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Accessibility for persons with disabilities to tourism services

Contribution by:

The European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT)

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This presentation gives a short introduction to the objectives and "philosophy" of the ENAT network, focussing on why ENAT was established and emphasising our aim to promote inclusion in the tourism sector. Then, some observations and proposals about the theme of the workshop are presented. Essentially, ENAT is eager to contribute to further development work and dissemination of standards and guidelines which can lead to improving the accessibility of tourism destinations, venues and transport in Europe and throughout the world.

Introducing ENAT

The European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT) was set up by 9 European organisations at the beginning of 2006 as a pilot project supported by the European Commission. Its initial goal was to demonstrate how disability policies could be mainstreamed more effectively in the tourism sector.

ENAT is now no longer a project but a non-profit association of member organisations and individuals from the private, public and NGO sectors. Our mission is to make European tourism destinations, products and services accessible to all visitors. We do this by disseminating information to tourism providers and tourism stakeholders, by providing access to relevant resources, by enabling our members to share information and work together, and by organising projects, events and working groups to tackle specific objectives. ENAT is also open to non-European members and has a wide range of associate members from around the world.

In the past two years ENAT has gathered over 400 members from 50 countries. We have held two International Workshops and, recently, an International Congress, bringing together more than 500 actors and stakeholders in accessible tourism.

Our members include more than 200 private enterprises, about 40 public sector organisations, ranging from Tourist Boards to educational institutions; private foundations, NGOs of disabled people and other consumer interest groups, professional associations and around 75 private citizens. We have established a website at www.accessibletourism.org which has received more 25,000 unique visitors, and where you can find News, Publications, Good Practices, Links, Videos, Theme pages and profiles of the members.

Why ENAT?

The motivation to establish ENAT grew from the sponsoring partners' awareness of a number of contemporary challenges in the tourism sector:

- The demographics of population ageing brings new challenges and opportunities to all areas of the tourism sector;
- Tourists with disabilities, older tourists and others with particular access needs have the right to travel and enjoy tourism but this right is inadequately recognised and poorly met by the majority of tourism and transport providers (or "the mainstream"). Exercising the right to travel is not always possible and can be both difficult and even hazardous due to multiple failures in the accessibility of information, transport, attractions, accommodation and services;
- There are good examples of accessible tourism policies, offers and initiatives in many European countries, regions and cities, and across the globe, but these are generally not well known. The travel and tourism industry and the consumer alike need to be made aware of these good practices in order for improvements to spread and thus enable the tourism market to function better;
- Mainstreaming disability requirements into everyday practice is a major challenge for all parts of the tourism sector. It requires greater awareness but also the transfer of specific knowledge in areas such as planning, design, management, economics, education and training....;
- Accessibility guidelines, minimum requirements and other forms of planning and management support are needed. Effective, accessible mechanisms for information exchange between specialists and mainstream providers in the tourism sector must be devised, so that providers can deliver high quality tourist offers in suitably designed and managed facilities.

Since ENAT was formed, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006 (article 30 in particular, referring to participation in cultural life, recreation and sport) has added further impetus to the need for all parts of the tourism industry in all parts of the world to address the requirements of these consumers in their facilities, services and offers.¹

The UN Website states that "As of 16 January 2008 there are 14 ratifications of the Convention and 8 ratifications of the Optional Protocol. The Convention must have 20 ratifications for it to enter into force. Currently, there are 123 signatories to the Convention and 69 signatories to the Optional Protocol."

In addition, we would also highlight that, on 29 November 2007, European Members of Parliament passed a resolution on the report by MEP Paolo Costa: "Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism", which calls for Member States to make a united effort to support measures in favour of Accessible Tourism.²

¹ See: <http://www.accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.reports.365>

² See: <http://www.accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.news.261>

This report firmly states a number of objectives which ENAT directly supports and works towards, including:

- Member States, tourism providers and national and local tourist organisations to join and/or to support initiatives to coordinate at European level the information on accessible tourism;
- [drawing up...] up a charter of the rights and obligations of European tourists [and...] a European code of conduct for tourist businesses;
- to initialise an "Access for all " EC label that would guarantee core accessibility facilities for tourists with reduced mobility;
- preservation of cultural sites and greater efforts to improve access for people with disabilities;
- [the European Commission to draft an action plan] on the enhancement of such [an access] label based on the work it has already carried out, on experiences and best practices at national and local level and taking stock of what has been achieved at EU level in the transport field;
- ...and of developing European transport policy, to take due account of the accessibility handicap affecting regions with specific natural or geographical characteristics, such as the outermost regions, island and mountain regions...

