

## EU CONFERENCE ON ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

### “Rethinking Accessible Tourism in Europe”

Maria Maraka-Romanou  
Head General Direction Tourism Development  
Greek National Tourism Organisation

Bruxelles, 6<sup>th</sup> June

Tourism, the sector which represents a sizable share of the global economy, plays, in Greece, an important role in terms of its economic and employment potential.

Tourism industry accounts for more than 8% of the Greek GDP and employs 688,800 persons - corresponding to 18.3% of the work force.

In 2013, the total number of tourist arrivals from abroad topped 17.5 millions.

Greek Tourism, as a highly resilient economic sector, remained competitive at a global level, even during the recent crisis.

The target for Greek Tourism, beside a general improvement of the main figures (arrivals and expenditure per visitor), is the **repositioning** of Greece as a tourism destination.

Diversification from massive seasonal tourism to a rich and all year round tourism product could lead to a more sustainable and balanced tourism development.

The strategy for Greek Tourism aims at moving from overreliance on the Sun and Beach product to products such as nautical, City-break, medical, cultural and MICE tourism (Meetings-Incentives-Convention-Exposition).

In any case attention has been given to enhance the visitor's experience through structured collection of added services that provide a product with distinct feel and perception.

In this framework the inclusion of **accessibility standards** in all accommodation and amenities is pointed out as a means to make everything easy and comfortable tailored to the needs of the elderly, the disabled and the temporary in need.

Given that tourism involves different branches of the economy that range from hotels and gastronomy to transports and different amenities (cultural, natural), in order to insure accessibility, it is necessary to respond adequately to the whole tourism supply chain, from information to infrastructure, superstructure and amenities and to services.

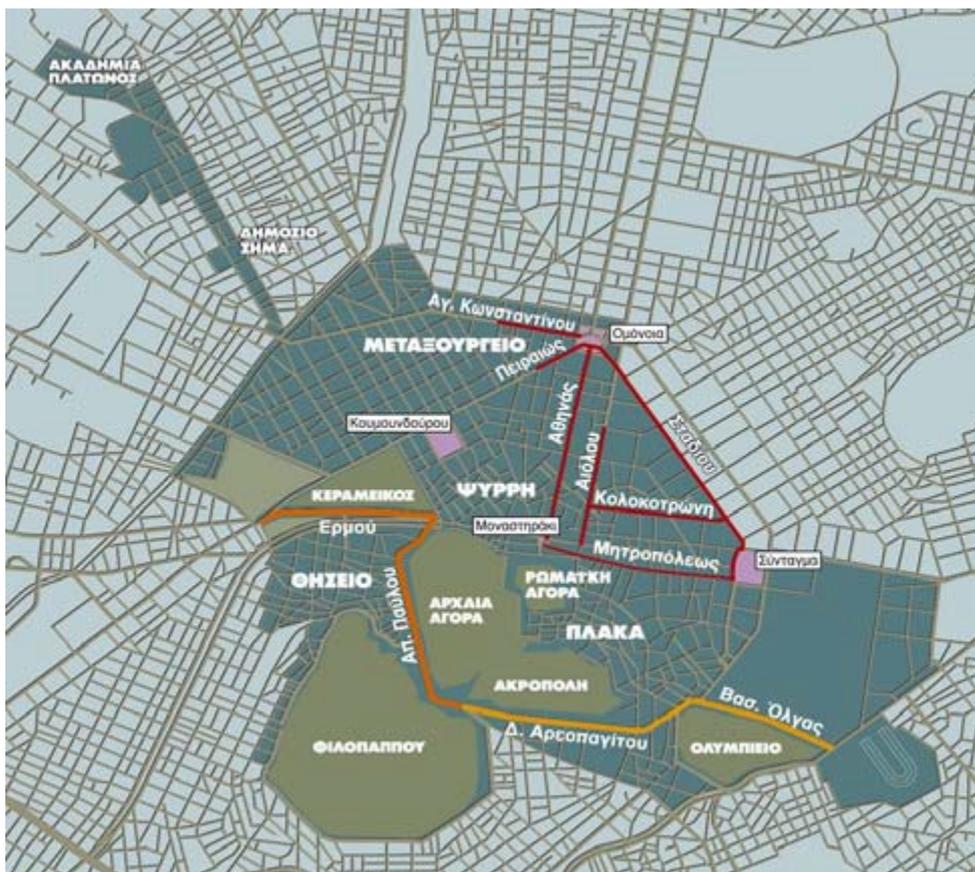
#### **In reference to built environment:**

Since 1998 the General Building Regulations have included special norms for public buildings and interventions in public space in order to eliminate barriers for people with special needs and to improve the awareness of technicians and the interested actors.

