

## ACCESSIBLE TOURISM – A CHALLENGE FOR ROMANIAN TOURISM

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### Abstract

*Accessibility has become a very important topic within the last years on all levels of society and all ages. It is important that in a modern world and an open society with sharing and participation for everyone, all kinds of barriers have to be realized, identified and- finally- removed. Accessibility is considered a central element of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. Accessible tourism now presents new challenges and increased demands in fields of accommodation, restaurants, leisure or wellness. However, many tourism businesses, particularly in Eastern Europe, have superficial knowledge about how their companies have to be organised and arranged to be accessible for all. The paper underlines the need to promote an accessible tourism in Romania as a concept designed for all. It also presents the main characteristics of accessibility, good practice examples and the initiative for an accessible tourism promoter.*

**Key words:** *accessible tourism, accessible tourism promoter, accessibility, tourism for all, universal design*

**JEL Classification:** *L83, Z32*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Accessible tourism is the tourism that can be enjoyed by everyone, including those with difficulties related to the access. Many people have access needs: disabled people (with hearing and visual impairments, wheelchair users), older and less mobile people.

According to the UN, an estimated 650 million people in the world live with disabilities. Together with their families, that means approximately 2 billion people are directly affected by disability, representing almost a third of the world's population. Moreover, the European population is aging: by 2050 the number of people over 65 will be 3 times what it was in 2003, and the over 80s will be 5 times greater in number ([http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism/accessibility/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/tourism/accessibility/index_en.htm)).

Today, according to a recent study by European Network for Accessible Tourism (2015) and partners, less than 10 per cent of tourism suppliers in Europe offer “accessible” tourism services, while demand for such services is set to increase due to the ageing population and continuing upward trend in market demand. Adopting *universal design* enlarges the target markets of destinations as well as ensures that more pleasant experiences can be delivered. Therefore it can increase the market base, reduce seasonality and support the competitiveness of destinations (Buhalis, 2000). Making tourism more accessible is a social responsibility, but also a compelling business case to boost the competitiveness of tourism in Europe.

By making some small adjustments to facilities, providing information on accessibility and understanding the needs of disabled people, tourism

businesses can appeal to a wider range of visitors and attract more business.

We can see a huge market potential for tourism which today remains vastly under-served.

Tourism may provide employment opportunities for marginalised groups, may bring direct income to individual communities and may promote equality in developing countries (Saarinen and Rogerson, 2013).

Improving the accessibility of tourism services increases their quality for all tourists, as well as improving quality of life in the local communities. Yet, few studies have examined accessible tourism in relation to destination management and only recently has accessible tourism been examined from destination competitiveness perspective (Domínguez Vila et al., 2015).

### II. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

The accessible tourism concept appeared for the first time in 1989, during the International Year of Disabled Persons. In Europe, this concept spread rapidly, being followed by multiple changes in terms of legislation, development and in relation to the perception of accessibility in the tourism sector.

The accessible tourism does not have a single definition, as it takes several forms and names: tourism for all, inclusive tourism, universal tourism, barrier-free tourism. But the most common definition is the one of Simon Darcy: “Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves collaborative processes between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the

delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments. This definition adopts a whole of life approach where people through their lifespan benefit from accessible tourism provision. These include people with permanent and temporary disabilities, seniors, obese, families with young children and those working in safer and more socially sustainably designed environments (Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, pp. 10-11).”

Moreover, according to Taleb Rifai, UNWTO Secretary-General “accessibility is a central element of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy. It is both a human rights imperative, and an exceptional business opportunity. Above all, we must come to appreciate that accessible tourism does not only benefit persons with disabilities or special needs; it benefits us all.”

*Tourism for All* consists of providing a tourism experience that anybody can enjoy regardless of any individual characteristics such as abilities, age, height, race, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, ideology or cultural background.

The aim of *Tourism for All* is that everyone should be able to travel to a country, within a country and to other place, attraction or event they wish to visit.