With such direct and clear political support, it seems the time has never been better than **now** for all of us to face up to the challenges of accessible tourism and work creatively together to create 'win-win' solutions for tourism providers and visitors.

Some Reflections on Standardisation

ENAT does not devise Standards. This is the job of the official Standards bodies working with industry and consumers. But we may contribute to standards work, if we are invited. And we hope to provide a range of support activities which can help to promote the right environment and conditions for international Standards work.

Of course, ENAT recognises and supports the use of existing authorised standards for accessibility of the built environment, for transport and for ICTs in countries and regions where these exist. These various standards may form the basis of future European or International standards for tourism and transport. But even these may be improved, as can their accompanying guidelines.

Industry standards for products and services have the direct purpose of safeguarding the health and safety of consumers, and protecting the rights of consumers. Good standards enable markets to function efficiently and fairly by providing industry with a reliable frame of reference for the design and delivery of products and services. Where new standards are introduced by legislation or other mandatory enforcement, enterprises must commonly adapt or modify their existing products or services in order to comply. Thus, the introduction of standards can necessitate significant changes in the way an

enterprise works and does its business. Standards can also help enterprises to deliver accurate information about products and services to users, including both workers and consumers.

However, we are well aware of the arguments from some quarters that mandatory standards can be a threat to some tourism providers, their products, services and ways of working if such standards are imposed without due care and consideration for local or sectoral conditions. Such criticism needs to be taken seriously and, we believe, issues of disagreement need to be explored and common areas carefully developed to find workable solutions.

As we have pointed out, there are inadequacies regarding the current provision of 'accessible tourism', and we do not doubt that there is a clear and urgent need for some accessibility guidelines in the area of tourism and transport and the adoption of such guidelines by industry, (which may be voluntary), so as to bring about better services and greater transparency both in the countries of Europe and across the globe.

Without standards or generally accepted guidelines, we can see that the urge to meet market demands can lead to many initiatives along the lines of standard-setting, some which may be useful and others less so. There is certainly a growth in the design of unofficial or 'proprietary' standards and practices for accessible tourism in many countries and regions – and even, to some extent, in individual venues. Mostly, these efforts tend not to have any national or international frame of reference. Such developments, in isolation, although they are well-meaning, may work against the development of inclusive, accessible tourism, as they may too easily create confusion and a false sense of certainty for the travel agent, the tour operator and the tourist.

ENAT's Proposals in the Area of Standardisation

ENAT offers a number of proposals for discussion with workshop delegates. We would like to suggest various activities in support of accessible tourism, with a number of mechanisms for setting common objectives, sharing knowledge and working towards appropriate and improved industry standards, where these can be beneficial to the tourism and travel sectors and their customers.

As part of its 2008 – 2009 Work Programme, to be launched this month, ENAT plans to promote higher quality service provisions in the tourism sector and to help the development and application of international standards where this is possible.

ENAT's approach is made up of four elements, which are intended to work together to provide tourism providers with an accessible tourism assurance system based on commitment, implementation, recognition and compliance:

1. **Commitment:** We will introduce the ENAT Members' Code of Good Conduct which will define a set of general service requirements and aspirations which tourism operators and providers who are members of ENAT must adhere to;
2. **Implementation:** We will develop and introduce Accessible Tourism Guidelines, based on existing standards and good practices, targeting service delivery, facilities design and management practices. The ENAT Guidelines will act as a set of references that can be applied internationally, and will help ENAT members to meet the requirements of the Code of Good Conduct;
3. **Recognition:** We will offer an Accessible Tourism Compliance Label exclusive to ENAT members, in order for them to publicise their adherence to the ENAT Code of Good Conduct; this will provide a much needed international marketing device for tourism providers, which customers can rely on;
4. **Compliance:** We will supervise the ENAT members' compliance with the Code and give advice to members on the implementation of the Accessible Tourism Guidelines. The responsibility for maintaining supervision and giving advice will be delegated to ENAT National Coordinators where these have been established, and will be monitored by an international committee under the ENAT General Secretariat.

The four elements, above, will be developed through the active participation of our members, being led by competent and experienced experts. We will use the on-line tools for discussion, archiving and retrieving information at the ENAT website. Use of the internet will enable participants from all countries and regions of the world to take part in creating the first international set of voluntary guidelines for accessible tourism. This approach is intended as a starting point, with a set of instruments and guidelines we may call "Version-one-point-zero", which can be used, tested, criticised and improved as time goes by. Perhaps like the "WAI-guidelines" which web developers use to make accessible web content, we could aspire to create a system which will help disabled people to access tourism and transport on an equal and inclusive basis. Regular review of the guidelines in use and their improvement are essential parts of this process.