During the period which preceded the Athens 2004 Olympic Games the accessibility requirements were enforced through government circulars and amendments to the laws regarding municipal urban renovation works and public buildings.

Similarly, the legislation governing hotels, which refers to the accessibility guidelines, was updated in 2002 and was followed by a campaign to encourage hoteliers (especially those in Athens and the other Olympic cities) to improve the accessibility of their premises. Namely, according to the tourism accommodation building code a proportion of rooms in each accommodation (approximately 5%) is required to be accessible for people with disabilities.

During the same period the so-called “*Unification of the Archaeological Sites*”, an overall plan which has re-defined the historical centre, its monuments, historical sites and streets, leading to a higher quality tourism offer, created a pedestrian route and an attractive accessible environment in a city centre that suffered greatly from motor traffic.



The Access for people with disabilities, parents with pushchairs and people with walking difficulties to the Acropolis of Athens has been ensured by a specially designed elevator well connected with a conveyor platform and with tourism vehicles.

The success of the Unification of Archaeological Sites project in Athens is stimulating similar new projects in other Greek cities. One specific example is Greece's third largest city, Patras, which is now following the path of Athens, by focusing on a study to create two walking routes, by the new archaeological museum and the historic centre, with the objective to apply for funding in the next EU framework, 2014 – 2020.

**Regarding public means of transport:** There is a combination of actions related to public transportation in the national network regarding p.w.d., such as entry priority, low fare tickets, special information call centers and websites.

The most integrated transport system is the one in and around the historical centre of Athens, where combined means of transport (Metro, renovated electric railway, bus and trolley bus services), designed to be accessible to wheelchair users and other persons with disabilities, connect directly with focal points of the Archeological Sites Grand Promenade. Especially, the new Metro system is regarded as one of the most accessible in Europe; additionally, it combines high technical standards with art and cultural exhibits at the stations. Together with the accessible trams and buses, this has contributed strongly to the success of the overall project.

**Regarding social tourism:** Initiatives, that prevent elderly and disabled people from dependency situations, are promoted within different social tourism programs realized by specific social security funds. The Ministry of Tourism and GNTO carry out yearly the "Tourism for All" program, not stemmed to security funds but totally financed by National funds, addressed to vulnerable (economically and physically) social groups and enabling them participate to cheap tourism vacations all over Greece.

**In the field of information:** Accessible tourism information is deficient. The absence of information regards official tourism websites that (with rare exceptions) do not adequately inform visitors about accessible itineraries and amenities.

Whilst main strategy of tourism policy is the promotion of Athens and Salonica as city-break destinations, the image projected lacks any reference to disabled-accessibility.

Although Athens' historical centre can be considered accessible to a high degree, there has been no significant follow up in terms of *marketing*.

This means that the fairly good standard of the center of Athens in disabled-accessibility is not under-lined, neither directly by official sites nor indirectly by displaying links to sites which contain such information. This is probably due to the under-estimation of the opportunities offered by the access market and that accessible tourism market is perceived as low yield.

However, in last year, changes were initiated in product development in the issues of access for people with disabilities and marketing towards these customers. The fact that targets for *Senior Tourism* product development and *City Breaks* are now included in Greek National Tourist Organisation's 'Strategic Marketing and Promotion Plan 2014-2015-2016', in the new 'Greek

Tourism 2020 Framework Strategy' proposed by SETE, the Hellenic Association of Tourism Enterprises, as well as in the programs of the Athens Hoteliers' Association and the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency, means that more people and stakeholders are aware of the benefits of focusing on the accessible tourism market and are planning to pay more attention to it.

Moreover, the EU Framework for the new Operational Period 2014-2020 requires the active participation of the National Confederation of People with Disabilities (ESAMEA) in the education and training of authorities responsible for management of the funds and eligibility of the projects (ex. Managing Authorities, selected major beneficiaries or Intermediate Management Agencies) and the practical application of relevant accessibility issues in all interventions and projects.

Meanwhile, it is scheduled that ESAMEA will participate in the monitoring committees and the setting of specific selection criteria and evaluation instruments for transactions relating to accessibility and non-discrimination, such as developing a set of integrated accessibility infrastructure throughout the entire premises of tourist interest.

If these combined plans can be realized, the accessible tourism supply chain in Greece has the potential to deliver greatly improved services to visitors in the coming period. The aim should be to pass from the government and the private sector declarations about disability, as an agenda issue, to an implementation that will not be limited in ad hoc actions, but firmly built in a strategically grounded approach to creating **destinations** really accessible to tourism.