

Accessible tourism in Europe: an interesting economic market, including for mountain destinations

Disability concerns over 80 million of European citizens, that is to say 15% of the population, according to the Communication on European Disability Strategy. The lack of adapted infrastructure and services, as well as the lack of information on accessible areas remain today a huge barrier: it prevents disabled people from travelling as often and as easily as they would like. Further to improving a social right, tourism accessibility is an economic advisability that is not yet fully taken into account, including in mountain areas.

On 6th June 2014, the European Commission organised a conference “**Mind the accessibility gap: rethinking accessible tourism in Europe!**” on the accessibility of tourism areas. This conference was built up on a study on the “[Economic impact and travel patterns of accessible tourism in Europe](#)” launched by the European Commission. It better understands the demand for accessible tourism and shows to what extent accessible tourism is an underestimated market that will continue to grow in the future.

Tourism for disabled people: an important economic market

The lack of infrastructure, services and information adapted to disabled people often prevents them from travelling, or at least considerably limits them. “[Economic impact and travel patterns of accessible tourism in Europe](#)” is a comprehensive research study that was carried out at the European level by GfK Belgium, the University of Surrey, Neumann Consult and ProAsolutions. It shows that there is a huge demand on accessible infrastructures and services in the tourism sector. It also proves that accessible tourism can increase incomes of tourism operators.

1. A market with “spill over effects”

The study reveals that in 2012, in the European Union, the demand for accessible tourism “*by people with special access needs was 17.6 million trips, of which 7.2 million was taken by people with disabilities and 10.4 million by the elderly population*”. Indeed, persons who need specific accessibility infrastructures and services include not only disabled people but also those who present difficulties to move, such as older or injured people. Besides, families with young children and pushchairs are very likely to book their holidays in accessible destinations. “*Overall, the direct contribution of EU27’s accessible tourism demand to the EU’s economy was estimated to be approximately 352 billion Euros in terms of the economic output or gross turnover of tourism-related service providers. (...) Taking all the direct, indirect and induced effects into consideration, accessible tourism demand within the EU generated a total economic contribution of 786 billion Euros in terms of economic output (...) and 394 billion Euros in terms of GDP*”¹.

A mainstream approach in accessibility is very important when disabled people travel: if a restaurant is accessible but the museum next-door is not, the destination might not be relevant for them. Yet, according to surveys and analysis from the study, the more accessibility services are provided, the more disabled people are willing to travel. Some disabled people also said they would increase their budget if tourism was more accessible, and 80% of them would go back to the same destination if they are satisfied. The economic income would also be further amplified considering that disabled people travel with a companion in most of the cases.

If we consider people travelling the same way and as much as they do, and “*based on the forecasted growth of the elderly population and the growth of individuals with disabilities*”, “*the demand for EU accessible tourism will continue to grow to about 862 million trips per year*”² by 2020.

The investments made in accessibility would provide three levels of economic benefits:

-tourists direct spending: services or products directly bought by disabled people when they travel (hotels, restaurants, museums) will bring incomes to tourism operators.

¹ [Economic impact and travel patterns of accessible tourism in Europe](#), by GfK Belgium, the University of Surrey, Neumann Consult and ProAsolutions, page 8

² idem, page 4

- this demand for accessibility will increase the number of products and services that have to be provided to tourists. As a result, tourism operators will have to increase their **interactions and economic transactions** with other tourism actors or with other sectors: for instance, disabled people are willing to stay in a city where several services are accessible such as museums, cafes, shops.

-to face this increased demand, tourism operators will have to hire more employees. The **consumption of these additional tourism employees** will increase the general economic growth.

2. A market that needs to be further strengthened

According to Ms Séverine Guisset, from GFK, and Gang Li, Teacher at the University of Surrey (UK), even if tourism stakeholders are well aware that accessible tourism is a business opportunity, they often face a lack of coordination in many areas, particularly between the public and the private sectors. This prevents them to develop fully accessible tourism destinations. Communication is also underestimated: accessibility is mainly understood as a feature for disabled guests and almost never understood as a plus in comfort and service and, therefore, neither used in marketing nor in advertising.

As Ms Flavia Coccia, the Italian Ministry for Culture and Tourism said, Member States did work on trying to close the accessibility gap. However, they have to establish better strategies on how to reduce this gap by exchanging ideas and information, by monitoring and following-up their work with tourism operators. The latter ones need also to be further informed on the advisability of this market. Decision makers should encourage them to invest in accessibility and in mainstreaming. Networking and coordination efforts are important, particularly to promote partnerships between various sectors.

