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Blind through the Okavango Delta–Inclusion excluded

"States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues"¹

¹ UN Convention on the Rights Of Persons With Disabilities, article 30 para 5, c).

Those who read my travel report concerning my tour in Peru² know that sometimes I like to participate in guided tours even when there are such high challenges as on the Inka Trail. Accompanied and supported by my wife it is, from my view-point, also an aspect of inclusion to have the opportunity to travel together even when the tour is not "barrier-free".

Planning our trip to Botswana

This year, however, my wife and me wanted to go to Botswana and this time we were looking for trips without major challenges. Finally, we found a two weeks package holiday with excursions described as "without major challenges" or even "easy". That was the main reason – beside price and date – why we chose this travel organizer.

Arrival in Africa

After a ten hours flight we landed in Johannesburg where we met some of the members of our group and took the connecting flight to Maun (Botswana) where we first met our German tour guide and our driver.

When we arrived in our first lodge our tour guide suggested that we should introduce ourselves to each other. When introducing myself I mentioned also that I was blind, but that according to my own and my wife's experience on other trips this would not change the course of the activities booked.

There was no discussion on this issue, even though the situation of having a blind participant was surprising for them. During the first days some participants told me that they had already private contacts with blind people, one of them even in the family.

The first excursions

Since we booked a roundtrip with excursions we had to use besides our bus these jeeps shown on next page³ for our excursions (game drives).

² <http://www.accessibletourism.org/resources/report--blind-on-the-inka-trail-leidner.pdf>

³ All photos © Silka Leidner-von Harten



Picture: Embarking the safari jeep.

The first time it was not easy for me to embark and disembark the jeep, but with the help of my wife I soon got familiar with this daily exercise and did not regard it as difficulty.

The Okavango Delta

For the fourth and fifth day a stay in a tented camp in the Okavango Delta was envisaged. Our tour guide told us that this camp could only be reached by special trucks as shown below with huge wheels to drive through the water in the Delta.



Picture: Entering the special truck (outer diameter of the wheels about 1,30 m)

Communicating exclusion

During our stay in the Okavango Delta our tour programme envisaged a one hour "bush walk" on one of the small islands. Since this excursion was characterized as "easy", we did not expect any problems and did not pay any attention to this activity.

The communication between the tour guide, my wife and me

All the more we were surprised as two days before our departure to the Delta our tour guide told us that I could not participate in that walk, for it would be necessary to walk in single file.

Since she saw me climbing into and out of the safari jeeps several times, I was sure that it would be possible to convince her that walking in single file for my wife and me was not unusual at all, but nearly daily exercise at home when going shopping or moving on crowded sidewalks.

But instead of agreeing to my participation she pointed out that holes in the ground might be a risk for me. I answered that because of our experience in mountain trekking tours we would not see any risk for me on this "easy" walk, but to avoid any risk for her I would sign a document that I would take all risks in context with this walk on my own responsibility.

Now she argued that wild animals might approach the group and make it necessary to run away quickly. My answer that some participants of our group would certainly be slower than me brought our conversation to an end for the moment, for she wanted to clarify these issues.

The day before our departure she informed us that the CEO of the travel organizer in Germany decided that I was not allowed to participate in the walk together with the group, because it was allegedly forbidden by Botswanian laws that disabled people visit the islands in the Okavango Delta.⁴ The only way for us to enter this island would be that we get our own local guide. My proposal that we could join the group with this guide and leave the common route in case of unexpected difficulties, however, was denied. It should be a totally separated excursion.

The final reason pretended for this decision, was that my participation would endanger the safety of the group. For, when wild animals approach, group members would not think of their own safety but would take care of us.

The informations given to the group by the tour guide

Later in the bus, the programme of the next day was announced. With regard to the bush walk, the informations given to the group were significantly different from the informations given to us:

- The tour guide asked everybody to pay attention to the ground during the walk, but it would not be necessary to wear hiking boots. Thus, the information was in accordance with the description of the walk as "easy".
- A risk to run away because of wild animals was not mentioned at all. One should only be careful, because snakes might appear in the grass.