The concepts of Accessible Tourism and *Tourism for All* are evolving and the terms are often misused. Nevertheless there is a trend to seek to go beyond the idea of mere accessibility for disabled people and to stress the need to fulfil the expectations of any potential guest.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines ‘Universal Design’ as the ‘design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.’ (<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>)

Design for All is about ensuring that environments, products, services and interfaces work for people of all ages and abilities in different situations and under various circumstances, while Universal Design refers to producing buildings, products and environments that are inherently accessible to both people without disabilities and people with disabilities. More recently, professionals working in the field have tried to come to a common definition on the grounds of basic rights, obligations and attitudes described in [www.societyforall.org](http://www.societyforall.org). The British Standards Institute (2005) defines inclusive design as ‘The design of mainstream products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible ... without the need for special adaptation or specialised design.’

In summarisation, the term accessibility refers to a degree to which a product, device, service, or environment is available to as many people as possible. As it can be viewed as the “ability to access” and benefit from some system or entity, the concept often focuses on people with impairments or special needs to access

and for being enabled to use provided assistive technology.

But accessibility must not only to be confused with usability, which is the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve certain goals (by effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use); it is strongly related to a universal design when the approach involves “direct access” on several levels. This means to make things accessible to all people (whether they have an impairment or not). Alternatively an entity may provide “indirect access” by supporting the use of a person’s assistive technology to achieve access (for example, computer screen readers).

This topic has become an important thematic within the last years on all levels of society and all ages, but the removal and degradation of spatial and temporal limits and barriers, the development of faster possibilities to travel, to communicate and get access to the whole world also made it important to realise that even in our modern world barriers and hurdles still are not only existing, but also seemingly insurmountable stand in the way of progress towards the future.

Most of these barriers are quite visible (mostly architectural and physical) and can normally be removed or improved, what already has been done within the last years; mostly in public buildings and places, on most levels of public transportation as also in large enterprises and in bigger touristic entities such as hotels, restaurants and museums.

But there are also barriers left that seem to be invisible and even as they are well known still are whether ignored or concealed. These are not only the non-visible impairments (such as allergies) but also the lack of perception or the refusal of the objectives and necessities of accessibility in parts of the public, population and economic actors.

The accessible tourism involves everything that means to make life easier, so that all people, regardless of their condition, to be able to enjoy tourism experiences. Each person has unique abilities and disabilities, levels of support and assistive technology that creates a unique mix to consider with respect to the interaction with the tourism environment (Packer et al., 2007).

More people have access needs, whether or not related to a physical condition. For example, older and less mobile people or people with pushchairs have access needs, which can become a huge obstacle when going on holiday.

For those people, travelling can be a real challenge, as finding the information on accessible services, checking luggage on a plane, booking a room with special access needs often prove to be difficult, costly and time consuming.

Accessible tourism refers to the provision of a tourism experience which does not put customers in a ‘disability’ situation regardless of the activity limitation(s) or impairment(s) they may present. Further, the European Network for Accessible Tourism

(ENAT) refers to Accessible Tourism as the set of 'services and facilities (such as physical environment, transportation, information, communication) which enable persons with special access needs, either permanent or temporary, to enjoy a holiday and leisure time with no particular barrier or problem.' (<http://www.accessibletourism.org/>)

According to ENAT- the European Network for Accessible Tourism, the accessible tourism comprises:

- barrier-free destinations: infrastructure and barriers;
- transport suitable for all users: air, land and maritime transport;
- high-quality services;
- activities, exhibitions and attractions which allow participation in tourism around the world;
- marketing, reservation systems, websites and services: available information.

A series of problems encountered by travellers and tourists with disabilities include:

- inaccessibility or partially accessible websites;
- lack of airport shuttle;
- Lack of transportation for wheelchairs;
- lack of facilities in hotel rooms appropriate to their special needs;
- lack of qualified personnel to cope with their problems;
- inaccessible streets and sidewalks;
- lack of accessibility in restaurants, bars, and other amenities.
- lack of adapted toilets in restaurants and especially in public places.

### III. TOURISM AND TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE IN ROMANIA

The tourism cannot develop satisfactorily unless there are sufficient conditions to provide accommodation, meals, entertainment, etc., in line with market requirements. The tourism infrastructure includes all goods and means created by human aimed to highlight the natural and the anthropic resources which a certain territory has. Failing any adequate tourism infrastructure, the development of the tourism phenomenon cannot be achieved. This is also known in some studies as the material basis for tourism or as establishments of tourist reception.

