

Dr. Rüdiger Leidner

Tourism accessible for all in Europe

Preliminary remarks

For those who associate tourism only with holiday and leisure and luxury it should be mentioned that tourism is a sector of remarkable economic importance. The European tourism economy contributes to about 5 % (depending on its definition up to 11 %) to the GDP of the European Union and provides between 8 and 24 million jobs (depending on the definition of the sector). Furthermore, it should be taken into account that tourism is indispensably linked with travel. Thus, considering tourism for all inevitably also regards the design of many areas of our daily life, e.g. the internet as source of information, the transport sector and, of course, accommodation.

Since the European Community in the area of tourism policy does not have an original competence, but coordinates and completes Member State activities, it will, however, not be possible to present a complete picture of the complex issue "tourism for all" in the European Union. Besides a description of its importance, objectives and main developments some examples regarding individual Member States will be explained.

Accessible tourism for all vs. Tourism for disabled people

The term "tourism for all" often refers to very different aspects. Sometimes, in particular in social policy context, it is used to underline the need to facilitate holidays for lower income groups, sometimes to take into account the needs of disabled tourists. To avoid misunderstandings I prefer, when speaking about barrier-free or accessible tourism with regard to people with disabilities respectively activity limitations the term "Accessible tourism for all".

Disability associations in many European countries own special accommodation establishments for their members or disabled guests and their accompanists. Such establishments often have a long tradition and are sometimes supported by the respective government. But as far as they restrict their activities to disabled guests exclusively, they certainly facilitate tourism for disabled people, but do not pursue the idea of accessible tourism for all.

Accessible tourism for all is not about creating separated services for disabled people, it aims at full integration, or rather inclusion of people with special needs, in particular disabled and aged people, in the tourism sector. Viewed from the perspective of "Accessible tourism for all", tourism policy in the European Union can be said to unite accessibility targets that are part of the otherwise commerce-related aspects of tourism policy and a disability policy that, based on the UN's Standard Rules, support goals and specific measures at various levels that are designed to enhance accessibility in connection with tourism policy.

The long-term goal of the tourism accessible for all movement is the creation of a tourist environment in which all tourists, irrespective of their individual needs (age, size, ((dis)ability) can participate actively.

This objective indicates that the definition of tourism must not be restricted to the definition in tourism statistics (hotels/restaurants, tour operators, attractions). To achieve the objective of tourism accessible for all the whole service chain must be accessible.

The tourist service chain, however, begins with information about offers, events, destinations and the possibilities to get there. Accessible information, for example, means that the websites of tourism enterprises (including the transport sector) and destinations must be accessible also for blind and visually impaired users.

To achieve better accessibility of the tourism sector would also prerequisite accessible public and private transport facilities and accessible buildings/attractions in destinations.

The definition of Tourism for All adopted by the Nordic Council on Disability Policy underlines this approach: 'Everyone – regardless of whether they have any disabilities – should be able to travel to the country, within the country and to whatever place, attraction or event they should wish to visit'.

The economic argument

To persuade authorities and tourism enterprise to adapt their establishments and services to individual needs the possible economic impact must be considered.

The first question to be answered in this context is the number of potential consumers/tourists. About 10% of the population, 50 million people, in Europe is officially acknowledged disabled. But since about half of them are older than 65 their number will be rising in the forthcoming process of demographic aging. Furthermore, it must be considered that not only people officially acknowledged disabled maybe prevented from travelling because of too many barriers, but also "temporarily disabled" such as people suffering from car or sport accidents or people that have difficulties in moving around without being acknowledged disabled.

Taking into account all the people with activity limitations irrespective of having an official "disability status" it can be estimated that about 30% of the population may feel unease when travelling, or rather, would travel more when the environment would be better accessible. A study published in the framework of the OSSATE project estimates the market potential for tourists with accessibility needs at even 230 mio people representing travel expenditures of about € 160 bn.

Every travel not undertaken because of existing barriers means a lack of turnover in the tourism sector, less economic growth and employment than possible.

Furthermore, it must be considered that a higher degree of accessibility, for example with regard to hotels, simultaneously results in more quality. Wider doors and a larger bathroom containing step less shower results in higher comfort also for the growing number of older but still active tourists.

The manager of a Norwegian hotel told me recently that many tourists try to book "barrier-free rooms" without being disabled because they assume that these rooms are larger. And larger letters on doors and information desks or entrances showing good contrast to the surrounding walls are of advantage not only for visually impaired guests but for everybody

not familiar with the establishment. Thus, measures undertaken towards designing a hotel for all leads to higher quality and improves the competitiveness of the company.

The German Ministry of Economic and Labour in 2003 commissioned a study to evaluate the economic impact of accessible tourism for all with surprising results.

Approximately 4000 German disabled people were questioned about their travel habits. About 40% of them had already at least once renounced at going on holiday because of too many barriers and nearly 50% said they would travel more, if the environment was more accessible.

