

WEBSITE PROVISION OF ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION BY NEW ZEALAND LUXURY LODGES: A *LUXURY* FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

ABSTRACT

Luxury tourism is a trillion-dollar sector that is only expected to grow, yet it has largely been remiss in its consideration of people with disabilities. While the tourism and hospitality sectors have largely overlooked people with disabilities, it is well-documented that they represent a valuable market. Research has highlighted the many barriers to travel participation that this market face, including the lack of accurate, up-to-date and relevant information as critical. This working paper examines the websites of eight New Zealand Luxury Lodges and their provision of accessibility information. A major finding of this study is that minimal if any concern is given to the explicit provision of information regarding the accessibility of the rooms or wider premises, unless solicited through direct contact. It could be inferred then that luxury accommodation providers are not meeting the information needs of potential guests, and thus missing out on the business of this growing market.

Keywords: *Accessible tourism; luxury accommodation; New Zealand; people with disabilities; information needs; website content analysis.*

Introduction

Despite an increasing prevalence of disability worldwide, the tourism and hospitality sectors have largely been remiss in their considerations of people with disabilities as a valuable market (Cockburn-Wooten & McIntosh, 2020). Although there are social and business rationales supporting the provision of accessibility, a pervading misconception is that this market is unable or does not want to travel (O'Neill & Ali Knight, 2000). Yet, people with disabilities represent a loyal market who are repeat visitors, stay longer, and spend more (Domínguez Vila, Alén González, & Darcy, 2019).

Accessible tourism scholarship has mostly documented lived experiences of people with disabilities, barriers and constraints to participation, market and issues of supply and demand, and the accessibility of key sectors, including accommodation (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). A paucity of research exists, however, at the nexus of accessible accommodation and luxury, aside from two studies determining the interpretation of accessibility legislation by luxury and 5-star hotels in Dubai (Morris & Kazi, 2014, 2016).

Luxury tourism comprises wealthy individuals who have the desire and means to pay exorbitant prices for the purpose of business, pleasure or social status. Luxury accommodation encompasses superior rooms, fine dining, spa treatments and extraordinary activities (Harkison, 2022). The luxury experience is created through actor's performance and guidance, ethos of and comparison between properties, stage setting and co-creation (Harkison, Hemmington & Hyde, 2018), and begins when a potential guest reads a provider's press releases, magazine articles, or website (Harkison, 2022).

The website provision of accessibility information is an enabler or barrier to travel participation (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011). How accurate, reliable, detailed and specific information is, as well as the appropriateness of its format and delivery, is critical to people with disabilities making informed, individualised decisions during the planning process (Domínguez Vila et al., 2019; Eichhorn, Miller, Michopoulou, & Buhalis, 2008). An individual may choose a different destination or cancel their trip entirely if the accommodation is deemed unsuitable (Darcy, 2010; Darcy & Pegg, 2011). This working paper contributes preliminary insights into the website provision of accessibility information by New Zealand Luxury Lodges.

Methods

The Qualmark framework represents a benchmark for and official mark of quality for tourism businesses in New Zealand (Qualmark, 2022), and New Zealand Luxury Lodges provide unique and inspired luxury experiences to domestic and international travellers (100% Pure New Zealand, 2022a). The inclusion criteria for this study were properties listed under the 2022 Qualmark category of ‘New Zealand Luxury Lodges’.

The website for the national tourism board, and specifically, their dedicated ‘Inclusive and accessible travel’ webpage was used to locate the study’s sample (100% Pure New Zealand, 2022). Using the ‘Search accommodation’ function, and selecting the filters ‘all regions’, ‘all places’ ‘luxury lodge’ ‘disabled access’, and ‘all prices’, 24 Qualmark ‘New Zealand Luxury Lodges’ were initially found. The ‘disabled access’ filter as an ‘accommodation feature’ was selected. The final sample included: Blanket Bay, Helena Bay Lodge, Kinloch Manor and Villas, Otahuna Lodge, Pen-y-bryn Lodge, Poronui, The Lindis, Treetops Lodge and Estate.

Content analysis accepts unstructured material, is context sensitive, unobtrusive, and can deal with large volumes of data, including sampling units taken from websites (Krippendorff, 1980). This study followed a website content analysis process which includes five steps: formulate research question, select sample, define categories, trained coders determine reliability, and analyse and interpret data (McMillan, 2000).

Results and Discussion

Only two lodges explicitly stated on their websites that they have accessible rooms, confirming “*an accessible room is available for guests by request*” and “*the ease of accessibility for those with limited mobility*”. One lodge displayed the international symbol of access and provided “*a virtual walk-through of the lodge*,” showing the accessible room and bathroom. None of the lodges provided accessibility information pertaining to the wider premises. All websites included videos, images and floor plans, which might provide some visual indication of access. Other studies have similarly found that beyond stating whether providers have an accessible room, minimal additional information is provided (O’Neill & Ali Knight, 2000).

Each website’s ‘Contact us’ function was also utilised (UNWTO, 2016), and the following message was sent: “*I was hoping you could tell me whether you have accessible rooms and how you cater to guests with disabilities?*” All lodges responded, confirming they do have accessible rooms, bathrooms, and wider premises. No detail regarding accessibility of rooms was provided, however, some detail for bathrooms was, including “*a roll-in shower with a collapsible bench in the shower,*” “*a handrail next to the commode,*” and “*a larger door opening to bathroom, rails on shower, chair available for shower.*” Due to the price point and demand for high value luxury experiences, the planning process extends beyond simply browsing and booking on a website and is instead drawn-out involving direct contact with the provider (Harkison et al., 2018). People with disabilities do not represent a homogenous group and thus require information tailored to their individualised needs (Darcy, 2010; Eichhorn et al., 2008).

Almost all responses inferred a focus on people with mobility impairments, geared towards wheelchair access. Comments included “*welcoming of guests with a range of mobility levels,*” “*wheelchair access,*” “*wheelchair accessible bathroom,*” “*ramp entrance to room,*” “*lift in lodge*” and “*lodge on ground floor.*” This aligns with narrow views of disability and accessibility, pertaining to wheelchair users and removal of physical barriers (Cockburn-Wootten & McIntosh, 2020).

Conclusion and Implications

Preliminary findings suggest New Zealand Luxury Lodges have minimally considered the role and requirements for website provision of accessibility information (Eichhorn et al., 2008). Because accessibility information is provided on request and not outright, it is possible needs of potential

guests are not being met, and providers are missing out on business (UNWTO, 2016). The opportunity in enabling website provision of accessibility information is notable in terms of the potential competitive advantage to providers, stimulating latent travel demand, and reaching a previously untapped market (Darcy & Pegg, 2011). We encourage further examination of luxury accommodation providers to ensure the websites themselves, are accessible in their design, and meet W3C and WCAG principles and guidelines (Darcy, 2010).

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