



Accessible Tourism: A Study on Barrier - Free Tourism for the Person with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry people with disabilities and older persons are becoming a growing group of consumers. There are more than 700 million people with some kind of disability worldwide. People with disability have a right to, and do want to enjoy travel leisure experiences. Accessible tourism is not only about wide doors and greater signs – it is also about people. Come and learn about the trends in accessible tourism and about the ways how to deal with travelers with disabilities. Thus large numbers of people require tourism to be made barrier-free. However, their travel experiences are still characterized by transportation constraints, inaccessible accommodation and tourism sites, and inadequate customer services. If professionals of tourism industry are to succeed in accessing these potential new markets, they must understand the needs involved and learn how to respond to these challenges for the benefit of both the tourism industry and people with disabilities. The research carried out for this study is based on literature review. The present study identifies the various constraints faced by disabled travelers, it also identifying the challenges towards Barrier-Free Tourism and priority areas for promoting Barrier-Free Tourism.

Keywords : Disabilities, Accessible, Tourism, Barrier-Free

Introduction

Tourists, today are not content with staying within the confines of a resort hotel compound, being bussed to individual sites and entertained in places that mainly cater to tourists. Instead, tourists are increasingly interested in experiencing diversity of holiday environment in all aspects, including its people, culture, nature, architecture and way of life. This trend will be even more marked as consumers become better informed about options and entitlements, as well as more sophisticated and less willing to accept poor quality facilities and services that entail discomfort and stress. Tourists want access to everything that a city or a country has to offer. In view of the changing consumer demand, tourism for all is an increasingly important sales argument in a competitive market. At the same time, it can serve as an effective tool in furthering the human rights of people with disabilities in the destination communities. People with disabilities and older persons are becoming a growing group of consumers of travel, sports, and other leisure-oriented products and services. Furthermore, with regard to physical access, families with young children, who are also becoming part of this increasing tourist market, have similar needs to persons with disabilities and older persons. Thus large numbers of people require tourism to be made barrier-free. Most hotels, transportation facilities and tourist sites are not physically accessible for many people with disabilities and older persons. Their staff members have not been trained to provide disabled person-friendly services. This is associated with an absence of explicit government policies and strategies for promotion of accessible tourism, lack of training for tourism service personnel on means of meeting the access needs of tourists with disabilities, and shortage of tourism programmes that address such needs. The preemptive approach of promoting "tourism for all" is critical for the tourism industry to maintain its competitive edge in a changing and increasingly sophisticated world tourism market.

Objective of the Study

- To find out more about the specific needs and behaviors of travelers with disability
- To identify the constraints of Disabled Travelers
- To identify the challenges towards Barrier-Free Tourism

Review of Literature

Disabilities have historically been under-researched; this is even truer for the topic of "tourism and disabilities". Whilst the first important work about disabled people, "Stigma" (Hunt 1966), was written in the 60s, it was not until 20 years later that the World Tourism Conference connected the concept of accessibility and tourism for the first time (Manila Declaration 1980). This represented an important milestone on the quest for accessible tourism for disabled people (Pérez y Diego & González Velasco 2003:21), as it recognized tourism as a fundamental right for all and made recommendations to the member states to legislate tourist services. Present policies and programmes suffer from a dearth of disability data and inadequacy of existing data. There is a wide variation in the estimated disability rates reported by the developed and developing countries. The variation depends, to a large extent, on the definitions of disability used. The types of disability range from hearing, vision, and mobility impairment to intellectual impairment and psychiatric disorders. For example, Australia's 1993 survey indicated that persons with a disability comprise 18 per cent of its population. New Zealand's first national household survey (1996) yielded a disability rate of 19.1. In 1994, the United States Census Bureau estimated that some 54 million Americans were covered under disability, constituting nearly 21 per cent of the United States population. In contrast, China's (1987) and Pakistan's (1984-85) sample surveys both indicated a 4.9 per cent disability rate. The National Sample Survey of India in 2002, covering four disabilities – visual, hearing, speech and locomotor – yielded a prevalence rate of 1.9 per cent. It is now widely recognized from many quarters that people with disabilities, together with careers, friends and relatives, and older persons constitute a large potential consumer market segment for the tourism and hospitality industry. However, to take advantage of this potential niche market will depend on how the tourism sector as a whole and the tourism industry in particular will address the issue of tourism accessibility for people with disabilities.

Main Constraints of Disabled Travelers

People with disabilities have a right to, and do want to enjoy travel and leisure experiences. Tourism is a means of broad-

ening horizons and developing friendships for a social group, which increasingly is less willing to remain segregated from mainstream society. Furthermore, as more people acquire disabilities or survive with disabilities, they too wish to enjoy travel, just like everyone else. However, their travel experiences are still characterized by transportation constraints, inaccessible accommodation and tourism sites, and inadequate customer services.