3. Staff training:

Sophie Christofidou, Manager customer from the Hermes Airport in Cyprus, is in charge of accessibility. She has implemented a training program for two airports. According to her experience, a crucial element must not be forgotten: the consultation of local disabilities organizations. They are the only ones able to bring the knowledge needed on accessibility. Besides, the best way to understand this issue is to play ourselves the role of a disabled person.

Training thousands of people working in the airport was a very difficult task. To do so, the companies working in the airports have sent their front line staff to be trained. These employees have then been able to train other groups of people in different sessions.

In Portugal, a study on inclusive tourism was conducted by the company Perfil to better understand the dynamics of providing hospitality services to people with disabilities. This company created a training package to enable tourism professionals to receive people with special requirements. This training package was successful and used to train both students and professionals. It was even included in the Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações (the National Qualifications Framework) which is the strategic tool that the Portuguese government uses to manage the formal and vocational training for professional qualifications.

However, training people is not sufficient if tourist operators are not aware of the importance of accessible tourism. Thus, the association of hotels of Portugal, Perfil and Turismo di Portugal carried out workshops all over the country with students and professional, to raise awareness of accessible tourism and to promote trainings at the same time.

How some destination areas have already become accessible, including in mountain areas?

1. In the heart of mountains: "Trentino accessible"

This initiative, carried out by the "Mountain Academy of Trentino", was developed by a group of volunteers acting as a tourism agency for disabled people. The project "Trentino accessible" aims at increasing the number of disabled tourists in the Trentino region to demonstrate that they are an economic advisability at all levels and thus they shouldn't be seen as a problem. Several economic actors were involved in the project: schools, hotels, restaurants and sky resorts have voluntary participated in making the Trentino region accessible for disabled

people, developing new services for disabled people. For instance, “Trentino accessible” has developed a mobile application providing accessibility information for disabled people and an “Ibus voice” system for blind people to give them oral information on the bus stops.

2. Barcelona’s metro: many tourism opportunities for disabled people

The Barcelona’s metro is one clear example of the positive economic impact of accessibility. It transports up to 8 millions of people every year and has improved accessibility for years. It has developed the first ticket machine that is tactile and at the same time accessible for blind people and people with mental disabilities. As a result, the general satisfaction of clients and travels attendance has grown along with the increase of accessibility. Accessibility adjustment costs have been profitable only after two years, and spread to Barcelona city itself, which started accessibility improvement in other areas. Besides, mainstream activities raised their turnover and started to establish cooperation to improve accessibility. Disabled people could thus reach Mountain areas like Montserrat or sky resorts, thanks to this accessible Catalan regional train.

Tourism accessibility from EU perspective

The European Commission is currently working on several general activities within the framework of the EU disability strategy, adopted in November 2010: for instance, the mutual recognition of disability cards or the European standardisation of rights for disabled people. It is working on developing standards in the areas of ICT, such as technical criteria to define an accessible website: a proposal for accessibility of public organisations’ websites was launched.

In addition, the European Commission is preparing an initiative to improve the accessibility of goods and services for disabled in the internal market. Indeed, not enough accessible goods and services in the market leads to economic, political and social barriers for disabled people. This goes against the principle of free circulation and of social inclusion, equality and social justice of the common market. This act, which the European Union is still working on, will address public authorities and the manufacturers of goods, distributors, sellers and services providers.

According to Mr Oscar Almendros, from the Unit Tourism Policy of the DG Enterprise and Industry, providing accessibility to tourism could be a way to curb seasonality in the tourism sector, as well as strengthening the “tourism for all”. In this way, the interest of the “**Access city award**” is growing. Launched in 2010 for the first time by the European Commission, this competition between cities is a way to promote accessibility in urban areas. The award recognizes the innovative efforts made to further amplify a fundamental right: an equal access to all the services offered by the city. The award developed many ideas and good practices that can inspire other cities.

Calypso is an initiative launched by the European Commission, which aims at helping people who usually can’t travel. It aims at developing a low cost tourism during low season, thus it contributes to stimulate local economies during this period. In the framework of the Calypso programme, an online platform was launched to facilitate the match of tourism offer and demand.

Finally, the European Commission has launched a “**European destination for seniors**” call for proposal to establish a final report that will define a framework to facilitate low and medium season for senior travellers.

To put it in a nutshell, accessible tourism is an economic market that will continue to grow in the coming years to become an important sector. Some mountain destinations have already done investments to increase their accessibility, as also seen in the previous article on “[Accessible Tourism: how making mountainous destinations accessible for all?](#)” (published 03/01/2014). Regional and local policy-makers should accompany tourism operators to help them to seize this advisability.

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