

Dr. Ruediger Leidner

Blind on the Inka Trail – Discrimination inclusive



Picture 1: Ruediger Leidner accompanied by his wife at Machu Picchu, the end of the trekking tour

Ruediger Leidner, born 1950, is president of the Tourism Coordination Board of the German Association of blind and partially sighted persons and was elected president of the National Coordination Board on Tourism For All in May 2010. Between 2002 und 2007 he was charged with issues of German and European tourism policy in the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology in Berlin and at the European Commission in Brussels.

States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues¹

The first ideas

Some years ago I watched the presentation of Peru at the opening of the International Tourism Fair in Berlin. I was so impressed that my wife and I decided to book a roundtrip to see Peru this year (2010). Having checked the programmes of several tour operators we chose a three weeks roundtrip that included a four day trekking tour on the Inka Trail.

Since the tour operator pointed out in its description of the tour that it could be undertaken by all age groups and with “average fitness” I was sure that my physical constitution was sufficient. For I had some experience with trips at that height (I visited already Tibet) as well as with hiking tours in mountain areas.

Since I was accompanied by my wife, there was no reason to ask the tour operator for any additional arrangements or assistance because of my disability. Reading the Standard Business Terms of the tour operator, however, I even found a reason to be reluctant in that respect. For in its Standard Business Terms this tour operator reserved the right to exclude any person of a tour when he received hints that this person would not be able to participate or would cause problems for the course of the tour.

Even though I could imagine that there might be cases that could make such a regulation necessary, its wording was too broad and left too much room for discrimination. As we were restricted to the summer holidays in Germany, I did not want to run the risk of never-ending discussions in advance.

The trip before the Inka Trail

Having arrived in Lima we met our first tour guide who accompanied us during the first week from Lima to Arequipa and Puno. Neither the tour guide nor group members showed any reservations concerning the participation of a person with a disability. With our second tour guide we undertook our first hiking tour (four hours) up to a mountain at Titicaca lake (around 4000 m high). One of the group members who obviously had problems walking at this height could not follow us for the whole walk. But despite her problems which later even made medical treatment necessary, the tour operator did not prevent her from going on the trekking tour.

After returning to our lodge I asked our tour guide in the evening, whether the Inka Trail would be more difficult than our tour today. Her answer was very clear: The Inka Trail would not be more difficult, only longer. She assured that there would be no stress caused by a certain speed, because every group member could choose its own speed and a second guide would follow the slowest members.

Some days later we undertook a tour around Cusco to some of the ancient Inka sites with the guide that would accompany us during the trekking on the Inka trail.

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



Picture 2: One of the Inka sites at Cusco

I asked him the same question and his answer was similar: “I saw you walking up and down the steps on these ancient places. You will make it!”

The Inka Trail trekking

The ancient Inka Trail between Cusco and Machu Picchu is a 42 km long pathway built during the Inka period and uncovered in 1915, almost 500 years after the Spanish conquest.

It starts at a height of about 2500 m, crosses two passes at 4200 und 3800 m and ends at Machu Picchu at 2600 m. Since the trekking tour lasts four days, the distances vary from 11 km on the first day, 9 and 16 km on the following days and 6 km for the phase from the last camp up to the sun gate of Machu Picchu.



Picture 3: showing part of the Inka Trail at 4000 m

The answers of our two guides seemed to have clarified everything as far as my participation was concerned. Thus I was very optimistic, when I awoke on the day, on which our bus should take us at 5:30 am to our starting point where would meet our porters and the cook.

After breakfast, however, I had just returned to my room to get ready, our tour guide appeared accompanied by the head of the local office of our tour operator. The latter who had first met me the evening before in the hotel told me that he could not agree to my participation in the trekking tour on the Inka Trail, for it would be much to risky for me.

As I answered that the tour operator does not take any responsibility for the other participants and I would take my own risk as everybody else, he stated that our tour guide on the Inka Trail had called him the evening before and urgently asked him to exclude me from the tour. That was a clear lie, for it was just the day before, when I had asked this tour guide and he had supported my participation.

Confronted with this fact the head of the Cusco office pretended that I would never pass the three check points on the Inka Trail. Since he lied already before I had the impression that this could be a lie also.

The two tour guides who could judge my ability to go on that tour supported my participation, but obviously could not change his mind. Since time was running and the other group members were waiting without any explanation, I finally declared that this was a clear case of discrimination and offence of German law as well as the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities ratified also by Peru in 2008 and that I would inform the German embassy in Lima.

It was obviously the fear to be blamed by a government that changed his attitude and, after all, I could join the group.

My impression that the threat to get rejected at one of the check points was a lie turned out to be true: At the first check point we had to show our passports to check, whether we were on the list of 500 persons that are admitted per day. The following controls had only one purpose, to check if the organisers met the environmental regulations of the camp site just used.

Of course, this must be admitted, the Inka Trail is not an afternoon walk. 500 years of erosion left their traces. And the steps vary tremendously in form and size.



Picture 4: Ruediger Leidner and his wife climbing down high steps on the Inka Trail

But that was something I knew before. And why should somebody not knowing me and being unable to evaluate my physical ability prevent me from having the experience of undertaking this tour?

After the trekking tour

Although my wife and me managed to reach Machu Picchu (where as one of our group members had to give up on the first day and met us in Machu Picchu) the representative of our tour operator for all its Peruvian local offices came from Arequipa to Cusco to repeat that he could not take such a responsibility because the Peruvian government could withdraw the Licence for operating trekking tours on the Inka Trail, if something had happened. I answered that from my point of view my exclusion of this tour would have been a clear example of discrimination, because the tour operator does not check the physical condition of all participants, not even when they ask for medical treatment in the days before.

His final argument made his real attitude apparent: As I again tried to explain that it is only me who can evaluate the risks I want to take and that I did not ask for assistance by the tour operator he stated that the organiser could be blamed by other participants because of the participation of a person with a disability, for “they want to relax and enjoy their holidays and would not like to be confronted with the problems of the world”. He also mentioned that the “optimal solution” for me from his point of view would have been an “individual tour” for my wife and me only without any other members.

I leave these sentences to the judgement of the reader. I only asked the representative, whether I could make use of it in my article. He agreed.

Conclusions

Visiting Peru was a beautiful experience. An indispensable part was the tour on the Inka Trail. To walk for several days in a height between 2500 and 4200 m through different climate zones with varying vegetation and also human culture (not only the culture of the Inka period, but also people living in very poor huts) leads to many and unique impressions.

In addition, the argument with the representatives of the tour operator revealed that there is still much to do to realise Article 30 of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities

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even in states that already ratified it.

With regard to the people involved in my argument with the tour operator I would like to underline that I highly appreciate our tour guides that supported my participation in the tour on the Inka Trail. They were able to make up their mind regarding my participation independently and draw the right conclusions in the sense of article 30 of the UN Convention. I do hope that they will not encounter any disadvantages.