



# **BREAKING BARRIERS:**

## DESIGNING INCLUSIVE TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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## Breaking barriers: designing inclusive tourist destinations

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# PREFACE

This book is in its majority based on the research conducted by the book's authors within the project "SITE: Shaping Inclusive Tourist Experiences". The SITE project is financed through the Interreg Italy-Croatia cross-border cooperation programme and aims to enhance the appeal of tourist destinations within the Italy-Croatia Programme region by promoting social inclusion and participation through the implementation of Universal Design principles. The project's primary objective is to reduce barriers to access through the implementation of digital and physical solutions, thereby enhancing accessibility for all. The project partners are: the University of Trieste (Lead Partner), the City of Šibenik, the Dubrovnik Development Agency, Dubrovnik Airport Ltd, Central Marketing Intelligence – Arcadya Srl, Veasyt Srl, the Municipality of Fano and the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management. More information about the project can be found at: <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/site>.

As members of the project team of the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, the authors of this book conducted extensive desktop research of available literature sources and practices related to accessible tourism. Secondary data analysed for the purpose of this report included books, research papers, professional articles, manuals, strategic documents and policies, case studies, online sources related to the examples of good practices, etc. This task was performed as part of project activity "1.2.2 Multilevel international investigation on the accessibility of tourism ecosystem" and some of the findings of the research were integrated into the project deliverable "D 1.2.2 Report on recommendations for branding and promoting accessible tourism and inclusive solutions".

Authors would like to thank the project partners, especially the project team of the lead partner: the University of Trieste, Dipartimento di Ingegneria e Architettura, whose unwavering support illuminated paths towards this topic. Your valuable insights and shared enthusiasm for this project enriched it deeply. We sincerely appreciate the reviewers' comments and feedback, as well as the proofreader's attention to detail and thoughtful insights, both of which enhanced the clarity and overall quality of this work. We are grateful to all who offered their time, expertise or simply their faith in this endeavour, making this journey not only possible but meaningful as well.



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## **Barrier:**

Anything that might hinder the full and equal participation of people with disabilities. Barriers can be architectural, technological, attitudinal, based on information or communications, or can be the result of a policy or procedure.

(International Development Research Centre, n.d.)

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Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio

# INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, “there are 1.5 billion persons with disabilities across the world and the ageing of societies is on course to making disability an even more prominent feature of life. This requires policies that address disability as an integral part of sustainable development rather than a marginal issue of “solidarity” (United Nations, n.d.). Disability can be defined as “any impairment or difference in physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, sensory or communication ability. Disabilities can be permanent, temporary and/or can change over time” (International Development Research Centre, n.d.).

Tourism today represents one of the most dynamic and influential elements of the global economy, contributing significantly to economic growth, cultural exchange, and social development. It is evident that tourism activities provide a series of benefits for travellers, irrespective of the motivations for engaging in such activities; moreover, the Global Code of Ethics in Tourism states that the prospect of direct and personal access to the discovery and enjoyment of the planet’s resources constitutes a right equally open to all the world’s inhabitants (UN Tourism, n.d.a). Even so, tourism activities are still largely unavailable to a sizeable portion of persons with disabilities due to the diverse types of challenges and barriers. Furthermore, a non-inclusive environment in host communities often discourages people with disabilities from traveling. A considerable proportion of them still face challenges in accessing tourism activities due to various barriers. The most pressing issues include the lack of accessible transport to desired destinations, as well as the lack of accessible tourism offerings at the destination, such as accessible accommodation, restaurants, beaches and other barrier-free attractions, and the lack of comprehensive information on the current state and level of accessibility of all relevant components of the destination system. Imagine arriving at a breath-taking destination only to find barriers at every turn—stairs too steep, signs unreadable, and experiences inaccessible. Now imagine a world where everyone, regardless of ability, can fully enjoy the beauty and culture of every part of the world.



This book aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of accessible and inclusive tourism, highlighting its critical role in converging the awareness-raising and social inclusion perspective with the substantial market potential and economic opportunity. The objective of this book is to identify and address existing barriers that prevent the creation of more inclusive tourism systems. The book's analysis draws upon the latest literature and research results, strategic frameworks at both national and international levels, and insights from successful practices, providing practical recommendations for the creation of accessible and inclusive destinations.

The first chapter of the book provides an overview of the terminology related to accessibility and inclusivity in the context of tourism, offering a fundamental starting point for further examination of this subject. The second chapter is focused on understanding the role of assistive technologies and universal design as potential catalysts of inclusive tourism experiences. In the third chapter, the authors examine strategic frameworks at international, EU and national levels in order to evaluate the level of support provided in these strategies to the development of tourism that is both accessible and inclusive. Another approach to ensuring the accessibility of the tourist offer is outlined in Chapter 4 through the assessment of existing accessible tourism labels, their characteristics and key benefits. Chapter 5 showcases examples of best practice related to accessible airports, accommodation, beaches, natural-based attractions and museums and castles, providing practical inspiration for future actions. The sixth and final chapter of the book focuses on the destination perspective and provides recommendations for building more inclusive tourist destinations.



Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio



# **UNPACKING THE MEANING OF ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN TOURISM**

**1.1. Understanding Accessibility and Inclusivity as Concepts**

**1.2. Insights into the Terminology of Accessible and Inclusive  
Tourism**

Creating spaces for all people, enabling them to have experiences that they could use and prosper from, providing information, technologies, services and products that would be available to all without restrictions, barriers or extra effort should be the focus of inclusive tourism, tourism for all and/or tourism accessible by all — regardless of its name.

In light of the fact that approximately 1.3 billion people, representing 16% of the global population, experience significant disability (UN Tourism, n.d.b), and that many face challenges due to disability, physical limitation or age — whether resulting in permanent or occasional access needs — it is imperative that the issue of accessibility of all facilities, products, and services be a central part of any tourism development aspiration, idea or plan in order to ensure social equity.

While adequate terminology is not used consistently, this chapter aims at indicating the differences between the synonyms used in academic work and existing practice.



