



Norway's experience with standard for accessible tourist destinations

Standards Norway and the Delta Centre in the Norwegian Directorate for Health and Social Affairs are leading the development and deployment of a standard defining the requirements of a system for labelling tourist destinations in terms of accessibility to the disabled.



by **Inger S. Jørgensen**

Inger S. Jørgensen is the project secretary of the working group for the Norwegian Standard NS 11010, Accessible tourist destinations – Requirements as basis for a labelling system. She has been a Project Manager in Standards Norway for several years.

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The concept of universal design has been an important issue in Norway for the last 10 years and is growing in importance. The concept is referred to in existing and new laws and regulations, actions plans, coun-

ty and municipality planning documents and standards. The needs of the disabled are an important aspect of universal design and, in turn, these needs have to be taken into account in relation to tourism.

For many people, going on holiday and exploring new destinations is a popular way of recharging physical and mental energy to meet the challenges of everyday life. This is not always a simple

Photo: Bergen Tourist Board/Willy Haraldsen



The old Bryggen Hanseatic wharf in Bergen, Norway, is included on UNESCO's list of world heritage of history and culture, and is one of the most famous Norwegian tourist destinations. The Bryggen Museum is a staunch supporter of accessibility for the disabled.

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task for people with disabilities, because many tourist destinations are not accessible to all.

About 40 million people in Europe have a disability and, as tourists, need a barrier-free environment. In Norway and many other countries, great attention is paid towards making services and activities in the tourist industry accessible to people with disabilities. The industry itself considers this to be an interesting new market, especially in view of the growing proportion of elderly people.

There is a need to increase knowledge about the diversity of the population and to disseminate information about the level of accessibility offered by the tourist companies and the destinations they offer.

Pilot study

To address these issues, Norway's Ministry of Trade and Industry financed a preliminary pilot study to develop a labelling system for tourism where the degree of accessibility for people with different kinds of disabilities would be presented. The project was carried out in 2003-2004 by Standards Norway and the Delta Centre¹⁾ of the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs.

In this pilot study, the labelling systems in different European countries were studied. Additionally there was a close cooperation with Danish

Standards for learning from their experiences with a similar programme. The recommendation from the Norwegian project was to continue the work in near cooperation with the tourist industry.

National strategy for tourism

The Ministry of Trade and Industry has just recently published a national strategy for the tourist industry in Norway. The tourist industry is the fastest growing industry in the world and the number of

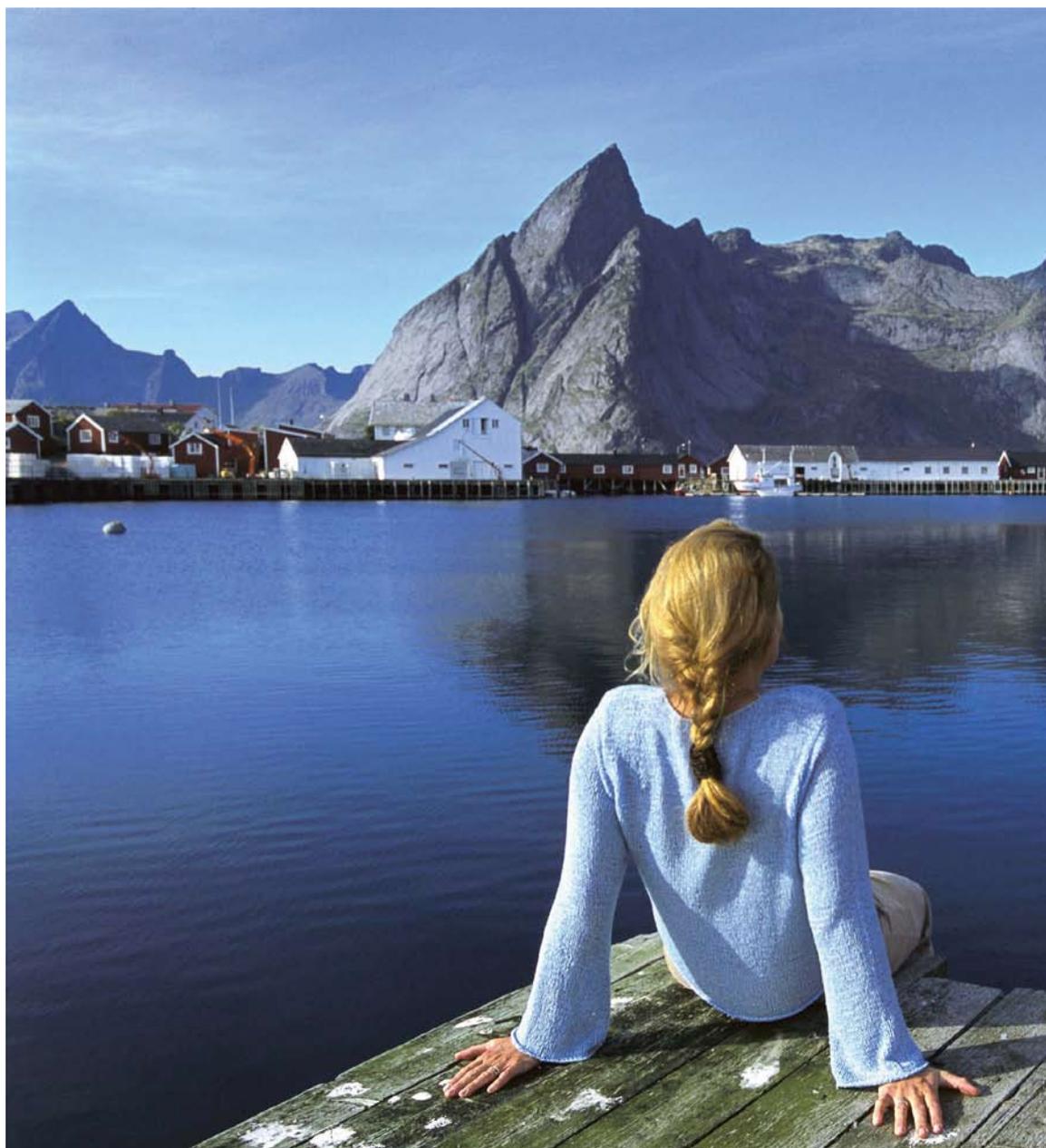
travellers worldwide is expected to double within 2020. This represents immense opportunities for Norway and the Norwegian tourist industry.

