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Interviewed by the Editor, "itn Greek Travel", Yiannis Apostolopoulos

Accessibility is a prerequisite for any type of tourism

Mr Ambrose it's really nice to have you here in "itn Ellinikos Tourismos (Greek Tourism)". On the occasion of World Tourism Day, UNTWO highlighted the necessity of accessible tourism and socially inclusive tourism. Let's talk first about how important these issues are to you, since you are the managing director of an organisation with a great deal of experience in this field.

Thankyou very much for inviting me to share some experience and ideas with your readers.

Firstly, I want to say that the term, "Accessible Tourism" is often misunderstood. In many countries and also in Greece, it is perceived as a specific kind of tourism that is only for people with disabilities. I would like to clarify that this is not a new or specific kind of tourism for a certain segment of visitors. Rather, it means making all tourism offers suitable for everyone. Good accessibility, in the widest sense, benefits everyone. It is essential for people with disabilities but also it contributes to the comfort and safety of many more people - old and young, with various abilities and health conditions. This why Accessible Tourism is also referred to as "Tourism for All" and in this sense it contributes to social inclusion.

We believe that accessibility is a pre-condition for any kind of tourism. The UN World Tourism Organisation has recognised this, and emphasises the importance of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.

Our mission, as ENAT, is to make European tourism destinations, products and services accessible to all travellers and to promote accessible tourism around the world. We do this by supporting tourism providers to develop and provide accessible offers that are welcoming and suitable for everyone. There are plenty of good reasons to improve access: reaching a wider market, especially for seniors, families with small children and guests with disabilities; increasing businesses' revenues from a loyal customer base; extending the tourism season; offering better quality, comfort and safety; contributing to sustainability and meeting new regulations and standards.

For us, improving accessibility means more than improving the product or offer itself. It is also crucial to inform visitors about the access conditions they can expect because what may be accessible for one person may not be accessible or suitable for another. This puts **information** at the heart of accessibility since it allows visitors to make informed choices when deciding where to travel.

From our years of experience as a network, we have collected many good practices in accessibility. They show how accessibility is good for businesses' economy and good for their reputation. It increases the desirability of the destination and improves the quality of the tourism offer.

In relation to Greek Tourism, I have to say that Greece is a latecomer in the practice of accessible tourism. In other countries where we have ENAT members, such as Belgium, Portugal, Spain and the UK, they have been active in this field for several years and are already enjoying the benefits. We know there are some good examples here in Greece too, but I am convinced there needs to be a change in the whole mindset and a new approach based on a new business model, if Greece is to keep its place among the top tourist destinations.

This is especially important as we face the additional challenges brought by COVID-19. ENAT has been working with the UN World Tourism Organisation and the ONCE Foundation on this issue and together we have developed UNWTO guidelines on re-starting tourism, without compromising accessibility for all. The restrictions on social distancing and travelling have shown the whole world what it means to feel a sense of isolation and exclusion – and how important accessibility is for everyone.

Greece has proved to be one of the most popular touristic destinations but it has not worked towards becoming an accessible destination. With a strong focus on accessibility, it can improve the quality of the whole touristic product and secure a sustainable development. With this strategy, it can gain the position it deserves among other competitors. This requires a new vision, strategic planning and a new business plan.

Recently the Greek Ministry of Tourism announced the “accessibility signage” for tourist premises, hotels, destinations etc. How do you see this initiative?

As I understand it, this initiative comes from the recently established Hellenic National Accessibility Authority. The new “Greek Accessibility Sign” is jointly owned by ELOT and ESAMEA, based on the ELOT Standard 1439 ‘Organisations

friendly to citizens with disabilities: requirements and recommendations' and the ELOT Technical Specification 1449. The accessibility certification would be awarded to certain businesses or venues that are assessed as complying with this Standard.

I would say three things about this. Firstly, no doubt this is a good development, going in the right direction. In practical terms, I see this as a long-term ambition – and possibly a very long-term ambition, as is always the situation with certification procedures. It is an open question if or when this could be realised and how many businesses are ready or can be ready to be certified. Certainly, it would require a huge, combined effort of many players.

Secondly, I think the initiative needs to pay particular attention to the specific conditions of tourism businesses. The ELOT standard refers to "all organisations, including touristic facilities". I wonder, to what extent organisations in the Greek tourism sector have been informed, to gain a deeper understanding of accessibility and the benefits of using the standard. Also, I think it is essential to consider how to reach the businesses from the first impression. I think the businesses would respond better to another message to be motivated. For example, the initiative might target "Quality Tourism for All", rather than referring to the "Accessibility Sign", which, as I said, is very often misunderstood in Greece as another way of saying: "This is for people with disabilities".

If the "Accessibility Sign" is the only benchmark for accessibility there will inevitably be many "non-compliant" businesses for many years to come, and these should not be left behind. I believe that, prior to certification, tourism businesses need to be guided and supported by the Ministry of Tourism on how to gather, provide and publish reliable information describing their access conditions, e.g., in the form of an Access Guide. This would be a good step towards raising their awareness and it is very useful to visitors, as I have said, to allow them to know the conditions and make informed choices.

In conclusion, to bring Greek tourism businesses on board, I would also like to see the Ministry of Tourism introducing a programme with incentives and support for tourism providers to make access improvements. This would also include training programmes to raise awareness and the skills of their managers and staff at every level. Then they will be equipped to take on the challenges and reap the rewards of the eventual Greek accessibility certification system.

There have been some efforts in the past in Greece about accessible tourism. ENAT has participated in meetings in the ministry of Tourism. What was discussed back then, - when and with whom- and why haven't we seen any actual results yet?