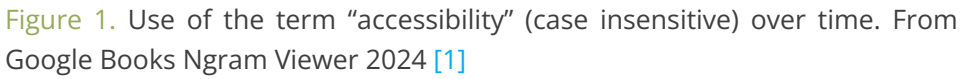
## 1.1. Understanding Accessibility and Inclusivity as Concepts

Accessibility supports individual's independence and social equity (Stafford & Tye, 2023) in a world of widespread barriers for disabled people (Park & Chowdhury, 2022), that are opposed by changing not only the physical environment but also the social setting (Levine & Karner, 2023). The social model of disability helped change the discourse of approaching the vulnerable groups of people through the lens of their medical impairment (at that point present in the prevailing medical model; Darcy & Buhalis, 2011a) to focusing on reducing barriers and supporting full social participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life and facilitating positive social changes (Barnes, 2013; Darcy & Buhalis, 2011a; Gillovich et al., 2018). Terminology is key in "discursive framing" and shaping the social environment of vulnerable groups (Gillovich et al., 2018) and it is thus important for scientific research to employ consistent and unified language. Appropriate discourse is crucial in shifting the perspective of future research from accessibility to inclusivity, i.e., from differentiating the needs of people with disabilities from general population in terms of creating barrier-free environments (Lee et al., 2014; Zhao & Shen, 2020) to a more integral inclusive perspective (Gillovich & McIntosh, 2020) of designing universally and enabling certain experience to all.

The term "accessibility" is not exactly synonymous with terms like "inclusiveness" or "usability", although there is some overlap between them. Therefore, it is essential to first define accessibility and to establish its relationship with other relevant terminology used to address the diverse types and levels of access requirements.

In defining the term "accessibility", regardless of its connection to any area of human activity, it should be acknowledged, according to the most relevant global dictionaries (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.) that accessibility represents:

a quality or a characteristic that implies something being reachable, available, easy to obtain, easy to use, easy to understand, easy to appreciate, easy to enter, and easy to use by people with any kind of impairment or disability.



In order for accessibility to be achieved, it requires **equity or equitable opportunity**, enabled by design that responds to conditions of “in-access”, regardless of the context (person’s (in)abilities). According to SeeWriteHear (2024), **two basic types of accessibility** in modern society imply:

- achieved through design features aimed at persons whose access to activities and/or environments is impeded by a temporary or permanent condition; designing something with accessibility in mind is key to inclusive design while it enhances the user experience for every user (the population in general)

- achieved through design choices (document structure, formatting, layout, use of visual media, graphical and typographical elements) that result in increased usability of documents for the largest number of people as possible

Accessibility for people with disabilities / access requirements and those with temporary or permanent mobility reduction in the EU is governed by international and European regulations, as well as national legislation. The main instruments on the international and European levels include the *UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD)* (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion, 2006./2016), *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion, 2015a), and *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion, 2015b), *The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* (UN Tourism, n.d.a), the Council of Europe *Recommendation on ageing and disability in the 21st century* (2009), the Council of Europe *Resolution on universal design “Achieving full participation through Universal Design”* (2007), and the Council of Europe *Recommendation on the Action Plan to promote the rights and full participation of the people with disabilities in society* (2006). The *European Accessibility Act (EAA)*, officially titled as “*Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services*”, covers many important products and services for persons with disabilities, having diverging accessibility requirements across EU countries. EAA is scheduled to take effect on 28 June 2025. As for tourism, it addresses transport services of all passenger transport sectors (European Parliament, 2019).

Designing for equitable physical and informational access does not aim to solve the problems of disability, but rather to accept and respect the limitations it includes in order to be able to implement available solutions and technologies in achieving barrier-free surroundings so that all people could use something, understand something, enter it, or achieve full and productive interaction. This requires an awareness of the needs of people with different limitations in movement or communication.

Disability is not purely a medical or a social issue, while there is a range of potential degrees and forms of functionality (or the lack of it) resulting from biological conditions in relation to context — whether it is external/ environmental (social attitudes, architectural features, legal and social structures, as well as the climate or the terrain) or internal/personal (gender, age, coping styles, social background, education, profession, past and present experiences, overall behaviour patterns or character) (World Health Organization, 2002). According to the multidimensional approach to disability, **impairments get classified in line with related “physical, sensory, communicative, intellectual/mental and hidden” restrictions**

**of functionality** (Buhalis et al., 2005; Rubio Escuderos et al. 2021).

As noted at the start of this chapter, the number of people with access needs, whether or not related to a physical condition, is increasing (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d.) and **ensuring accessibility fosters privacy, dignity and independence** (SeeWriteHear, 2024) **through universal inclusion**, which would incorporate the variety of access limitations, as presented in Figure 2.

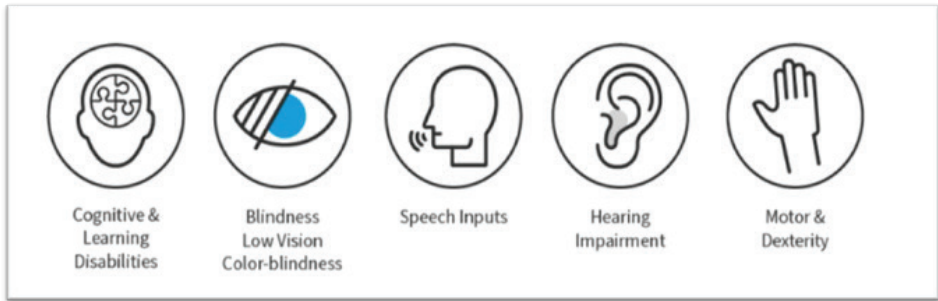


Figure 2. Design that fosters accessibility needs to accommodate everyone — including people with a variety of restrictions of functionality and people of a variety of abilities [2]

**Impediments in accessibility are connected to differences among people**, resulting from (SeeWriteHear, 2024):

- disabilities: cognitive, physical/mobility, auditory, verbal or ocular,
- age,
- language and/or culture,
- education,
- economic position,
- technological aptitude and access.

While most environments are designed for a “typical” individual possessing a set of functional capacities (e.g., vision, hearing, cognition or motor function within normative parameters) (Harniss, 2014), attention must be given to **reducing/eliminating the barriers that obstruct the full participation of persons impeded by any of the** previously mentioned **limitations** — on an equal basis with others. Accessibility of facilities and services that are open or provided to the public implies that every individual not only has access to them or is able to use them, but can also benefit from them (Equitas, 2019).