The national strategy focuses on increased productivity and value creation in the tourist industry, viable local communities and positioning Norway as a sustainable tourist attraction. One of the goals is to contribute to the security and quality of Norwegian tourist products. A quality management system is mentioned in that respect.

The new Norwegian Standard NS 11010, *Accessible tourist destinations – Requirements as a basis for a labelling system*, would be an important tool in such a quality system and the standard is indeed referred to in the strategy.

Standardization project

In 2006, Standards Norway and the Delta Centre established a standardization committee to develop a national labelling system for accessibility in the tourist industry. The committee consisted of members



1) The Delta Centre is Norway's National Resource Centre for Participation by and Accessibility for People with Disabilities.

both from the tourist industry and associations representing the disabled.

The objectives of the standard NS 11010 are to:

- give the consumer accurate and reliable information;
- provide companies with a tool for working towards increased accessibility;
- spearhead the implementation of the government's policy of increasing accessibility for people with disabilities.

The requirements and recommendations concern four categories of user with the following disabilities in the following areas:

- walking problems and/or arm and hand impairments;
- visual;
- hearing;
- asthma and/or allergies.

A tourist destination can obtain the right to use from one to four labels related to meeting accessibility criteria

for people in the above categories. All the categories have a set of minimum requirements.

The standard contains 107 requirements within 14 main areas:

1. parking;
2. access to the main entrance, ticket office;
3. entrance;
4. reception;
5. information, service and safety;
6. corridors and passages;
7. doors;
8. elevators;
9. lavatories and bathrooms;
10. overnight accommodations;
11. kitchen connected with the overnight accommodation;
12. restaurants, conference rooms, etc.;
13. cleaning;
14. adventure.

As an example, the requirements related to the area parking and accessibility have 15 requirements. Ten of the requirements are related to people with walking problems and/or arm and hand impairments and 11 requirements are related to people with visual impairments.

The disabled too need to "get away from it all" and enjoy tourist destinations like Lofoten and the view to Hamnøy, Northern Norway.

Photo: Terje Rakke/Nordic Life.

In order to meet the set quality specifications, a number of additional recommendations were added to the list of requirements in each area. These are not prerequisites for obtaining a label, but are intended to help the tourist destinations improve the accessibility for guests with different kinds of disabilities, and raise awareness about the need that people with disabilities have for adaptation.

In order to obtain a successful implementation of a future national labelling system, it is vital that the industry itself fully supports the idea. The businesses in the tourist and cultural sector must find the system useful and market-oriented. It has to be at once realistic and economically worthwhile. Furthermore, disabled people's associations must be able to trust the system to give accurate and reliable information to their members.

Organization

The standardization project has both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The participants were selected on previously displayed interest in and knowledge about accessibility matters. The recruiting of the participating businesses was made in close cooperation with the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry's Department for Tourism.

It is important to have a broad variety among the participating businesses. In the event, a tourist destination company, a hotel company, an amusement park, a restaurant and a

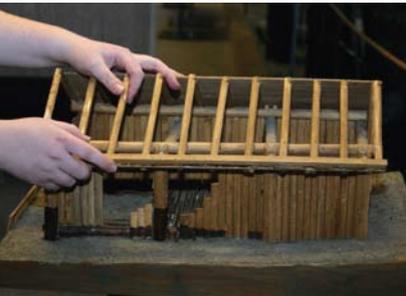


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museum have participated in the work.

With this approach, it has been possible to achieve feedback on the usefulness of the chosen criteria from different kinds of businesses.

A dialogue-oriented approach is used in the project. In this way, the information and points of view from the businesses and the disabled associations have formed the basis for the project.



Blind and visually impaired visitors are allowed to touch the permanent exhibits at Bryggen Museum.