Structurally, the tourism infrastructure includes: the basis of accommodation, the basis of public catering, the ways and means of tourism transport, leisure facilities and treatment, auxiliary or complementary facilities.

Romania, as a tourist destination, has an advantage over other countries owing to the fact that it has a rich and diversified tourism potential, so it can offer all forms of tourism required: starting from holiday at seaside, stays in mountain resorts, in balneary resorts, winter sports stays, hunting, fishing, up to cultural tourist tours and monastery objectives.

Romania has been an important tourist destination for the local market, promoting the tourism products of seaside, spa resorts, cultural programs and monasteries in northern Moldavia and Bukovina. The Romanian tourism offer has changed slowly over time, now being uncompetitive in relation to preferences of the tourism demand and of the similar tourism products in the international market.

The establishments of tourist reception and in particular the leisure offer are outdated, the tourism services and tourist programs are performed stereotypical and the quality-price ratio is less convincing.

Therefore, in the last 20 years, there has been registered a continuous decrease in the foreign tourism demand for Romania. In order to join the international tourism competition, Romania needs upgrading, relaunching and development of tourism, creation of modern and competitive tourism products in the tourism market.

In fact, besides further modernization of structures and tourist resorts, it is necessary the creation of new tourism products, resorts, original an attractive programs, which might, through a sustained activity of promotion on the international market, to direct major tourist flows to Romania. In this respect, there is required the development of the leisure and animation offer, which has great attractiveness, by creating thematic and entertainment parks, water parks, offers that are present in the countries with worldwide tourism tradition.

Along with the modernization and development of a such diversified and competitive offer, there are also needed some measures aimed to improve and develop the marketing and promotional activity, of integration into the worldwide tourism , of ensuring a corresponding legal framework and a stable and incentive financial environment.

### IV. REQUIREMENTS AND DEMANDS FOR CREATING THE ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

For some people, when it comes to travel, it's easy. It is not the same for people with disabilities. They are encountering difficulties in finding information, the necessary transport means, facilities within the accommodation structures, and why not, even at the communication level (for persons with speech and hearing disabilities), etc.

Because of these "barriers" that occur, many people with disabilities do not travel or have not ever travelled.

The appropriate infrastructure could become a factor of stimulating consumption of tourist services for people with disabilities.

The infrastructure refers to those components that form the basic structure necessary to the effective operation of the system such as urban areas, industry

and tourism. Its components are related to water supply, electricity, sewage and telecommunications. Of all of these elements depends the development of a safe and sound stay. However, the current infrastructure prevents people with disabilities to travel outside the family environment.

Further we will emphasize the need for endowment of the accommodation structures regarding the facilities to be taken in the accommodation centres (and not only) and this barrier to be removed.

#### A. Accommodation

The rooms should be as close as possible to the information centre, preferably on the ground floor. A phone available, alarm or other means of help request should be possible to reach and available. The height of thresholds, door width and the area of traffic are key elements for wheelchair users. As regards the persons with hearing disabilities, the requirements must be discussed and agreed since their arrival in the unit and a television with teletext that can provide subtitles would be very helpful for them. It should also be avoided the settlement of unnecessary things on tables, desks, or any useless furniture in order to avoid any kind of accident of the customers.

#### B. The sanitary facilities

The sanitary facilities should be accessible, functional and impeccable clean. For people with disabilities they should have some special features. For people in wheelchairs there is needed enough space for easy movement, whether they are moving alone or with help, the sink must be without legs (thus avoiding hitting), the taps should be with sensors, the showers should have folding chairs, and in the case of bathtubs and toilets, there should be available foldable support bars. Also the bathrooms should be equipped with emergency or alarm cables located as close as possible to the floor.

#### A. Restaurants, cafes and bars

In restaurants, cafes and bars the corridors should be wide enough to allow users to easily move even when the tables and chairs are used. It is very important that some tables to be adapted for people with special needs, having enough space under the table for comfortable fit of a wheelchair. The menus should be printed in large format and in Braille for blind people.

#### B. The commercial areas

Any visitor or tourist, from the desire to remain with a memory, enters at least into one store in order to purchase at least one object, a book, a view, etc. Therefore the space between shelves should be large enough in order to facilitate the mobility and access to the products on the shelves, the staff must be willing to help the customers by taking over their goods, if necessary, or if they require to do so.