⁴ That reminded me of my Peru trip where the organizers also pretended that it was forbidden that people with disabilities would walk on the Inka Trail

After dinner the owner of the lodge from which we would start the next morning by boat gave additional information concerning that walk. She said that the group would be accompanied by several persons, the "polers" that drive the typical canoes shown below to the island. The number of polers would be sufficient so that during the walk everybody could choose his own pace or even rest a while.



Picture: Embarking the Mokoro canoe

The next day when we had entered the island the head poler informed the group about the "rules to be respected". I suppose nobody can imagine how surprised I was when he mentioned that it might happen that an elephant approaches the group. In that case, he said, do not run away, remain where you are and clap your hands. My surprise in that respect grew even more some days later, when I heard our tour guide reporting about her encounter of a hippo during another trip. "Of course", she said, "I did not run away. I moved slowly backward always looking at the animal."

Our "exclusive" bush walk

After this introduction we were separated from the group and went into the opposite direction, more or less 20 minutes around a sausage tree (the excursion of the group took about 45 minutes). Our guide gave us some information and explanation of the flora.

When we returned to our starting point my wife asked him which wild animals would live on the island. His answer was clear and convincing: Except some elephants no wild animals live on this island, for lions and leopards do not swim.

A “dangerous” excursion: elephant back riding

On the last day before returning home we booked one of the optional tours: a 45 minutes ride on an elephant as shown below.



Picture: Climbing on the elephant.

Our mahout told me that the ride would lead through an area where lions and leopards live and it could not be excluded that they would attack the group. For this reason, the group of nine elephants was accompanied by an armed ranger walking ahead of us.

It struck me somehow that in this case of obvious risks to be attacked by wild animals, I was not considered as safety risk for the group, but the organizers themselves took the measures necessary to ensure the safety of the group. They also took actions to minimize their own risks. For before the tour started, every participant had to sign a document that he is aware of all the risks on that tour.

Conclusions

Even though we were excluded of the group only for one excursion, it influenced my thoughts during the whole journey. In particular, the way how the decision was communicated and that the information given to the group and to us differed to such a great extent, showed that discrimination begins with discriminating⁵ the informations.

What gave my thoughts additional food was the impression that the local people did not seem to have any problems concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities. The owner of the lodge, for example, mentioned explicitly that the walk was organized in a way that allows to take care of individual needs. And the organizers of the elephant back riding did not hesitate a second – despite the dangerous wild animals in the area – to

⁵ The Latin origine „discriminare“ means „making differences“.

help me climbing on the elephant's back. The fact that every participant had to confirm that he is aware of all the risks shows that clear regulations are an indispensable precondition of inclusion, for they facilitate that every participant can take its own decision. Negative attitudes with regard to disabilities appeared only on the part of the German tour guide and the CEO of the travel organizer in Germany.

It seems that in this area as well there is a special "German Angst" that leads to exclusion of tourists with special needs. The German government would be well advised to recognize a need for action to concretize legislation on discrimination in the context of package holidays. Up to now and despite the new EU Package Travel Directive German travel organizers seem to consider their scope of action towards people with disabilities as infinite. Just the other day I found the catalogue of a travel organizer who wrote below the description of its package holidays that these tours were "generally not suitable for people with mobility impairments". Because of the diversity of mobility impairments I can not imagine that it is possible to say that an event or a tour is "generally" not suitable for persons with mobility impairments, except one intends to exclude these customers.

But not all travel organizers show such negative approaches - as experienced by myself on my tours through Peru 2010 and Botswana this year - and do not even hesitate to say the untruth on purpose concerning legislation in the countries visited.

The SPD-Reiseservice, for example, a small German travel organizer shows that inclusion is possible without shifting risks to the company. In its catalogue the company points out that travellers who need assistance organize their assistance themselves. This very clear rule avoids risks for the travel organizer and gives any guest the right to choose his trip taking into account the necessary assistance that might be different depending on the type of the holiday. This very clear rule allows open and non-discriminating exchange of information between the travel organizer and its guests.