Although there is certain overlapping, the term accessibility is sometimes mistaken with the term **usability**.

Usability is concerned with the effectiveness, efficiency and user-satisfaction of design — not specifically focusing on individual user group (like people with disabilities). However, accessibility is concerned with whether all users have access to an equivalent user experience and focuses on the needs of people with disabilities (Interaction Design Foundation — IxDF, 2016).

Accessibility also interacts with the term **inclusiveness**. Accessibility is beneficial to all users and features that help people with disabilities often help other people regardless of their abilities when faced with situational challenges. Accessibility focuses on making products and content usable for everyone, regardless of disabilities, by removing barriers and optimising user experiences. It emphasises adaptations and adjustments to accommodate individual needs.

**Inclusion** refers to the proactive design of products, services, and environments that are welcoming and usable for a diverse range of people from the start. It is about designing universally, considering all users' varied needs and preferences (Interaction Design Foundation — IxDF, 2016).

The difference between the two concepts is evident in their goals. While accessibility involves design solutions that do not discriminate against people with any kind of disability, inclusiveness focuses on enabling everyone to have the experience.

In the field of design and user experience, the terms accessibility, inclusiveness and usability, while often used interchangeably, represent distinct yet interrelated concepts. Accessibility refers specifically to the ease with which individuals, particularly those with disabilities, can access and interact with a product or environment. Inclusion extends this concept by emphasising the importance of creating spaces and experiences that cater for a wide range of users, ensuring that everyone feels valued and included. Usability, on the other hand, focuses on the overall effectiveness and efficiency of a product in meeting user needs, and emphasises the importance of intuitive design that enhances the user experience for all people, regardless of background or ability.

## 1.2. Insights into the Terminology of Accessible and Inclusive Tourism

Although there is a notable increase of research into experiences of vulnerable groups in tourism (Thakur et al., 2023), there is a cultural change required for tourism to be completely inclusive (Perangin-Angin et al., 2023; Perangin-Angin et al., 2025). The multidimensional “biopsychosocial model” perspective benefited the studies of accessible tourism (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021) while tourist experience got to be explored through the variety of accessibility needs and corresponding restrictions (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011b). This supported leaving the considerations of tourism and disability in the past and conceptualizing accessible tourism, which in turn enabled focusing on accessible destination experiences (Darcy et al., 2020) – available to all people.

Just like “accessibility”, the concept or term “accessible tourism” has several synonyms. Accessible tourism is often used interchangeably with the concepts of “inclusive tourism”, “tourism for all” or “barrier-free tourism”. The issue is that different authors use different terms randomly. However, **“accessible tourism” is the mature term that prevails** (Hernández-Sales & Sánchez, 2023) and is often related to the other terms of «universal design» or used together with the terms “experience” and “participation” (Qiao et al., 2022), all of which are key in researching accessible tourism.

First used by UN Tourism (former UNWTO) in 2013, the term “accessible tourism” stands for the inclusive concept named “Tourism for All” emerged in 1989 (Hernández-Sales & Sánchez, 2023), referring until today to the **adaptation of the tourism environment for all users, as well as for people with specific needs** (UN Tourism, 2016b). This conceptualisation of tourism is, among other factors, facilitated through the encouragement and support for people with disabilities, as clearly embedded in the core values of UN Tourism’s *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* (UN Tourism, n.d.a).

The number of studies on accessible tourism over the last two decades has increased considerably, more so in recent years (Hernández-Sales & Sánchez, 2023; Qiao et al. 2022). The research content is also very extensive, ranging from experimental or theoretical studies (more frequent in the last decade; Rubio Escuderos et al., 2021) to behavioural approach and specific categories

of demand (Alén et al., 2015; Alén et al., 2017.; Asghar et al., 2020, etc.). Regardless of the approach in theoretical contribution, accessible tourism should in reality aim at creating “universally designed tourism products, services and environments” which support people with (mobility, vision, hearing and/or cognitive) access requirements to enable them to function independently and be treated with equity and dignity (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). In other words, accessible tourism is about ensuring the accessibility of “publicly and privately owned tourist locations, facilities and services” and allowing them to be equally enjoyable to all people, “regardless of their physical limitations, disabilities or age” (European Commission, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs n.d.; UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. n.d.). The challenge in enabling accessibility on the tourism market is in **the variety of permanent and temporary disabilities**. At present, the attention is still on pre-defined groups of mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive disability, the elderly, etc. (Qiao et al. 2022).

The changes in the perception of disability (from the medical to the social and biopsychosocial model; from focus on disability to focus on functioning; Rubio-Escuderos et al. 2021) have also changed the perspective on the experiences of people with disabilities (in tourism as well). In a wider sense, accessible tourism should therefore consider the needs of all people (or, all types of people) by offering an accessible environment — products, services, destinations (spaces, infrastructure) and information. In this manner accessible tourism would provide benefits to tourists and service providers, as well as overall benefits to society.

Accessible tourism is about **making tourism experiences available for everyone** to enjoy (European Commission, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, n.d.b). Moreover, creating an inclusive offer, **achieving accessibility in tourism beyond legal obligation is a business opportunity** for tourism destinations, with revenue-enhancement potential realised by accepting and welcoming all visitors (UN Tourism, n.d.b). Economic benefits generated by accessible tourism are likely to rise in the future (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021) — in line with the large (and increasing) numbers of people with disabilities, which is largely contributed to by population aging and chronic diseases (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.b).

It is important to highlight that accessible tourism or tourism for all is **not a new or particular type of tourism for a certain segment of tourists**, as it implies that all tourism offerings are suitable for everyone — old and young, with different abilities and health conditions. Considering this, it contributes to social inclusion (ENAT 2022). Nevertheless, the level of a destination's accessibility is not always relevant for people with disabilities when choosing a tourist destination (Rucci & Porto, 2022), but for the majority it is crucial. Although accessibility for persons with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility in the EU is governed by international, European and national legislation (as previously mentioned), there is more to be done in not only defining and theorising on certain aspects of travel and stay in a destination, but more so in implementing and unifying already existing instruments and good practices.

For persons with disabilities, travelling can be a challenge, and dealing with the indispensable aspects of travel (like finding information about services, checking luggage, booking a room that fulfils access needs, etc.) often proves to be difficult, discouraging, costly and/or time consuming.

