



Session 2: Information and Marketing on Accessibility

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Tourism Flanders is a Flemish government agency with as main task the promotion of tourism to and in Flanders. The main mission of Tourism Flanders is the promotion and marketing of Flanders as national and international tourist destination. Our offices abroad in and outside the main European cities play an important role. The development of the tourist product Flanders is another important mission. We do this through the quality control and through delivering permits and classification stars, and product innovation through direct investments, co-financing or subsidies. Research, training, development and use of new (sustainable) technologies are also very important pillars in the working of Tourism Flanders.

The accessibility of tourist services in Flanders is a key part of the Flemish policy on tourism. People with disabilities constitute an appealing target group for the tourism industry, and this will certainly be true in the future bearing in mind the aging population.

We have been working on the introduction of an action plan to improve the accessibility of tourism products in Flanders since 2001. We are concentrating on two essential points:

- Improvement of the physical accessibility of tourism products in Flanders through an extensive system of subsidies. Flemish minister for tourism Geert Bourgeois will address this in more detail later.
- Obtaining reliable information on the accessibility of current products. The lack of reliable information on this subject has proven to be a major obstacle to people with disabilities taking a holiday or break in the region.

We have our own accessibility information system in Flanders. I would like to go into it in more detail as our experiences can be relevant in the light of the development of a pan-European information system 'Europe for All'.

'Accessible Flanders' is the accessibility databank cum website of Flanders. It was developed in 2003 by vzw Toegankelijkheidsbureau – one of the partners in the OSSATE project – as part of the interregional project Libretto, together with a number of other partners. The databank was originally limited to the Benelux-Middegebied region, but it was extended to cover the whole of Flanders under the impulse of Equal Opportunities in Flanders. Other Flemish accessibility agencies also joined the project.

Our databank contains camping sites, youth hostels and tourist sites, as well as local government offices, sports facilities, swimming pools, cultural centres and museums. Every part of the building is evaluated by a specially trained accessibility agent and

given a '+', '+/-' or '-' rating, reflecting the accessibility level offered by the establishment.

Tourism Flanders has participated in this project from the beginning by commissioning accessibility agencies to conduct evaluations of tourist accommodations. We have found this to be a suitable tool for providing reliable information to visitors with restricted mobility. We foot the bill, which means that the service is provided free of charge to owners. At this moment 300 or so tourism establishments have been evaluated. Our aim is to fill the databank with a good sampling of tourism products in Flanders by 2009, based on a multi-year plan and budget.

The Accessible Flanders' databank offers us as a governmental tourism agency a number of opportunities and also a number of challenges to turn the databank into a success:

- It provides a good picture of the accessibility of tourism infrastructure in our region. It shows the problems and weaknesses, on which basis we are able to establish policy. The Accessibility Action Plan is based on an evaluation of 100 hotels in Flanders. We naturally use that information in the development of our system of subsidies, so that we know what we have to focus on, which weaknesses have to be tackled in the industry.
- We are able to link the information in the Accessible Flanders databank to our own tourism databank. We feel it is important that accessibility information is offered in an inclusive way to visitors through our own tourism promotion channels. Visitors looking for information about a given hotel can check the accessibility section on our website to access the relevant page in the Accessible Flanders databank to gain accessibility info in an inclusive way.
- The databank also provides a report to the owner of the establishment about the accessibility of the premises in question. A distinction is made in this report between minor inexpensive adjustments the owner can make and things that demand a more structural approach. This can raise awareness among owners in the tourism industry of the situation on their premises and act as a stimulus to gradually improve this situation. It is part of our awareness-raising policy.
But that is also where the shoe pinches:
- The accessibility criteria – which have been established in consultation with accessibility agencies and target group organisations (organisations for people with restricted mobility) – are very extensive and often very stringent. Non-essential comfort aspects (things that are 'nice to have') often have a large impact on the evaluation. The result can sometimes be very negative scores for premises whose accessibility for people with restricted mobility is satisfactory. Premises that have often accommodated people with disabilities who have been very satisfied with the facilities. This discourages owners, who sometimes invest great efforts to make their premises more accessible.

Another consequence of this stringent criteria and thus negative scores, is that visitors get the impression that few or no premises are accessible to them, which is not always true.

Criteria must in my opinion be realistic and achievable, and they must be achieved in consultation with the tourism industry. We must not forget that we have to evaluate an existing building: not everything is ideally suited to people with disabilities or can be easily improved. Sometimes you have to be creative or offer extra services to ensure that people with disabilities have a comfortable stay. Many owners are willing to go down this path. These are things that are difficult to express in a databank.

At the moment, in Flanders we are working on testing the Accessible Flanders databank criteria against the veto principle. 'Is the lack or poor quality of this aspect a key factor in the inability of a person with a disability to use it (e.g. a mirror at the wrong height in a toilet does not stop a wheelchair user from using the toilet; the lack of space or grab rails does)'. It is a question of finding the right balance, as we want Accessible Flanders to play a key role in promoting Flanders as an accessible destination.

- We would like to go a step further here and use an accessibility label linked to the Accessible Flanders databank. Tourism establishments that obtain a good score on the essential aspects of their premises will be rewarded with an accessibility label. We are working to bring the label into operation and all being well the first establishments will be awarded an accessibility label by Tourism Flanders before the end of 2007.

A label is a practical tool for selecting from the large body of information in a brochure or on a website those accommodations with a good accessibility level. You don't have to read all reports in detail. This is a practical solution for visitors but also for tourism services, which have to field questions about the accessibility of hotels in their city, for instance. In combination with the detailed information in the databank, the user is thus given a full palette of information.

In my opinion it would be worthwhile extending the use of a label in a broader context, such as Europe for All. After all, a European accessibility label constitutes major added value for international visitors.

- A broad definition of accessibility is important in the context of tourism – for owners and visitors alike. An accessible hotel also means a hotel where the older generation can enjoy a comfortable stay, with a minimum of thresholds and a spacious lift to take them to their floor. For young families it means spacious rooms and bathrooms that can accommodate the whole family. We endeavour to convey this broad definition in our approach.

- The Europe for All e-service offers additional opportunities for the Accessible Flanders databank. I hope that it will be technically possible to integrate the Accessible Flanders databank in the Europe for All databank. This will open up the accessibility information that we have collected in Flanders to a wider European audience.

If it is to be truly European, it is naturally important that enough countries join the Europe for All e-service.