▪ **Transportation**

While air travel in general has become easier and airlines increasingly provide friendly services to the average travelers, still some problems arise from time to time, such as misplaced luggage or delays in flight schedules. However, these mishaps might seriously inconvenience travelers with disability. For example, an issue among some travelers with disabilities is the damage to and loss of wheelchairs on airplanes. Indeed, being without one's wheelchair is much more distressing than having the misfortune of lost or delayed luggage for the average travelers. Other constraints facing wheelchair-travelers include the difficulty of boarding and disembarking the aircraft, changing flights and the inaccessibility of airplane restrooms. For blind people, identifying and retrieving luggage becomes another additional obstacle in the course of their already difficult journey. Despite such frustrations, improvements have been, and continue to be, made to airports designs through the introduction of greater areas of level access, help phones, induction loops for the hearing impaired, easy access toilets and other infrastructures adjustments. While legislative pressure can help enforce accessibility in airports, airlines on the other hand operate their own policies regarding the provision of services to travelers with disabilities. However, many airlines have adopted measures catering to the special needs of travelers with disabilities. Assistance is available free of charge at both departure and arrival to help these disabled passengers on and off the plane as well as to and from the airport terminals. This is standard procedure in most countries. Passengers receive a code when booking the flight or checking in. The Code informs the staff about the passenger's needs in reaching the aircraft seat. "WCHC" for example means passenger cannot walk, uses own wheelchair and needs to be carried on board to the aircraft seat. Moreover, some airlines are computerizing such information to spare frequent disabled travelers the trouble of repeating at each stage of the journey their special needs. As the market for disabled travelers expands, all airlines should adapt their policies and practices to efficiently anticipate and meet the requirements of people with disabilities. However, in most developing countries the availability of such specially designed buses remains limited. While trains could better accommodate disabled persons travel needs, often the gap between car doors and the platform are too wide. The major constraints, especially for people with physical disability and wheelchair users, lie with the difficult access to toilets and compartments. The transportation sector of the tourism industry needs to take the necessary action to remove these physical barriers.

▪ **Accommodations**

Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities constitute still another set of challenges. For example, very few hotels offer accessible disabled person-friendly rooms with wider entrances; low-level switches, hand dryers, towels racks and beds; chair lifts and room information written in simple and concise language for people with cognitive disabilities. Few hotels have lifts to all floors on slow timers, access to reception, pool and bar areas, clear signage, visual alarms and clear access through the entire building. Many travelers with disabilities find facilities at eating and drinking establishments within tourist destination areas to be difficult to access. Some others encounter problems when making hotel reservations. It was observed that in some hotels, specific accessible rooms even when available could not be reserved by an individual. In some other instances, some room accommodations, which were promoted as accessible rooms,

actually appeared to be inaccessible to people with disabilities. For example, showers with handrails may well accommodate some people, but for many wheelchair users, bathtubs present a major barrier. Accommodation providers need to increase their awareness of accessibility standards as well as examine their own policies governing general accessibility measures to room design and reservation procedures. Most staff at hotels and other related establishments would benefit from additional training in sensitivity and awareness regarding travelers with disabilities.

▪ **Tourism sites**

Attractions are the elements of a tourism destination that stimulate the purpose of a journey and visit. They may be of a leisure-type, such as visiting theme parks or participating in sport events; nature-based, such as sea-side tourism; historical, such as visiting museums or antique shopping; or socio-cultural, such as festivals or visiting with friends or relatives. Most of the constraints encountered by tourists with disabilities in the course of these activities focus on site inaccessibility. For example, beaches are often not equipped to accommodate wheelchair users. Similarly, poor access to museums, historical monuments or shopping areas restricts people with disabilities from enjoying the opportunity of participating in these activities as much as their counterparts without disabilities can. Tourism site providers need to look closer into this particular issue and efforts should be made to enhance accessibility to tourism sites. On the other hand, people with disabilities should also ask for as much information as possible about the site accessibility of their intended travel destinations.

▪ **Travel planning**

For people with disabilities, planning a vacation can be somewhat more complicated. Depending on the type of disability, there would be travelers need to ensure that during the envisaged vacation due attention will be made to their special needs such as special lifts for coaches and adapted hotel rooms. Such arrangements cannot be made without the assistance of travel agencies that cater to those special needs.

Challenges towards Barrier-Free Tourism for People with Disability

If professionals of the tourism industry are to succeed in accessing this potential new market, they must understand the needs involved and learn how to respond to these challenges for the benefit of both Tourism industry and people with Disability.