With regard to **travel planning and realisation**, challenges for persons with disabilities include:



Figure 3. Challenges of persons with disabilities in relation to tourism travel [3]

In addition to transport-related travel challenges, there is another set of challenges related to the actual **stay in a destination** (European Commission, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, n.d.):

- physical accessibility (the need to improve spaces and infrastructure to create an environment where all people can move around freely),
- communication accessibility (the need to get the intended message across uninterrupted and uncorrupted, via the appropriate tools and trained staff), and
- web accessibility (the need to make booking services and service-related websites easier to access and use).

Still, the concept of accessible tourism is evolving and becoming more sophisticated (Darcy et al., 2020) as it strives towards greater inclusiveness, and accessible tourism is therefore getting considered as one aspect of a broader concept — inclusive tourism (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). The **much wider scope of inclusive tourism** addresses all forms of social and economic exclusion, alongside accessibility (e.g. Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018), which is why it also remains limited in its ability to address the specific needs of people with disabilities (Darcy et al., 2020). Although the terminology is sometimes confusing, there is **a difference between accessible and inclusive tourism**, and it lies in the fact that:

accessible tourism refers to making travel and tourism offer available to all by removing physical barriers, while inclusive tourism not only makes travel accessible but is focused on creating the welcoming and accommodating environment for people of all backgrounds and abilities (Tourism Australia, n.d.).


Further details on the enhancement of various forms of accessibility will be provided in subsequent chapters.



In the mixture of alternative usage of inclusivity- and accessibility-related terminology it is important to delineate the general terms, as well as their application to the tourism sector. For something to provide equal opportunity to be used, obtained, understood, entered or appreciated — regardless of the person's abilities, functionality or age, implies that it is accessible, i.e. it must meet a range of people's access requirements through design choices and features.

Accessibility is concerned with whether all users have access to an equivalent user experience, and focuses on the needs of people with disabilities, which makes it narrower in scope than inclusivity. While accessibility is focused on making products and content usable for everyone, regardless of disabilities, by adapting, adjusting and removing barriers, inclusiveness is based in proactive and universal design that considers the variety of needs and requirements from the very start.

Although it is being used interchangeably with the concepts of “inclusive tourism”, “tourism for all” or “barrier-free tourism”, accessible tourism is the most mature and recognisable term. It is not a specific type of tourism; rather, it represents a business opportunity for all tourism stakeholders and is focused on making all tourism offerings suitable for everyone — including all indispensable aspects of travel and stay at a tourist destination. Although inclusivity has a much wider scope than accessibility, accessible tourism is still used as a synonym for inclusive tourism, which suggests that it should consider different forms of social and economic exclusion, in addition to accessibility restrictions and addressing a variety of access requirements.





Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio



# **BOOSTING INCLUSIVE TOURISM EXPERIENCES — TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN**

**2.1. Assistive Technologies: Catalyst for Inclusive Travel**

**2.2. Universal Design: Designing the Tourism Experience for Everyone**

This chapter provides details on the most common approaches to helping people with various types of permanent or temporary disabilities to engage in everyday activities. In this context, as the most advanced approaches, digital assistive technologies and universal design, which focus on user experience and overall improvement of quality of life of people with disabilities, are discussed in more detail.

## 2.1. Assistive Technologies: Catalyst for Inclusive Travel

Assistive technology (AT) can be defined as any product whose primary purpose is to maintain or improve an individual's functioning and independence and thereby promote their wellbeing (Khasnabis et al., 2015). This definition does not directly imply that assistive technologies only serve people with different types of disabilities or impairments, but generally AT can be considered hardware and software tools that assist individuals with disabilities in accessing and navigating different systems with greater ease (Gov.uk., 2024). Additionally, apart from hardware and software tools, AT is also any item, piece of equipment or product system that is used to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities (Assistive Technology Industry Association, n.d.). Moreover, AT has the potential to improve functioning, reduce activity limitations, promote social inclusion, and increase participation in education, the labour market and civic life (McNicholl et al., 2021).

The importance of AT as one of the key elements in enabling persons with disabilities to exercise their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others has also been recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly in the areas of personal mobility, education, employment and political right (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD also encourages the further development of AT and access to AT at an affordable cost.

Assistive technology covers a wide range of disabilities and helps people who have difficulty speaking, typing, writing, remembering, pointing, seeing, hearing, learning, walking, and many other things. Different disabilities require different assistive technologies.

In order to better understand its meaning and scope of the term, it is important to have in mind that AT can refer to (ATIA, n.d.):

- low tech (such as communication boards made of cardboard or fuzzy felt) or high tech (special-purpose computers),
- hardware (prosthetics, mounting systems, and positioning devices),
- computer hardware (special switches, keyboards, and pointing devices) or software (screen readers and communication programmes),
- inclusive or specialised learning materials and curriculum aids, but also specialised curricular software,



- and can also include electronic devices, wheelchairs, walkers, braces, educational software, power lifts, pencil holders, eye-gaze and head trackers, and much more.

The principal objective of assistive technologies is to enhance the independence, safety, and accessibility of individuals with a wide range of disabilities, thereby enabling them to participate more fully in their communities.

Naturally, the exponential growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) has led to the emergence of a wide range of digital assistive technologies. Digital assistive technologies draw on recent scientific and technological advances to help people with different disabilities access digital services. The origins of digital assistive technologies can be traced back to the adaptation of the use of computers and other “smart” devices to the needs of people with disabilities and the facilitation of their engagement with the internet. In order to control the computer or smartphone, people with disabilities often use assistive technologies to facilitate input or enhance output and to bridge the gap between the standard user interface and their abilities, needs, and preferences (Pühretmair & Nussbaum, 2010).

