



Accessible and inclusive tourism experiences through strategic destination planning and management

Sophie Hayden, sophie.hayden@aut.ac.nz

Alison McIntosh, alison.mcintosh@aut.ac.nz

Brielle Gillovic, brielle.gillovic@aut.ac.nz

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Keywords

Inclusive tourism experiences, Accessibility, Key pillars of accessible tourism, Tourism destination management, People with disabilities

Abstract

Tourism can provide transformational experiences, in positive and/or negative ways, for any tourist. It can provide new experiences that can be (deeply) affective as tourists encounter new places, people, cultures, and activities that they may have never encountered before. For tourists with disability, transformational experiences can be even more significant, again in positive and/or negative ways. An estimated 1.3 billion people (16% of the global population) live with disability (World Health Organisation, 2023). The United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) asserts that people with disabilities should be able to access, participate in, and enjoy leisure, recreation, and tourism experiences as a fundamental human right. It is important to appreciate that disability is not a homogenous concept, but complex and multifaceted (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Darcy & Dickson, 2009). Adapting to meet the access requirements of visitors with disabilities is not only beneficial for economic sustainability, but also for the social sustainability of a community, at national, regional/state, and local levels, by putting into practice the values enshrined in the UNCRPD (United Nations [UN], 2006; CockburnWootton &

McIntosh, 2020). We note the difference between 'accessibility' (often perceived as physical access/infrastructure) and 'inclusion' (an understanding and appreciation of diverse customers). In this presentation, we will set out four pillars that are essential in developing tourism destinations to provide accessible and inclusive experiences.

The presentation adopts Scheyvens and Biddulph's understanding of inclusive tourism as "transformative tourism in which marginalised groups are engaged in ethical production or consumption of tourism and the sharing of its benefits" (2018, p. 592). Further to this, the presentation is framed around the social model of disability, requiring destination managers and tourism operators to recognise that impairment is not the only cause of disability (Darcy & Buhalis, 2010a). Positive changes towards access and inclusion can be enacted through social solutions and practical applications delivered through accessible and inclusive destination management strategies.

Pursuing accessible experiences for tourists with disability contributes to alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most notably SDG#10, Reduced Inequalities, as a means of social sustainability (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Attempts to improve access and inclusion in tourism can have significant impacts, not only for people with disabilities, but also for their family, friends, and the carers they travel with (Robinson et al., 2007). Tourists with disability are provided with experiences and opportunities they may not otherwise have had, and be able to participate in aspects of life that tourists without disability may take for granted. Prioritising accessible experiences also opens opportunities for a wider range of tourists; if it works for tourists with disability, it will likely work for other tourists.

SDG#8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, is also important to recognise in experiences for tourists with disability. Providing accessible experiences opens a destination up to a market that fits within every other tourism market and in every social group (VisitEngland, n.d.), thus leading to an increase in revenue; tourists with disability are known to be repeat visitors who stay longer, spend more, and travel with one or more companions (Avis et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2007).

The presentation will also explore the importance of including people with disability as part of audits and consulting when embarking upon the quest to improve accessibility and inclusion, as well as the importance of including people with disability as staff or employees of tourism organisations. Any improvements made to provide tourists with positive experiences may also benefit existing staff with (un)disclosed disability or impairment.

The first pillar, Knowledge, examines the importance of data sets, best practice models, disability awareness and education and monitoring through audits and/or accessibility guides in improving tourism experiences for tourists with disability. Managers at any level (national, regional/state, or local) are able to assess the current state of their tourism product or service and how tourists with disability may experience it, and in doing so discover ways in which their product or service can be adapted to be more inclusive and accessible. Disability awareness training and accommodations, and monitoring of them, are significant as they will have the greatest effect on visitors with disabilities' experiences, especially if concerns arise (WTTC, 2021, p. 5).

In performing audits, working with people with disability is quite possibly the most significant partnership a destination or tourism operator/provider can form, as they are the people who will be directly engaging with the destination or tourism operator/provider, as well as the family, friends, carers, and other travel companions of tourists with disability (Accentuate, n.d.; Harju-Myllyaho & Jutila, 2021). By drawing on their lived experience and sharing their views on how destinations can be exclusive spaces, people with disabilities can provide an incredibly valuable perspective to enhance destination developers' knowledge and understanding of issues of accessibility and inclusion that directly impact them. Paying attention to feedback given by people with disabilities will provide guidance on what works and what does not (Accentuate, 2012; VisitEngland, n.d.). In this way, drawing on lived experience can enhance transformational experiences.

The second pillar, Coordination, considers the stakeholders involved in providing accessible and inclusive experiences for tourists with disability. Strategies to provide transformational experiences for tourists with disability involve a wide range of people in a variety of roles, with tourists with disability themselves positioned as an important stakeholder group (Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2010). An important requirement for coordination is having a leader or champion within the destination or tourism operation, as someone who can see and promote a vision of transformed experiences is essential to maintain momentum and to keep the team striving forward to make the vision a reality (WTTC, 2021). Leaders are required in the tourism industry and within destinations to bring stakeholders together and coordinate actioning of strategies. It is also essential that the voices of people with disability are heard (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020), which must be a key priority for leaders.