Taking into account the amount of money they spent for going on holiday (which was above the amount spent by the average tourist) and that most of them did not travel alone the researchers forecast that the turnover yielded with disabled German tourists might rise from currently € 2.5 bn to € 4.8 bn in an accessible tourist environment resulting in 90,000 additional jobs (currently 65,000).

Thus, this study underlines that the creation of an accessible service chain in the tourism sector contributes to economic growth and employment and cannot be considered as social welfare.

Activities in Member States of the European Union

It is not possible to give a complete overview on Member State activities concerning tourism for all because yet there is no European database. Tourists that want to get informed of the situation in an individual Member State are well advised to contact one of the addresses presented below.

Nevertheless some examples and trends will be presented.

Governmental activities

Within the last decade in many EU Member States disability acts or antidiscrimination acts with regard to disability entered into force. This legislation improved the accessibility in areas closely related to tourism such as the internet and public transport. In many Member States the authorities are obliged to design their websites according to the international accessibility standards (WAI standard) and at least in larger cities of many Member States low-floor busses with speech announcement of the next station are in use and steadily growing in number.

With regard to buildings, however, in particular to hotels and restaurants the picture is not that optimistic. In most Member States the construction legislation forces hotels to provide a certain number of rooms accessible for wheel-chair users. But little is known with regard to comparable legislation concerning other disabilities.

Even in Member States where legislation and standards on the construction of public buildings invite owners to provide accessibility measures for blind people (eg. Elevators with synthetic voice, guidance stripes to be followed using the white cane) or visually impaired people (high contrast design) this legislation is, maybe with the exception of the United Kingdom, not applied on hotels and restaurants.

The British Disability Discrimination Act places duties on providers of goods, services and facilities not to discriminate against people with disabilities. Like everyone else in the United Kingdom, tourism providers must take reasonable steps to change practices, policies and

procedures to make their facilities and services accessible to disabled people. Tourism providers should also provide step by step and within the framework of national accessibility schemes auxiliary aids (such as installing an induction loop) to make it easier to use a service. However, I do not have any information on the outcome of this legislation with regard to tourism.

In the mid-1990s, the governments of the Nordic countries began to set new goals for tourism policy. These goals involve profitability, social and environmental considerations, and, as a consequence, increasingly integrated accessibility as a quality – with the emphasis on expanded target groups and increased income for the tourism industry.

Irrespective of legislation forcing hotels to provide more accessibility some good examples of hotels devoted to the idea of “tourism accessible for all” are located in Spain, all of them belonging to the Confortel chain. These 12 hotels are different in size, quality and location, but many of them have besides rooms and swimming pools equipped for wheel-chair users also adaptations that are important for blind and visually impaired guests such as synthetic voice in the elevators including keyboards with tactile letters as well as tactile room numbers and high contrast design. Furthermore, the hotel staff is well trained to provide some assistance if needed.

The best evidence that these Confortels are not only technically barrier-free, but come very close to the principles of a “Design for all”, was the answer of a guest in the bar. I asked him whether he recognised any peculiarities in this hotel. His answer: “No, nothing, only talking elevators I never saw before in a hotel.” That means that the owners of the Confortel chain managed to combine good design with the needs of all guests irrespective of disabilities by respecting an old architectural principle: Form follows function.

Non-governmental activities

Also in the mid 1990s in many EU Member States organisations devoted to the goal of an accessible tourism for all were established. Since the situation with regard to accessibility is steadily (slowly but surely) improving in all Member States and tourist destinations these organisations are presumably the best source of information for a disabled incoming tourist.

Austria

YOU-TOO

Database of accessibility information on a range of facilities

www.you-too.net

Denmark

DANSK STANDARD

Operates national accessible tourism scheme

www.ds.dk

DANSK CENTER FOR TILGÆNGELIGHED

www.dcf.dk

France

SECRETARIAT D'ETAT AU TOURISME

Operates 'Label Tourisme & Handicap'

www.tourisme.gouv.fr

Greece

MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT
Office for People with Disabilities
www.minenv.gr

Italy

ITALIA PER TUTTI
National accessible tourism scheme
www.italiapertutti.it

CO.IN SOCIALE
Organisation guidance on accessible tourism
www.coinsociale.it

Netherlands

LANDELIJK BUREAU TOEGANKELIJKHEID
Assess facilities for accessibility and award International Symbol of Access
www.lbt.nl

Spain

PLATAFORMA REPRESENTATIVA ESTATAL DE DISCAPACITADOS FÍSICOS (PREDIF)
Disability organisation providing information on accessible tourism to industry
www.predif.org

United Kingdom

VISIT BRITAIN
Operates National Accessible Scheme for accommodation
www.visitbritain.org/ukindustry

TOURISM FOR ALL
UK-wide consortium of commercial, voluntary and government organisations
www.tourismforall.org.uk

Belgium

AUTONOMIA ASBL
www.autonomia.org/autrsite.htm

TOEGANKELIJKHEIDSBUREAU
www.toegankelijkheidsbureau.be

Finland

RULLATEN RY
Organisation promoting accessible travel, produces accessible tourism guide
www.rullaten.fi

Germany

NATIONALE KOORDINATIONSSTELLE TOURISMUS FÜR ALLE E.V.