Some examples of digital assistive technologies include (University of California, Berkeley, n.d.):

- Screen readers: Software used by blind or visually impaired people to read the content of the computer screen.
- Screen magnification software: Allows users to control the size of text and/or graphics on the screen.
- Text readers: Software used by people with learning disabilities, eye fatigue or other conditions that affect their ability to read text. This software reads text with a synthesised voice and may highlight the words being spoken. These applications do not read things such as menus or buttons — they only read the text.
- Speech input software: Provides people with an alternate way to type text and control the computer. Users can give the system commands to perform mouse actions. They can tell their computer to click a link or use a menu item.
- Alternative input devices: Some users may not be able to use a mouse or a keyboard to use computers. Instead, they may use: head pointers (a stick or object mounted directly on the user’s head that can be used to

push keys on the keyboard); Motion tracking or eye tracking (devices that watch a target or even the eyes of the user to interpret where the user wants to place the mouse pointer and moves it for the user) or single switch entry devices (can be used with other alternative input devices or by themselves and are typically used with on-screen keyboards).

Today, most of the new smartphone models are equipped with a range of accessible built-in features, which are typically audio or visually based and tailored to the requirements of visually impaired individuals (Senjam et al., 2021).

Closely related to the digital assistive technologies is the term of **web accessibility**. It focuses on **simplifying layouts, optimising code, and making content more understandable and navigable**, especially for screen-reader users. Content needs to be user-friendly, regardless of individual ability (Interaction Design Foundation — IxDF, 2016). The creation of accessible web content is no longer just a desirable practice from the perspective of social sustainability or a useful means of gaining a competitive advantage. It is also a legal obligation under the European Accessibility Act, which is scheduled to come into force on 28 June 2025. The Act proscribes that all newly marketed products and services covered by the Act are accessible. This is particularly important for online information on products and services, as websites will need to display information about the accessibility features of services and users must be able to consult a website's content and structure and navigate through webpages, also when using assistive devices (European Commission, n.d.). In the implementation of this Act, the voluntary harmonised EU standard EN 301 549 will be used as the presumptive standard of conformity, and it includes the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) with the current 2.2. version. WCAG contains a set of standards for digital accessibility, guided by the principles of creating Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust (POUR) content. Those principles imply that the web must have content that is (W3C, n.d.):

- Perceivable — Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive. This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented (it cannot be invisible to all their senses).
- Operable — User interface components and navigation must be operable. Therefore, users must be able to operate the interface (the interface cannot require an interaction that a user cannot perform).

- Understandable — Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable. The users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface (the content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding).
- Robust — Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies. This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance (as technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible).

WCAG covers a range of recommendations for making web content that accommodates the needs of a wide range of people with different disabilities, like blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, limited movement, speech disabilities, photosensitivity, as well as learning disabilities and cognitive limitations. These guidelines address accessibility of web content on different devices, making it also more usable to users in general (W3C, 2023). An increasingly common icon that appears on web pages and indicates accessibility elements is the Universal Access icon:



Figure 4. Universal Access icon [4]

It is a human figure in a circle, emphasising inclusivity for people of all abilities, as opposed to the wheelchair-related symbol for access. Its origin is not entirely clear, but a very similar logo has been used in Apple products for accessibility related items, and the general inspiration for creating the logo could be the stylisation of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man.

Figure 5 shows how this symbol was adapted to create the Accessible Website icon, which comprises a simplified web page and a human figure. It is the symbol for inclusive web page design that takes into account inclusivity and usability by people with disabilities.



Figure 5. Accessible Website icon [5]

All the aforementioned changes and further implementation of assistive technologies have a considerable impact on the tourism industry, having in mind its information-intensive nature.

In terms of the most useful application of assistive technologies in tourism, the facilitation of information acquisition pertaining to tourist destinations and transportation options for people with disabilities is worthy of particular emphasis. This is because it enables them to individually plan their trips with greater ease and confidence. It is of particular benefit that the European Accessibility Act applies to electronic tickets and all sources of information pertaining to air, bus, rail, and waterborne transport services. In addition, individuals who utilise assistive technologies are able to capitalise on the numerous advantages offered by modern technologies that facilitate mobility, including the following:

- Global Positioning System (GPS) and navigation applications with accessibility features, such as voice guidance, text-to-speech, and route planning for wheelchair users.
- Mobile applications that provide real-time transit information, itinerary planning, and detailed accessibility data for buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation.
- Wearable devices and sensors that can detect obstacles, provide haptic feedback, and assist with wayfinding for individuals with visual or mobility impairments.
- Integrated systems in vehicles that permit voice control, alternative input methods, and the customisation of settings for drivers or passengers with disabilities.
- Augmented reality applications that superimpose accessibility information on the physical environment, thereby aiding navigation.

Despite the notable advancement in technology that has enhanced the autonomy of individuals with disabilities in travelling, the accessibility and availability of online information relevant to the planning of a trip represent a pivotal initial step in supporting them in engaging in tourism (Eusébio et al., 2021). In order to plan a journey, it is necessary to have access to mainstream tourist distribution networks (Domínguez Vila et al., 2017) and online inclusive practice is a precursor to information searching. Existing information barriers in terms of web accessibility can be removed by creating more inclusive and accessible online content.

In addition to the widely anticipated advancements in assistive technology, the development of **accessible tourist information platforms (websites) and applications** represents a crucial aspect of enhancing the accessibility of

tourism. These platforms should provide accurate and up-to-date information on tourist offerings and accessibility levels. The importance of digital content for mobile devices, which align with tourist requirements and enhance satisfaction, has been further emphasised by technological advancements such as QR codes, audio guides, digital guides, augmented and virtual reality. Regardless of whether the destination is considered at the local, regional or national level, all destinations and their managing authorities must adapt to this change and utilise it for its recognition. It is crucial for destinations and tourist providers to adopt these technologies and utilise them for informational and promotional purposes. Despite the initial costs being higher than those of traditional promotion and advertising tools, it is essential to embrace these technologies and tools to remain competitive in the market, compliant with EU laws and acts and socially sustainable and inclusive. Additional information on how to promote accessible and inclusive tourist destinations can be found in subchapter 6.3. Information = promotion: Communication dos and don'ts for destination stakeholders.



## 2.2. Universal Design: Designing the Tourism Experience for Everyone

Understanding how to adapt the environment for equal use by significantly different target groups with potentially different temporary, permanent and situational disabilities is the topic of universal design (UD).

The term and concept of “universal design” was originally coined by architect Ron Mace describing it as a design approach that aims to move away from specialised, costly, and unattractive solutions for limited groups, instead focusing on designing for “everyone”, because individuals with disabilities should not be viewed as a distinct group requiring separate solutions, but as a valuable source of knowledge (Mace, 1985).