#### C. Audio conferences or visual presentations

In case that, during the persons' staying, there are involved conferences, or presentations in cinemas, theatres, etc., there should be available at least six seats

for wheelchair users, along with seats for those who are accompanying them. The lighting and the sound system should be of good quality. For persons with speech and hearing disabilities there should be also included an interpreter or the presentations should have subtitles, also the provision of these facilities should be clearly signalled.

#### D. Other facilities

Any person while on a vacation, apart from recreation and relaxation, wants to have fun. Therefore, whether they go to a park to recreate and meditate or go to the swimming pool, there must be given appropriate conditions. In parks and outdoor areas, the alleys must be wide enough, without any obstacles in the passengers way, the curbs and steps should be provided with ramp, from every 50m - 60m there should be placed resting places (banks) on flat ground and the channels should be covered with adequate lattice so that it would not result in blocking the wheels of the wheelchairs, walking sticks or injury of any kind. The swimming pools should have basins adapted for people with disabilities with a minimum slope of 5% and at least one adapted shower.

If the above facilities are fulfilled there should be displayed the signs internationally recognized for tourists facilities offered for people with disabilities.



**Figure 1. Signs internationally recognized for facilities for people with disabilities**

## V. TOURISM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Tourism can represent a psychological barrier for people with disabilities, who may feel marginalized through the fact that they are not met like other people, physically normal. Therefore, it is necessary that the accommodation structures to equip special spaces for those with disabilities.

A good example is that of France, where the local authorities in Hendaye (area situated in the Landes district) have built on the beach at Deux Jumeaux a special centre for disabled people, equipped with locker rooms and special toilets, which can also be used by the persons immobilized in wheelchairs. The building has an area of 50 square meters per floor, is located next to a hospital with a special regime in the area, it has covered veranda where guests can sit quietly in the shadow. Near this centre it was installed a special a parking lot, equipped with automatic gates, which can be used by employing a special card. Also, special

wheelchairs can be rented, which have larger wheels and they are easier to handle.

It was also constructed a special wooden ramp, located on the sand which reaches up to the seafront, so that it facilitates the sea access to those who come here. The centre of Hendaye is one of two French beaches arranged for people with disabilities. The decision of establishing such a centre has come from the authorities, from the desire to provide for those with whom fate has not been generous the opportunity to make civilized and non-discriminatory tourism. Many of these people are obliged to use the existing tourist facilities, but they can use these facilities only with the help of family or friends. The arrangement of such facilities for people with disabilities was necessary in order to stop discrimination and to ensure equal opportunities to make tourism for everyone.

Staff in tourist venues plays an important role in reducing potential deficiencies in access or in mitigating unforeseen difficulties, and training in disability awareness and customer care can minimize the barriers encountered by persons with disabilities.

1. The staff of tourism establishments and related services should be prepared to know, understand and address the needs of customers with disabilities.

2. Staff should receive appropriate training regarding disabled persons' rights, so as to provide better assistance and services guaranteed by those rights, to monitor and provide the necessary services and explain the operation of facilities designed for customers with disabilities.

3. The staff should include employees who know how to communicate with persons with sensory disabilities.

4. Staff should be trained to treat people with disabilities with courtesy and efficiency, provide complete information on services and facilities available, and facilitate access to non-accessible services.

5. Staff should provide accessible information for people with disabilities about mobility aids, technical devices and assistive technologies, including new technologies and other forms of assistance, support services and facilities available at the establishment.

Moreover, in order for tourism planning to meet the current and the future expectations of tourists and in order to provide a sustainability of tourism, the local authorities should have a clear vision of the trends of this sector at international level (Băltărețu, 2016, p.18)

## VI. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN ROMANIA

*The quality of a country's infrastructure* represents one of the important factors in the development the international economic relations. Depending on its level of quality, this factor can become a competitive advantage / disadvantage on the global stage, and one of the driving forces of which development must precede the growth of other sectors of the economy (including tourism).

The general infrastructure for Romania represents a *point of vulnerability in terms of competitive advantages* that have a direct impact on the sustainable development of the national economy, on the foreign trade of goods and services and on the tourism, etc. For example, in a report of the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) is asserted that the poor condition of the roads represents a major obstacle to the development of Romanian tourism ([www.wttc.org](http://www.wttc.org)).