Back in 2005, before we started ENAT, I worked with the Ministry and other Greek partners on a European project called OSSATE – 'One Stop Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe'. At that time the Ministry made a survey of accommodation establishments in Greece, enquiring about their accessibility conditions. We created a website, "EuropeforAll" showing the accessibility of accommodation facilities. This website survived only for a few years in Greece and was discontinued. However, I am pleased to say that it was adapted and further developed by VisitBritain, which was one of the OSSATE partners, and it is used to this day as part of the Quality Management Scheme for serviced accommodation in the UK.

During the past several years we have contacted the Ministry and EOT, suggesting a collaboration with ENAT on accessible tourism issues and in 2020 we had a positive meeting with the Minister of Tourism. Also, one of our Greek experts, Architect Katerina Papamichail, was appointed as a member of the Ministry's Working Group on Accessible Tourism, which however, is no longer active. Beyond this there has been no other collaboration. We have invited the Ministry to be part of our network, alongside other Ministries and National Tourist Organisations (NTOs), to exchange experiences and good practices but so far this has not happened. I hope that this offer might be a good opportunity for the Ministry and EOT to consider in the near future.

It seems other European countries have done a lot more about accessible tourism and Greece only recently realised that it has to catch up. Can you tell us which are the best practices you have witnessed?

When we talk about good practices, we need to focus on what works but also how you make a start and how businesses and destinations maintain their efforts over the long-term.

Improving accessibility is a journey – it's a long run, not a sprint. Those countries, destinations and individual businesses that are doing well have typically worked out a plan; they have sought expert advice, they gather data and listen to customers with different access requirements and life experiences, they set targets and milestones and they have put policies, strategies and resources – investments and incentives - in place. They plan so that in 1, 3, 5 or even 10 years, they will eventually reach their goals.

All this is fairly basic “good management” practice, perhaps, but it needs to happen at all levels, from the policymakers to the destination managers, local municipalities and right through to each tourism business. We have seen that there needs to be strong leadership, a common understanding and close collaboration among all actors and stakeholders to ensure successful results.

To start this long journey the first thing which is necessary is to have “open ears” «ευήκοα ὦτα», as you would say in Greek and to look at good examples from international experience in tourism.

The example of **Turismo de Portugal**, one of our ENAT members, is particularly outstanding. This NTO has made great efforts on three fronts: improving the tourism product, supporting training and promoting the destinations. The Portuguese national programme, “All for All”, started in 2017 by introducing training and giving tax breaks to companies and municipalities for accessibility projects. It was funded, not by the European Union, but by domestic funds. It is obvious that there had been a lot of awareness and preparation work by the Turismo de Portugal leaders before establishing this programme.

One of the most important steps, at the very beginning, is to raise awareness of the value and advantages of accessibility in tourism: the added value to the country, to businesses and the added value to customers. This understanding comes especially through professional development courses for those who are already working in tourism and related professions, and through education and training for those who are seeking a career in the tourism sector. But crucially, the politicians must understand and commit to funding and supporting the work that needs to be done.

As regards education and training, Portugal is the only country in Europe which, since 2018, has included an obligatory course on inclusive and accessible tourism in its national tourism and hospitality schools, ensuring that the next generations of tourism professionals will have the necessary knowledge and skills in this subject. They are already reaping the benefits of this investment because, for example, when Turismo de Portugal provides financial incentives to businesses to improve their accessibility, business owners and managers know what they need to do for the long-term, so the money is not wasted on short-term projects that stop when the funding dries up. This was so successful that their new 10-year tourism development strategy includes accessibility as a qualifying requirement for receiving public funding for tourism events and for any new tourism infrastructure works going forward. Now that the business community has developed the necessary knowledge and skills, accessibility is simply treated as a “mainstream” issue in Portugal, which tourism providers

respect and apply in their business plans. Because they know it is good for everyone, it makes sense and brings rewards.

Our ENAT website (www.accessibletourism.org) presents many other good practices and references that can be used for inspiration and as ideas to follow. They cover a wide range of examples from across the whole value chain, including marketing, booking sites, Web accessibility, accommodation, transportation, education and training, service design, tourist guiding for visitors with intellectual impairments, built environment accessibility standards and certification, social media and many other areas.

In conclusion, what is your message not only towards the Greek State, but also towards the Greek tourism industry. What are the benefits of accessible tourism, why should we invest in this field?

I would say that improving accessibility is a challenge, but it is also a huge opportunity for Greece and the Greek tourism industry. In my opinion, it is vital to develop a national accessibility plan for tourism and to support the tourism industry to catch up with its European and global counterparts after too many years where Greece has been a bystander. Not under the perspective of a “social” obligation but as a key quality factor for **every visitor** who might have permanent or temporary access requirements or even preferences. It is clearly a **good business case** to invest in accessibility, providing high quality services, showing respect and satisfying all your visitors. Just to highlight, Greece should not miss the great business opportunity of the growing numbers of senior travellers, who typically have various access requirements, and persons with disabilities, since these two groups tend to travel in all seasons, and they stay longer, also spending more per visit than average tourists.

The future of Greece’s reputation and performance as a competitive and desirable tourist destination depends on continuously improving the quality and sustainability of every business and destination. The Greek State and its many departments and agencies should commit to working together with the prefectures and municipalities, the private sector and non-governmental and citizens’ groups to make Greece an “accessible destination for all”. And in this joint effort, I can say that ENAT and our many members and partners will be ready to give our advice and support.

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