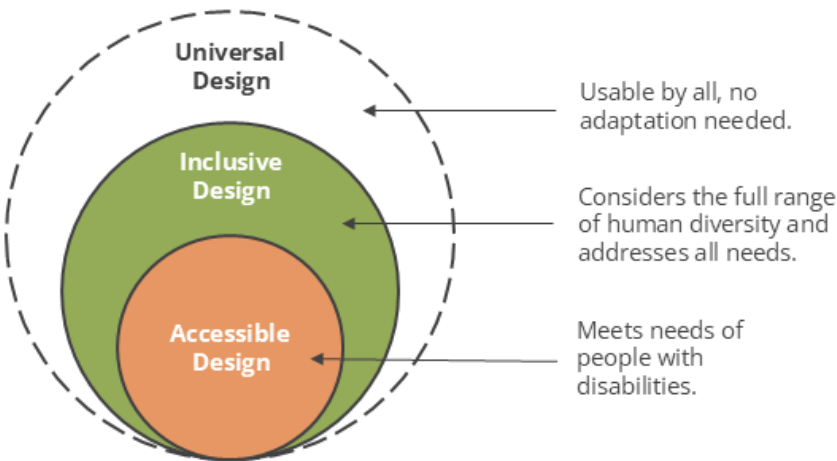
Understanding and applying universal design as a design that can be used by all people means that UD is not only a guiding approach to the process of designing but also a form of societal development based on an argument that there is only one population and not a normal population and a deviating one (Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003; Hedwall & Ericsson, 2024). As stated by Mace himself: “Universal design is ultimately about changing attitudes throughout society, emphasizing democracy, equity, and citizenship, and it denotes a process more than a definite result” (Mace 1985, cited in Iwarsson, 2009).

Modern approaches to universal design do not diverge from the original notion and the prevailing definition positions universal design as a “design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.). Therefore, **universal design incorporates the need for inclusion and accessibility by creating a single solution (products, environments or services) that could be used by anyone without the need for adaptation or specialised design — it implies “designing with diversity in mind”.**

Inclusive design, a similar term, has a narrower scope and aims at creating tailored solutions that would appeal to diverse needs and abilities (and be accessible to marginalised groups by removing barriers), unlike the more generic approach (Continual Engine, 2024).

By being extensive and focused on the similarities that people share as part of improving user experience, **universal design solutions aim to be accessible to as many people as possible**. Inclusive design focuses on people's differences, aimed at accommodating a variety of experiences and reducing barriers to engagement based on culture, gender, age, ability, etc. (Accessibility.com, n.d.).

The difference between universal, inclusive and accessible design is best depicted by a graphical representation (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** The scope of different types of design concepts that aim at creating accessible and inclusive outputs [6]

The previously mentioned UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 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. ‘Universal design’ shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion, 2006/2016, Article 2).

Universal design is based on seven key principles that are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Seven principles of universal design

<p><b>1. Equitable Use</b> The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.</p>	<p>1a. Provide the same means of use for all users: identical whenever possible; equivalent when not. 1b. Avoid segregating or stigmatising any users. 1c. Provisions for privacy, security, and safety should be equally available to all users. 1d. Make the design appealing to all users.</p>
<p><b>2. Flexibility in Use</b> The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.</p>	<p>2a. Provide choice in methods of use. 2b. Accommodate right- or left-handed access and use. 2c. Facilitate the user's accuracy and precision. 2d. Provide adaptability to the user's pace.</p>
<p><b>3. Simple and Intuitive Use</b> Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level.</p>	<p>3a. Eliminate unnecessary complexity. 3b. Be consistent with user expectations and intuition. 3c. Accommodate a wide range of literacy and language skills. 3d. Arrange information consistent with its importance. 3e. Provide effective prompting and feedback during and after task completion.</p>
<p><b>4. Perceptible Information</b> The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities</p>	<p>4a. Use different modes (pictorial, verbal, tactile) for redundant presentation of essential information. 4b. Provide adequate contrast between essential information and its surroundings. 4c. Maximise "legibility" of essential information. 4d. Differentiate elements in ways that can be described (i.e., make it easy to give instructions or directions). 4e. Provide compatibility with a variety of techniques or devices used by people with sensory limitations.</p>
<p><b>5. Tolerance for Error</b> The design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.</p>	<p>5a. Arrange elements to minimise hazards and errors: most used elements, most accessible; hazardous elements eliminated, isolated or shielded. 5b. Provide warnings of hazards and errors. 5c. Provide fail safe features. 5d. Discourage unconscious action in tasks that require vigilance.</p>

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<b>6. Low Physical Effort</b> The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.	6a. Allow user to maintain a neutral body position. 6b. Use reasonable operating forces. 6c. Minimise repetitive actions. 6d. Minimise sustained physical effort.
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<b>7. Size and Space for Approach and Use</b> Appropriate size and space are provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture or mobility.	7a. Provide a clear line of sight to important elements for any seated or standing user. 7b. Make reach to all components comfortable for any seated or standing user. 7c. Accommodate variations in hand and grip size. 7d. Provide adequate space for the use of assistive devices or personal assistance.
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Source: Connell et al., 1997

The seven principles of universal design were developed by a working group of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers, with the aim to guide a wide range of design disciplines including environments, products and communications. These seven principles may be applied to evaluate existing designs, guide the design process and educate both designers and consumers about the characteristics of more usable products and environments.

In terms of tourism, universal design offers endless possibilities for implementation in creating a sustainable and inclusive tourist offer. It was also recognised by the World Tourism Organization which offered a whole set of suggestions, based on universal design, on how to accommodate communication and information accessibility requirements in order to be more inclusive (UN Tourism, 2016a). It specifies guidelines for printed materials, digital documents, audio-visual content, websites, apps, self-service terminals and mobile/smart devices, and signage. It also acknowledges the necessity to **focus not only on how information needs to be presented to be accessible, but also on what kinds of information are required and how to best deliver it when communicating to tourists** (UN Tourism, 2016b).