In seeking for information on accessible tourism in for Romania, we found out that there is a precarious legislation with regard to persons with disabilities and in practice does not apply at all. Because the accessible tourism is based on three major principles: independence, equality and respect for people with disabilities, we can identify some basic needs of the target groups, such as:

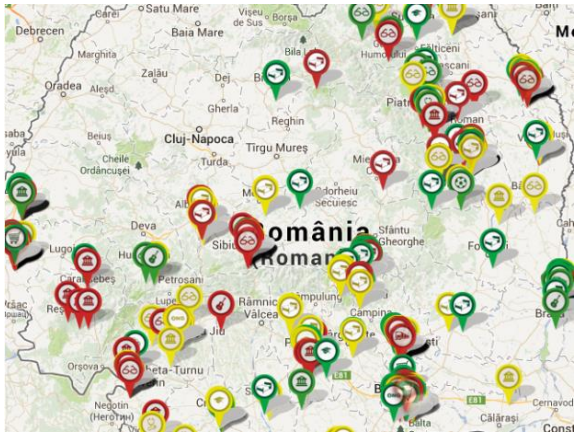
- physically disabled persons are those persons requiring travel with a wheelchair or have some difficulties in moving. Therefore their needs are strictly related to the built environment;
- persons with sensory disabilities (blind, deaf), their needs are related to technical equipment;
- persons with mental and intellectual disabilities require networking, clear and simple information and the use of pictograms.

However the airlines transporters have specific facilities for people with disabilities. Most of the services and facilities are free. Among the services offered are: boarding assistance, transporting and carrying luggage assistance and assistance for check-ins. The airlines limit the number of disabled people on board, from 3 to 5 people, for safety reasons, and for people who depend on wheelchairs they can travel with their own wheelchair only if they are within the standards required, otherwise, the wheelchair is considered as item of hold baggage (wheelchairs, medical crutches and walking sticks are transported for free).

One of the aspects almost ignored by those involved in the tourism industry is the one of accessible tourism, tourism with facilities for people moving in wheelchairs.

The good news is that foundations (such Motivation Foundation Romania) are struggling to provide visibility of the places available for people with mobility problems, not only from Romania, residents and tourists alike.

In 2015 the Foundation launched an online accessibility map. Those interested can find highlighted on this map the public institutions, places of entertainment and leisure, accommodation structures that facilitate access to those in wheelchairs to their facilities and their surroundings.



#### LEGEND

- Accessible
- Partially accessible
- Inaccessible

Motivation Foundation Romania has developed a system designed to audit the level of accessibility of public buildings. The tools are based on Romanian laws on the rights of persons with disabilities and their free access to the public space (Law 448/ 2006), as well as on accessibility in terms of construction of public spaces (NP 051- 2001) (<http://www.accesibil.org/en/content/degrees-accessibility>).

The accessibility audit created by Motivation Romania has three major components: access to outdoor spaces (parking lots, access ways, and entrances), access to indoor spaces (moving around indoors, space for wheelchair manoeuvring, vertical access, if the case, adapted bathroom facilities) and other facilities available according to the specific features of each location (e.g., easy access to shelves in a public library).

These components can be translated into three categories of accessibility: *accessible*, *moderately accessible*, and *inaccessible*.

The category *accessible* includes buildings that are fully accessible to wheelchair users, in compliance with all specific standards. Accessibility refers to the exterior and interior areas of the building, as well as to its facilities.

The category *moderately accessible* includes buildings with moderate wheelchair access. In this case, access to one of the three components or cumulatively to all three of them is limited, however, not entirely absent (e.g. ramp with a difficult angle, door where additional strength is needed for opening, information desk higher than 90 cm from the ground,

elevator with push buttons higher than 120 cm from the ground etc.).

The category *inaccessible* includes buildings where wheelchair access to the outside or inside areas is entirely absent. (E.g. ramp at the entrance but inside not wheelchair accessible, or the reverse situation, where inside wheelchair is accessible but the outside ramp is absent).