The third pillar, Enablers, highlights the importance of collaboration in sharing knowledge as a means to enable progress. By working together towards transformational experiences for tourists with disability, destinations and tourism operators may also see positive 'transformation' of their customer or consumer base. Collaboration with disability organisations and the wider access sector to problem solve and remove barriers are foundational for enabling meaningful participation and an assured quality of accessible and inclusive tourism. Innovations also unlock potential across the wider visitor journey, as technology can help provide equitable access to and inclusion in tourism experiences (Darcy & Buhalis, 2010b).

The final pillar, Platform, discusses the importance of information in assisting tourists with disability to be able to make informed choices about how they participate in tourism. The potential impact of inaccurate information or a lack of information provided by destinations and tourism operators/providers on a tourist with disability's experience of tourism is not to be underestimated; a UK survey in 2015 (VisitEngland, n.d., p. 13) found that 54% of disabled travellers avoided going to new places if they could not find relevant access information. Significantly, providing detailed information enables tourists with disability to retain autonomy when making choices that suit them (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Darcy & Dickson, 2009; WTTC, 2021), which contributes to the experience of their travel or tourism activity.

Case studies will be explored throughout the presentation to showcase examples of adaptations for accessibility and inclusion, at a variety of levels. Tourism organisations can strive to be inclusive in ways that do not require significant investment, such as through providing advanced customer care/service. While working towards inclusion could be (mis)understood as a challenge, it is also a “golden opportunity” (UNWTO, 2013, p. 3) to learn more about the access market and discover the range of small changes that, while not necessarily a quick fix (Ambrose et al., 2012), can make a positive, or transformational, difference to tourists with disabilities’ experiences in a destination.

References

- Accentuate. (2012). *Access all areas: A guide to destination access audits*.
https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/Documents-Library/documents/England-documents/guide_to_destination_access_audits.pdf
- Accentuate. (n.d.). *Involving disabled people in access audits – A destination zones toolkit for best practice*. https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/DocumentsLibrary/documents/England-documents/accentuate_disabled_ppl_in_access_audits_destination_zone_toolkit.pdf
- Ambrose, I., Darcy, S. & Buhalis, D. (2012). Introduction. In D. Buhalis, S. Darcy & I. Ambrose (Eds.), *Best practice in accessible tourism: Inclusion, disability, aging population and tourism* (pp. 1–15). Channel View Publications.
- Avis, A. H., Card, J. A., & Cole, S. T. (2005). Accessibility and attitudinal barriers encountered by travelers with physical disabilities. *Tourism Review International*, 8, 239–248.
- Buhalis, D., & Michopoulou, E. (2011). Information-enabled tourism destination marketing: Addressing the accessibility market. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 14(2), 145–168.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683501003653361>
- Cockburn-Wootton, C., & McIntosh, A. (2020). Improving the accessibility of the tourism industry in New Zealand. *Sustainability*, 12(24). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122410478>
- Darcy, S., & Buhalis, D. (2010a). Conceptualising disability. In D. Buhalis & S. Darcy (Eds.), *Accessible tourism: Concepts and issues*. (pp. 21–45). Channel View Publications.
- Darcy, S., & Buhalis, D. (2010b). Introduction: From disabled tourists to accessible tourism. In D. Buhalis & S. Darcy (Eds.), *Accessible tourism: Concepts and issues* (pp. 1–20). Channel View Publications.
- Darcy, S., & Dickson, T. J. (2009). A whole-of-life approach to tourism: The case for accessible tourism experiences. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 16(1), 32–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1375/jhtm.16.1.32>
- Gillovic, B., & McIntosh, A. (2020). Accessibility and inclusive tourism development: Current state and future agenda. *Sustainability*, 12(22), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12229722>
- Harju-Myllyaho, A. & Jutila, S. (2021). Inclusion in tourism strategies: Setting the stage for inclusive tourism development in tourism. In A. Harju-Myllyaho & S. Jutila (Eds.), *Inclusive tourism futures* (pp. 59–79). Channel View Publications.
- Michopoulou, E., & Buhalis, D. (2010). Stakeholder analysis of accessible tourism. In D. Buhalis & D. S. Darcy (Eds.), *Accessible tourism: concepts and issues* (pp. 260-273). Channel View

- Publications.MMGY Global. (2022, August 2). *Portrait of travelers with disabilities: Mobility & accessibility* <https://www.mmgyglobal.com/news/portrait-of-travelers-withdisabilities/>
- Robinson, N., Packer, T., Carter, M., Goddard, T., & Muir, T. (2007, February 11–14). Travellers with disabilities: A substantial and growing tourism niche market [paper presentation]. In I. McDonnell, S. Grabowski, & R. March (Eds.), *CAUTHE 2007: Tourism: Past Achievements, Future Challenges* (pp. 34–48). University of Technology, Sydney.
- Scheyvens, R. & Biddulph, R. (2018). Inclusive tourism development. *Tourism Geographies*. 20(4). 589–609.
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol*. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2013). *Recommendations on Accessible Tourism*. <https://www.unwto.org/accessibility>
- VisitEngland. (n.d.a). *Destinations for all: A guide to creating accessible destinations*. https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/dmo_guide_final.pdf
- World Health Organization. (2023). *Disability*. Retrieved March 7, 2023, from https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1
- World Travel and Tourism Council. (2021). *Inclusive & accessible travel guidelines*. <https://wtcc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Inclusive%20Accessible%20Travel.pdf?ver=2021-05-04-115923-407>