Any sustainable development planning needs to incorporate accessibility, while accessible tourism needs to be developed in a sustainable manner. Being aware of this relationship pushes tourist destinations beyond ad hoc decision-making to adopting the principles of **universal design** — declining the preferential or segregated treatment of people with disabilities and ensuring

**equity** (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Inclusiveness of universally designed or adjusted tourism services adds to their quality and supports creating an inclusive and accessible environment for visitors and local population to use and enjoy.

Universal design and its principles should be positioned as a foundational guide for tourism planners and developers (Prescott, 2024). Seven key principles of universal design are already being operationalised in a certain manner for tourism services, for example in Ireland. The Irish Standard Universal Design for Customer Engagement in Tourism Services (UD-CETS) was developed as a non-binding policy accompanied by a toolkit and recommendations for tourism providers and it comprises the following (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.):

- Written Communication: providing printed materials about the service.
- Face-to-Face, Telephone & Video Communication: provide instruction on how to communicate with customers.
- Electronic & Web Based Communication: provide descriptive information about services in an easy-to-understand way.

Furthermore, these toolkits have been later superseded by the Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public — A Universal Design Approach (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.) and also implemented in other countries such as the United Kingdom. Recommendations provided in the toolkits are generally applicable (not just focused on people with certain disability) and result in increased satisfaction of customers, decreased number of complaints and overall improvement in the customer-relation segment.


Destination managers and tourist offer providers can benefit greatly from recommendations that have already been developed, as they provide valuable insight into how to make their offerings more inclusive. The question of adapting existing infrastructure and building new infrastructure in line with the principles of universal design is a highly challenging political issue that should be addressed at the national and EU levels. Some countries, such as Norway, have already made considerable progress towards the goal of creating universally designed cities. This has been achieved through a combination of legislative framework and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, with the process having been underway for some time. Italy also provides an illustrative



example of effective legislative action in the context of overall accessibility. Still, despite the fact that the Plans for the Removal of Architectural Barriers (PEBAs) are incorporated in Italian law for over three decades, their implementation by municipalities remains constrained, with the exception of some regions, such as Friuli Venezia Giulia, that have made noteworthy advances on a strategic level in the utilisation of universal design principles (Marchigiani et al., 2022).

In light of the advantages associated with universal design, including the potential to expand the customer base, increase incomes and extend the tourism season, it is recommended that both private and public stakeholders in the tourism industry adopt a universal design approach as a voluntary component of their business strategies. This is particularly relevant in the context of **new investments in tourism infrastructure**. Moreover, following the implementation of universal design in tourism offerings, it is crucial to emphasise this aspect in promotional materials. This is due to the growing positive connotations associated with universal design for all categories of tourists and visitors and the impact on changing mindsets of all stakeholders involved.

More information on the implementation of universal design in developing inclusive destinations can be found in subchapter 6.2. Develop with care: universal design in tourism infrastructure planning.



Assistive technologies and universal design have high transformative potential in shaping inclusive tourism experiences. Assistive technologies, ranging from mobility aids to advanced digital tools such as real-time translation apps and wearable devices, are very efficient in facilitating the everyday activities of persons with disabilities. They also serve as an enabler of travel. By improving access to information, transportation, and on-site navigation, these technologies empower travellers and enhance their independence and comfort. To maximise their effectiveness, it is essential that both the online environment and onsite infrastructure be adapted for assistive technology usage. Universal design aims to ensure that facilities, services and experiences are inherently accessible, rather than requiring retroactive adaptations. It therefore represents a relevant holistic approach to creating tourism environments and experiences that cater to the broadest spectrum of users. The principles of universal design are already being incorporated into various guidelines on (mostly public) infrastructure design, as well as recommendations for communication and information. The integration of assistive technologies and universal design enhances accessibility, improves quality, and increases the appeal of tourism offerings, benefiting all stakeholders.





Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio



# **ACCESSIBLE EUROPE: STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS FOR MORE INCLUSIVE TOURISM**

**3.1. Thinking Big: European-level Frameworks for Inclusive and Accessible Tourism**

**3.2. Selected National Strategies and Framework for More Inclusive Tourism**

The European Union is founded on the principles of equality, social justice, freedom, democracy and human rights, and one of its core values is the commitment to promote equal treatment and opportunities for all citizens (European Parliament, n.d.). This also applies to activities related to tourism. This chapter presents strategic frameworks at the EU level that enable and promote the development of accessible and inclusive tourism. The frameworks presented include various initiatives to ensure that all people, regardless of their abilities and/or specific needs, can enjoy tourism experiences. It then highlights specific EU countries that have emphasised the concepts of accessible tourism or 'tourism for all' in their tourism strategic development documents. The EU recognises that making tourism accessible is not only a social responsibility, but also a significant economic opportunity and that promoting an inclusive approach to tourism improves the quality of life and the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

### 3.1. Thinking Big: European-level Frameworks for Inclusive and Accessible Tourism

Inclusion and accessibility are fundamental principles embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing the three key pillars of sustainable development (environmental, economic and social) and to be achieved by 2030. The underlying principle of the SDGs is to foster inclusive development that takes into account diverse needs and removes barriers to ensure that everyone, regardless of background or ability, can benefit from sustainable progress. Disability and inclusion are at the centre of multiple areas of the SDGs, from SDG 4, which focuses on equal and accessible education, ensured through the creation of inclusive learning environments and support for persons with disabilities, to the promotion of inclusive economic growth and full and productive employment through an accessible labour market, elaborated in SDG 8. In addition, SDG 10 and SDG 11 also advocate inclusion and accessibility, each in its own way - one by pointing to the social, economic and political inclusion of persons with disabilities, the other by focusing on the creation of accessible cities, accessible and sustainable transport systems and universal access to safe, inclusive, accessible and green public spaces. (United Nations, n.d.).

As respect for people's rights is one of the fundamental obligations of the EU, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union provide the basis for addressing all forms of discrimination and placing equality at the heart of EU policies (European Union, 2021). In 2021, the new and strengthened **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030** was developed to make further progress in ensuring the full participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life (European Union, 2021). This strategy recognises the multifaceted nature of disability, resulting from the interaction of long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments (many of which are not immediately visible) and environmental barriers. It also recognises the increasing prevalence of disability as people age. By promoting an intersectional perspective, the Strategy addresses the particular challenges faced by persons with disabilities who belong to multiple identity groups (such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion) or who are in difficult socio-economic or other vulnerable circumstances (European Union, 2021).

