because there was a chemist next door. The habit of 'making do' seems to prevail, with some shabby garden sheds, caravans and boats.

There was only one hiccup and that was at Berlin airport, where there is no x-ray wand for wheelchairs, meaning that my wheelchair had to go through a machine. Luckily there were members of staff available to transfer me and lift the chair onto the machine; there was no ramp available. Apparently one passenger was refused a flight because his wheelchair was too big to go in the x-ray machine, so it would seem I had a lucky escape.

 [www.hausrheinsberg.de/eng](http://www.hausrheinsberg.de/eng)