



DISABILITY NOW

Customers Views on Accessible Tourism

Tourism continues to grow in Europe, both at domestic and intra-European level. The fact that Europe remains one of the most popular tourism attractions in the world combined with an intensification of competition between countries and regions to attract tourists, has led to an increased awareness of the role and impact of tourism in the economy and on employment.

Since the mid '90s employment generated by the tourism industry within the Euro-Mediterranean area has been generally increasing. The average size of establishments and the number of bed-places shows also a significant increase both in the Mediterranean countries and EU countries. On the other hand, in the last decade there has been a considerable increase in larger hotels, providing a complete package of big events (e.g. conferences, workshops, and exhibitions), while, recently, the general trend has been to go beyond simple accommodation, so as to provide overall satisfaction to the customer within the individual's budget.

Despite the great changes in the tourism sector, though, the needs of various target groups, such as older people and even more people with disabilities, regarding the facilities and the services offered have often been considered of low priority, while in numerous cases they have been completely ignored.

In the meanwhile, although figures vary from country to country, about 10-20% of the European population has one or more disabilities, and this figure is rising gradually with the ageing of the population.

The main problems that preserve the exclusion of specific target groups from tourism activities can be summarized to the below:

- The number of accessible hotels and other relevant establishments throughout Europe is low, whereas full accessibility is rarely provided even by them, when it is declared so.
- All categories of the workforce involved (from hotel managers to receptionists) are often not aware of the adaptations or services needed for disabled people.
- There is no formalized and validated accessibility training scheme in the tourism sector.
- The means of transport are in their great majority inaccessible for disabled travelers.

The problem of access to tourist accommodation for disabled people has been recognized as a Europe-wide issue, at least since 1990, "The European Year of Tourism". In 1993, the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for persons with Disabilities proposed that "States should introduce programs of action to make the physical environment accessible and undertake measures to provide access to information and communication". As each EU Member State has signed the UN Standard Rules, each is committed to achieve the objectives of full participation and equality. In 1996 a European "Handbook for the tourism industry: making Europe accessible for tourists with disabilities" was published, in order to demonstrate that existing facilities can often be easily adapted

to suit disabled tourists. During 1990s, several European actions (e.g. HELIOS, Tourism for All) produced guidelines and handbooks which further stimulated improvements around Europe.

Despite the already held initiatives, the above recommendations have not been implemented in any systematic way at European level. The number of accessible establishments remains extremely low, the provision of services for people with disabilities is inadequate, even in cases where relevant facilities and services do exist, while the lack of knowledge on accessible facilities remains on behalf of hotel staff and managers. As a result, people with disabilities face a series of problems in finding the adequate place to host them, either due to the fact that there is not an adequate one or because they are not able to find it, due to the incapability of detecting it.

What should be done?

We, people with disabilities, pretend to our right to live in dignity. Our exclusion from tourism activities violates our human rights and set us as second-class citizens. We are willing to help in any way we can in order to make things better, but there are several issues that need to be settled with common work by all the different parties related to tourism sector.

Some basic requirements from which we can start are the below:

- Providers of tourist accommodation need qualified advice and guidance on how to achieve accessibility for all.
- We have to create training schemes on accessible accommodation services addressing the service providers at all levels.
- There is a need to make information regarding the accessibility of tourist accommodation in all countries available to disabled people.
- A pan-European co-ordination and co-operation has to be formulated, as the vision of open access to tourist accommodation for all, is still unrealized today.
- It's important to highlight that accessible tourist accommodation increases the number of tourists-travelers and brings a profit to the providers of tourist accommodation and services.
- It is also important to emphasize that accessible tourist accommodation brings benefits not only to disabled people but also to a wide range of travelers and tourists (e.g. older persons, parents with young children).

Of course, it is always important to bear in mind the demographic changes in Europe over the coming 20 years. More than 25% of Europeans will be aged over 60 by 2020. The prospect of disability in the population increases with advancing age. Therefore, as more older people wish to travel, the demand for accessible facilities and services will undoubtedly increase.

The European building stock as a whole is not sufficiently accessible to disabled people. The tourist sector bears a responsibility to upgrade its facilities, making them more accessible to disabled users. It is a challenge for the European tourist industry in maintaining and strengthening its appeal in the global tourism market.

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