Central organisation for any enquiries concerning "tourism without barriers" in Germany.

www.natko.de

Portugal

SECRETARIDO NACIONAL PARA A REABILITAÇÃO E INTEGRAÇÃO DAS PESSOAS COM DEFICIÊNCIA (SNRIPD)

Produces regional guides on accessible tourism

www.snrird.mts.gov.pt

Luxembourg

OFFICE NATIONAL DU TOURISME

www.ont.lu

INFO-HANDICAP

Joint guide to accessible accommodation

www.info-handicap.lu

Ireland

FAILTE IRELAND

Disabled Travel and Trade Advice

www.bordfailte.ie

Sweden

TURISM FÖR ALLA

Operates the EQUALITY accessibility certification programme

www.turismforalla.se

Source: European Commission, "Improving information on accessible tourism for disabled people", Brussels, June 2004, last pages;

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/services/tourism/policy-areas/doc/improving_accessibility_de.pdf

In the new Member States of the enlarged European Union such organisations are also developing. Up to now the main activity of these organisations is the improving of information on the accessibility of all facilities along the tourist service chain. Many of them also work on the establishment of a labelling system for hotels, labels that can be used in hotel guides and the home pages of hotels and tourist organisations. Main problems of all these labelling systems, besides the lacking European-wide harmonisation are the insufficiencies of the self-assessment of the operating staff and a remaining information deficit from the point of view of a potential guest. For to judge whether a hotel is really adapted for the individual needs he/she must first read the criteria that permit the use of a certain symbol, and even then he only learns that a certain establishment could be suitable, if everything was measured and evaluated correctly. According to my knowledge only in Luxemburg, one of the smaller Member States, establishments using the accessibility label are examined by a third party.

Activities of the European Commission

Even though the European Union does not have competence in the field of tourism, many of its activities towards improved accessibility are tourism-related. This is, as on national level, true for all the measures undertaken to make public transport accessible as well as the internet. At the moment three new regulations are adopted respectively in preparation. They refer to the rights of disabled passengers in air and trans-border railway and bus/coach travel.

2003 was declared the "European year of people with disabilities". Besides a variety of activities the European Commission established an expert group to present suggestions to improving the accessibility of the build environment. The report of this expert group was adopted as "Agenda 2010 on the build environment". On the basis of this agenda an action plan was set up which in his second phase covering the years 2006-07 intends to mainstream the disability/accessibility issue in all Commission activities. 2007 is declared the "European year of equal opportunities for all".

The tourism unit of the Commission published the brochure "Improving information on accessible tourism for disabled people" containing checklists to facilitate hoteliers the self-assessment of their establishment. In this case, however, a positive self-evaluation does not result in having the right to use a (European-wide) accessibility label.

Other Commission services launched "The OSSATE project" which aims to implement a prototype multi-platform, multi-lingual digital information service providing national and regional content on Accessible Tourist Venues, Sites and Accommodation.

In 2005 the EU funded "European network for accessible tourism" was founded (www.accessibletourism.org).

The European Disability Forum

In 1996, disabled people in Europe and their representative organisations decided to create the European Disability Forum (EDF) and its Brussels-based secretariat. The aim of establishing such a pioneer umbrella organisation was to guarantee that no decisions were taken by the European Union without consulting disabled people, as all initiatives and European policies have a direct impact in disabled people's lives.

In the past years, EDF's scope of action has covered most areas of EU competence, including transport, employment, the information society, social policy, public procurement, accessibility. Guaranteeing the right to travel for disabled people and to enjoy accessible tourism services and premises is also part of EDF's work programme. It is among EDF aims to encourage a consensus among the 25 Member States recognising the importance of a "tourism for all" and to promote the adoption of common standards, that will guarantee disabled people the right to travel, for business purposes as well as to enjoy leisure activities.

Digression: Tourism for all and design for all

Also in the 1990s the "Design for all" movement entered the European stage. In Ireland the "European Institute for Design and Disability" (EIDD) was established. The EIDD pursues the objective to design the whole environment including consumer durables such as washing machines, cash dispensers, ticket machines, telephones etc. in a way that everybody is able to use them. Of course, this principle must include that a product which is considered to comply with DFA criteria must have an interface to connect assistive technology. It would be

unrealistic to assume that a product could be designed that everybody could use without any assistive technology. But since the main difference between the DFA idea and similar approaches such as “universal design” is that the targeted users should be involved in the process of product development there should be no barrier to consider the needs of customers using assistive technology.

Meanwhile in 15 Member States of the European Union national member organisations of the EIDD were founded to promote the DFA idea in their countries.

In 2004 the European Commission adopted a directive concerning public procurement that invites the authorities to consider accessibility and design-for-all criteria in the technical specifications of their procurements. This directive still has to be transposed into laws of the Member States and the criteria to be considered have to be specified.

Thus, “Design for all” and “Tourism for all” are twins on the way to a more accessible world.

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