Regarding the tourism aspect, until June 2013, the teams of the Motivation Foundation Romania, formed from instructors, wheelchair users and architects, have evaluated 796 buildings, of which 60% are hotels, restaurants, cultural or entertainment venues. Of these, only 205 were accessible, 229, partially accessible, and 362 were completely inaccessible to wheelchair users.

Considering that only at the end of 2012 there were classified 7,736 accommodation units; judging by the statistics above, around half of them are likely to be totally inaccessible to wheelchair users.

We can mention however a few examples of good practice in providing services for persons with disabilities: Complex President Băile Felix – Romania, which is situated in the North-Western part of Romania, in the Thermal Resort Băile Felix offers quality services for the people looking for treatment, especially for rheumatism and locomotion problems. Wheel chair users can access all areas of the complex: ramps, elevators with suitable dimensions and special gates make it easy for them. Hotel rooms and bathrooms are also adapted.

Another example is the Princely Court Piatra Neamț – Romania. The City of Piatra Neamț is located in north-east part of Romania and offers a multitude of leisure activities and accessible facilities: ramps, escalators, elevators with special dimensions for wheel chairs and sanitary facilities with special features for people with disabilities. The museums in the area were also made accessible.

## VII. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM PROMOTER – A NEW PROFILE

The analysis of demands on accessibility not only by the affected target group but also by the actors in the levels of services, care and providing (whether public, private, national or international) has shown the large necessity to develop measures and possibilities to spread awareness on the significance of this topic, not only to try to overcome all kinds of barriers, but to remove them.

As an important step towards this kind of awareness a project was initiated in 2015 (ATP4SME), under Erasmus + Program to create a milestone in form of an international adaptable course for the employees of small and medium tourism enterprises to become promoters for the importance, necessity and realisation of matters of accessibility within their facilities- not only for the reason to be accessible to customers with corresponding demands but also to



become competitive for the future and to be a part of a barrier-free society.

Because it is planned to establish the course on an international level (so participants in all parts of Europe will be able to participate and become accessible tourism promoters) several objectives will have to be taken into account to realise a consistent and connecting standard.

Because the matters of accessibility and the implementation of appropriate measures are quite on different levels within the European Union it is important to evaluate the most significant common denominators in the field of demands and requirements by the tourists, visitors, actors and providers.

Based on the results of that research a fundament of necessary contents and learning objectives will be developed.

Further teaching content will be focusing on the detailed requirements for several kinds of impairments and the existing methods to handle and care for the specific target groups, but also the mediation of new approaches and ideas in form of whether best practice-examples or planned designs and frameworks.

For that, the several target groups of accessibility and their special demands will be introduced and analysed - also with existing examples of the removal of barriers and the status of accessibility within different countries.

But not only the requirements of the target group will be observed but also the point of view of the enterprises plays a big importance. This means the analysis of problems and challenges, that most of touristic enterprises have to face when confronted with barriers and target groups.

As it is important to provide accessible offers in the whole touristic value chain it has to be regarded what kind of enterprises play what kind of role within that chain. Which kind of enterprise will have to focus on what objective in particular and how do all these link together to create new opportunities for touristic offers.

## **VIII. CONCLUSIONS**

In Romania the infrastructure is the main barrier in meeting tourist's needs, the quality of a country's infrastructure representig one of the important factors in the development of the international economic relations. Depending on its level of quality, this factor can become a competitive advantage / disadvantage on the global stage, and one of the driving forces of which development must precede the growth of other sectors of the economy.

Accessible tourism now presents new challenges and increased demands in fields of accommodation, restaurants, leisure or wellness. However, many tourism businesses, particularly in Eastern Europe, have superficial knowledge about how their companies have to be organised and arranged to be accessible for all.

In this context it has been shown that barrier-free offers are welcomed and interesting also for people who would not describe themselves as person with disabilities. Thus, accessible tourism provides an economic opportunity for tourist regions.

In addition, we consider necessary a close collaboration between the state authorities, local authorities, architects, designers, organizations and associations that support persons with disabilities. Romania needs to take real measures regarding the accessibility for persons with disabilities, for the elderly or with reduced mobility but also for families with small children in everything related to tourism, public buildings and means of transport.

The establishment of facilities for people with disabilities is essential in order to ensure equal opportunities to make tourism accesible for everyone in the world.

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