ENAT proposes this approach as a way to help to build consensus and contribute to common solutions and, eventually, to standards (both European and International). At the same time we will promote other related actions, such as:

- Continuing to disseminate information about the value of international standards and guidelines for inclusive tourism development;
- Gathering good practice examples on a wide range of themes, sourced from all regions of the globe, and publishing these in the ENAT Resources Database and in News items and e-Bulletins directed to the tourism sector;
- Gathering and publishing documents and/or references to existing standards, guidelines, etc. via the internet

- Establishing moderated Discussion Forum(s) to enable debate and development of ideas concerning accessible tourism requirements, criteria, etc.
- Participating in transnational research and development projects involving ENAT members and partner organisations;
- Participating in projects to encourage the spread of education and training for accessible tourism with ENAT members and partner organisations.

ENAT will continue to make active representations to International European, national and regional policymakers, institutions and authorities whose actions (or lack of actions) may impact upon accessible tourism development.

ENAT will also continue to inform the tourism sector and its stakeholders about the added value of accessible tourism and transport and the need for continual improvements both in mainstream and specialised service provisions, so as to meet the requirements of all tourists.

In Conclusion

We believe that the use of guidelines and standards can help to raise the profile and profits of tourism providers who are willing to comply with an ENAT "Code of Good Practice" and "Guidelines". This is admittedly a gradualist approach, starting with the industry's voluntary compliance but we think it is a vital step to give all industry players (or those who are ENAT members at least) the opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to meet some accessibility criteria in their daily practice.

We would like to conclude by emphasising that, through the communications we receive from our members and our connections with other organisations around the world, we can see that there is a great desire for international standards concerning accessibility to tourism for disabled people, especially with regard to the accessibility of accommodation but also for destinations in general and for transport by buses and coaches, by air, by ferryboat and by rail.

The following message came from Mary Chen, who is the publisher of Malaysia's 1st cross-disability lifestyle magazine titled CHALLENGES. (In December 2007 Malaysia passed the Persons with Disabilities Bill in Parliament and the first blind Senator was sworn in). Mary Chen is keen to promote universal design and accessible tourism in Malaysia.

She writes:

"I think we should go back to basics on accessibility. Yes, it is good to have a universal standard, something we can all fall back on and say yes, that is the minimum or optimal... However, in the area of tourism, we must not forget that one very unique factor is the cultural differences of each place and even architecture has

its own cultural norms based on environmental and climatic needs. So guidelines for a New York hotel may not work for a long house in East Malaysia for instance.

“So as I say back to basics. What would a guest with disability need in an accessible lodging? Let us look at the place to sleep

1. able to get into the room
2. able to get into the bed! And out independently!
3. able to use the bathroom independently
4. able to take a shower independently
5. room service within call/reach , meaning meals /breakfast in bed
6. able to groom myself at the dressing table ?
7. able to enjoy entertainment in my room if I cannot / do not wish to go out – so accessible TV , remote control ?
8. control the air con or fan or ventilation system in my room easily?

Next – outside my room and still in the lodgings. Accessing available guests’ facilities and services – in a sense we are not asking for anything extra, we are just asking that the available services of the premises are also made accessible. That should be the minimal requirement.

Commenting on an earlier draft of ENAT’s proposed approach, (outlined above) Mary Chen continues:

“ENAT being an accessible tourism secretariat with a member code of good conduct and accessible tourism compliance label, (actl) is a step in the right direction.

“And good practices should of course always be recognised, perhaps with ENAT’s own set of awards for service providers who have achieved certain level of accessible tourism compliance. However, may I suggest that you include one requirement in your code of good practice and that is that members ensure the same standards of services / good practice in all their chain of hotels globally, and not just in the E.U. If this is implemented and we get all their hotel chains with the same accessible standards. there can only be two outcomes:

- loyal guests will use this service provider because they know they can expect the same services anywhere they go;
- it will spur other hotels in their vicinity to buck up or miss this niche market.

And when this happen, persons with disabilities will be 'coming out in numbers too great to ignore' 8-) “

As a European organisation, ENAT is committed to build links with organisations and enterprises in EU Member States, the wider Europe and countries in all continents of the world in order to establish good standards and good practices in accessible tourism and transport.

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