▪ **Legislation framework**

One crucial element in meeting this goal is the existence of a legal framework, which ensures that people with disabilities have the right to access to tourism facilities and services and to encourage tourism professionals to adopt related measures. Several governments in the developed and developing countries have passed comprehensive legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Others are in various stages of adoption, formulation and planning such legislation. Those countries, which have already adopted such legislation, enacted additional laws and regulations or amended existing one to further protect the rights of persons with disabilities in specific areas crucial to the equalization of opportunities. Legislation on access should also apply to a variety of public areas and services – including information services – such as travel agents, cafes, restaurants, libraries, transport, shops, theatres and other places of entertainment. Accordingly, related information needs to be provided to people with disabilities. Lack of proper physical access to transport, buildings and sites will not only exclude people with disabilities from participating in community life but also affect tourism and leisure providers. One great challenge regarding legislation implementation is the provision of information to tourism professionals, such as for instance hospitality providers, of the key relevant legislation relating to people with disabilities and their obligations under the legislation.

▪ Tourism services providers

To fully harness the potential of barrier-free tourism, it is essential that the tourism industry improve its services to people with disabilities. Travel operators that specialize in services for, and provide tailoring packages to, people with disabilities are instrumental in assisting them with their vacation planning. They are able to provide with the information regarding the availability of accessible facilities suited to their needs. People with disabilities are more likely to rely on tourism professionals, such as specific travel agents and hotels that best serve their needs. It is therefore imperative that specific barrier-free tourism promotional activities be undertaken by travel agents in close cooperation with other professionals of the tourism industry such as hospitality providers. Disability organizations may also contribute to these promotional efforts by drawing the attention of the tourism industry to the needs and desires of the people with disabilities, especially with regard to flexibility in travel options.

▪ Training and education

Training and education is one of the major challenges facing the tourism industry in relation to meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Sensitive and willing staff with the right attitude and strong interpersonal skills can overcome many of the barriers that persons with disabilities face and turn what may be perceived as an inaccessible property into an accessible one. It is essential that the tourism industry strengthen its customer services training in order to serve those with disabilities. The availability of specialized tour guides is another important factor for people with disabilities, especially those with sight and hearing impairments to enable them to enjoy tourism activities. Efforts should be made to develop and strengthen appropriate specialized tour-guiding courses in training curricula on tourism management and related tourism services.

Priority areas for Promotion of Barrier-Free Tourism

Over the past few years, accessible tourism is gradually taking shape and becoming a recognized necessary feature within tourism development efforts. People with disabilities and older persons are now regarded as a potential growing market for tourism. Despite the increasing global-level attention to disability and accessibility for disabled persons, in developing countries the travelers with disabilities are still confronted with obstacles and constraints: conditions which constitute barriers to disabled persons freedom of movement. Consequently, the tourism industry needs to address a number of related issues, which will help to promote barrier-free tourism. These include, among others, better familiarization with accessibility issues and thereby the development of policies that are barrier-free, the strengthening of its training programmes to provide disabled persons with friendly services, and the development of promotional activities. There are three key issues that require immediate attention.

- One key area is the formulation and implementation of related legislation in order to protect the right of persons with disabilities to accessible facilities and environment. Countries should be encouraged to continue developing such legislation as well as introduce new amendments in keeping with changes in the tourism sector, including travel conditions, and the specific situations of different disability groups. While it is essential that legislation needs to be reviewed in a continuous manner, it is imperative that members of the tourism industry be informed of their obligations and operational implications in order to protect not only their interest, but also the interests of the people with disabilities. Of equal importance is the role of the various disability bodies and organizations, which must begin to work closely with the tourism industry to improve existing practices. The organizations are well acquainted with and knowledgeable about various disability issues. They should assist the tourism industry in introducing the necessary changes required under the legislation and to assist in the organization of related staff training programmes.
- Education and training on awareness and sensitivity to disability issues is another top priority area in the promotion of accessible tourism. The education sector should be encouraged to include in their training curricula on tourism management and related tourism services courses on "disabled person's right to access" as well as "customer services to, and relations with, people with disabilities". Here again, the close collaboration between the disability organizations and the tourism industry along with the education sector would facilitate the development of required training programmes. It would also help in the publication of training material, such as facilitative guide, student handbook and audio-visual training support, for wider distribution amongst the tourism industry.
- Provision of accessible facilities is by far the most important area of concern for achieving a barrier-free tourism for people with disabilities. Taking into consideration that it is highly unrealistic to presume that the situation would change overnight due to cost and time limitations, what is required in the short-term is that the tourism sector strives to achieve a reasonable level of accessibility, which balances disabled users needs, the constraints of existing conditions and the resource available for such adjustments. In many cases, this relates to the issue of physical access such as main hotel entrance access, appropriate access ramp, reception counters, disability friendly rooms, access to and location to all public areas. In the long-term, the approach will be to encourage major restructuring and/or refurbishment of hospitality establishments and tourism sites.

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