Photo: Bryggens Museum/Tore Klyve.

The standardization process

The standardization process is not easy. There are a variety of user requirements within each user group and competing interests and contradictory considerations often have to be dealt with. Another challenge is the fact that requirements of one user group may conflict with those of another.

Probably, the biggest challenge faced by the committee is how to weigh the need for sufficient quality specifications to meet the needs of people with disabilities against the requirement for a practical and market-oriented tool. At the same

NS 11010 user – Bryggens Museum

Bryggens Museum in Bergen on the west coast of Norway is a cultural-historical museum with archaeology finds from the Middle Ages. The museum has 40 000 visitors a year and was already built to accessibility principles in 1976. For example, all three floors are connected with ramps for wheelchairs. The museum has also made a special exhibition for blind and vision-impaired people.

Anne Ågotnes has worked as Director of the museum, as well as being senior consultant at Bergen City Museum, of which Bryggens Museum now is a part. She represented Bryggens Museum during the development of NS 11010.

Anne Ågotnes comments: “The standard for accessibility is important, because all segments of the population are among our visitors. When we put on exhibitions and organize guided tours, the standard can be used as a reference. By referring to the standard we signal that the museum considers people with disabilities.

“The standard inspires us to organize exhibitions specially for one or other of the four user categories. It also inspires us to become a better place to work for all kinds of employees.

“It’s much easier to follow the standard when planning of exhibitions and other activities, than to make corrections relating to accessibility afterwards.

“We are also planning to integrate the standard in a new manual for Bergen City Museum. The requirements and recommendations in the standard will then be normative for all our activities”.

by qualifying for the use of an increasing number of labels. It was decided that the target groups for the labelling system are destinations that offer overnight stops, those serving food and drinks, and attractions of a permanent character such as exhibitions, amusement parks and sports centres.

The project has also emphasized the importance of including activities and events in the standard. When it comes to accessibility to activities and events, a different kind of structure is necessary.

Vision or hearing impaired people, people with walking problems and/or arm and hand impairments or people with allergies will need totally different adaptations in order to participate in the activities or cultural events that are offered. We therefore found it unwise to specify requirements in experiences and cultural activities.

About 40 million people in Europe have a disability

time, the assessment tool must be understandable, easy to follow and realistic. If the standard is too complicated and the list of requirements too long, businesses may not find it viable to implement.

The objective is to encourage the businesses to continuously improve their accessibility,



The Bryggens Museum, Bergen, actively implements a policy on accessibility for the disabled.

Photo: Bryggens Museum/Tore Klyve.



Scandic Hotels (pictured here the Scandic Hotel at Hamar, Norway), which is the Nordic region's leading hotel chain, participated actively in the development of NS 11010.

Photo: Scandic Hotels

NS 11010 user – Scandic Hotels

Scandic Hotels is the Nordic region's leading hotel chain, with 139 hotels in nine countries of which 15 are situated in Norway.

Gyda U. Bugge is Human Resources Manager at Scandic Norway and was Hotel Manager at Scandic Byporten in Oslo when she became involved in the development of NS 11010. Scandic Byporten opened in 1999 and accessibility principles were followed both in the planning and building process.

Gyda U. Bugge relates her experience: "We built 10 big rooms for wheelchair users and adapted our facilities to the needs of both hearing and visually impaired guests. Our business concept since 1963 is 'to offer easy and accessible travel for all'.

"We stress diversity, and it's a matter of course that all guests feel welcome and secure. At the same time, profitability is of course very important. In Europe there are some 40 million disabled. That's a lot of potential guests.

"Scandic is a company which likes to be in the lead both with regard to accessibility and to environmental issues. Over 70 of our hotels are, for instance Swan labelled²⁾.

"For me, it has been vital to participate in the NS 11010 standardization process, and I have learned a lot. Standardization is about having a common goal and finding good solutions both for business and users.

"If we choose later on to certify our hotels, we will definitely use the standard in marketing and sales activities towards different user categories in Scandinavia and other European countries. However, hotel management is indeed complex. A lot of people are involved 24 hours per day, 365 days a year, and we have to be certain that we are able to deliver what we promise."

2) The Swan is the official Nordic ecolabel, introduced by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Firstly, it would be impossible to tell which specifications are the most important as this depends on what disability and what activities are offered. Secondly, by operating only with a subset of requirements, these may not be suitable or exclude other subcategories of the same groups.

The standard stresses that knowledge about the user categories is vital in order to know how to adapt and give assistance to each individual guest. This shall also include awareness about the problems people with disabilities are facing. Knowledge about how to communicate with hearing and vision impaired is necessary to ensure that the information is understood. Measures of security will give guests with disabilities the feeling of being safe from injury.

Hosting competence is an important part of the standard. Training of the staff is also important in security matters and in order to dismantle discriminatory attitudes. The human factor cannot be underestimated. Assistance and customer service is vital for all tourists.

There are ongoing discussions between the Confederation of Norwegian Business and the Ministry of Trade and Industry concerning a future certification system for the accessibility label to receive the "Trade-mark Norway". •