The EU's commitment to equality ensures that all people are entitled to fair treatment and non-discrimination in all aspects of life (Commission of the European Communities, 2008), including tourism. In this context, accessible and inclusive culture, arts, sport, leisure, recreation and tourism are essential to ensure the full participation of all in society (European Union, 2021). Moreover, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, adopted in 1999 by the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization as a basic reference framework for responsible and sustainable tourism, emphasises in Article 7 (Right to Tourism) that "the prospect of direct and personal access to the discovery and enjoyment of the planet's resources is a right that is equally open to all the world's inhabitants, and that in this process family, youth, student and senior tourism, and tourism for people with disabilities, should be encouraged and facilitated" (UN Tourism, n.d.a). The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism is a comprehensive set of principles designed to guide key stakeholders in the development of tourism, with the aim of "promoting responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism in the framework of the right of all persons to use their free time for leisure pursuits or travel with respect for the choices of society of all peoples" (UN Tourism, n.d.a).

Accessibility has also been recognised by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which has developed four sets of criteria to promote sustainability in the travel and tourism sector. These criteria serve as the minimum standards that businesses, governments, and destinations should strive to meet with a goal of achieving social, environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, n.d.). In line with the previously mentioned SDGs (8 and 10), the criteria are specifically tailored to the industry, to destinations, to MICE and to attractions. In all four sector-specific documents, the criterion "Access for All" is consistently included.

People travelling within the EU will enjoy the same rights and protection regardless of their origin, background, identity, needs, abilities or disabilities and requirements. The importance of enhancing the travel experience by encouraging and promoting inclusivity is recognised in different EU initiatives related to accessible and inclusive tourism. These initiatives contribute to the EU's wider objective of creating a society that respects diversity and ensures equality for all. Measures to regulate tourism accessibility began in 2015, with the aim of adapting services to the needs of all individuals and promoting accessible



tourism (Henríquez et al., 2022). One of the key initiatives was the publication of the Manual on Accessible Tourism for All — Public-Private Partnerships and Good Practices by the World Tourism Organization in collaboration with the ACS Foundation (UN Tourism, 2016b), which has served as a foundational resource for numerous studies and initiatives that have followed (Henríquez et al., 2022).

Over several years, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has published a number of standards that can be relevant to and implemented in accessible tourism (Figure 5). By adopting ISO standards related to accessible and inclusive tourism, destinations can improve their offerings, attract a wider audience and promote a more sustainable and inclusive tourism environment, ensuring that local communities, businesses and tourists all benefit.



Figure 7. ISO standards related to accessible tourism [7]

In terms of accessible and inclusive tourism, ISO 21902:2021 (ISO, 2021) is one of the most relevant standards as it defines requirements and provides guidelines for “accessible tourism for all”, with the aim of ensuring equal access to and enjoyment of tourism by the widest possible range of people of all ages and abilities. In recent years, a series of “How to apply ISO 21902” guidelines has been published, highlighting the key aspects of this tool for

administrations, accommodation and hospitality establishments, transport facilities and tourism resources, as well as its implementation in businesses and services. Among them, “How to apply ISO 21902 Accessible tourism for all: requirements and recommendations for public administrations and tourism destinations” was published in 2022 and was followed by recommendations for key players in the cultural tourism ecosystem, as well as by recommendations for key players in the management of natural resources and by recommendations for accommodation, food & beverage and MICE companies published in 2023 (UN Tourism, n.d.a). Furthermore, in 2024, a set of recommendations for tour operators, travel agencies and travel agents to implement the ISO 21902:2021 standard were published that provide strategic and actionable advice to ensure accessible tourism experiences that meet the specific access needs of all customers (UN Tourism, Fundación ONCE and Normalización Española, 2024a). In addition, new recommendations for the transport sector were published in late 2024 with the aim of improving transport infrastructure, facilities and services to ensure a safe, reliable and dignified travel experience for passengers with disabilities (UN Tourism, Fundación ONCE and Normalización Española, 2024b). The implementation of ISO 21902:2021 is an important step towards creating inclusive tourism destinations and environments where people of all abilities and ages can participate and enjoy tourism experiences.

The European Union takes a comprehensive approach to tourism, focusing on sustainability, competitiveness and growth. EU tourism policy aims to maintain Europe’s standing as a leading destination while maximising the industry’s contribution to growth and employment and promoting cooperation between EU countries, particularly through the exchange of good practices (Overview of EU tourism policy). Moreover, through various documents, directives and resolutions, the EU also focuses on promoting accessible and inclusive tourism practices to ensure equal access and participation for all people, including those with disabilities and different needs. The following part demonstrates how the European Union strategically and systematically promotes and encourages the development of tourism accessible to all (Table 2).

**Table 2.** EU documents that include aspects of accessible tourism

	Description
European Tourism Manifesto (n.d.)	<p>The European tourism manifesto (n.d.) represents more than seventy public and private organisations and covers the full range of products and services related to travel and tourism. It focuses on eight key policy priorities, including competitiveness, digitalisation, good governance, joint promotion, seasonality, skills and qualifications, sustainability, and transport connectivity. The parts of the Tourism Manifesto that relate to sustainability and transport connectivity, among other priorities, include the following:</p> <p><i>"36. Support the concept of tourism as a right for everybody. Give a chance to every European citizen to travel, including those with low income or disabilities."</i> and</p> <p><i>"42. Encourage better accessibility and in-destination facilities near tourist attractions to facilitate access and minimize disruption, as well as to eliminate language barriers."</i></p>
EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism (2021)	<p>The EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism was adopted by the European Parliament in 2021. The Strategy focuses on ensuring the sustainability and resilience of the tourism sector and highlights <i>"the importance of accessibility of travel and tourism services for all, including for children, elderly people and disabled people, regardless of their economic situation or potential vulnerabilities"</i>. Moreover, it stresses the preservation of nature, local environments, and the cultural well-being of residents. In essence, the EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism aligns accessibility and inclusivity with the broader goals of sustainability and resilience in the tourism sector.</p>
Transition Pathway for Tourism (European Commission, 2022)	<p>The Transition Pathway is a collaboratively developed strategy, involving tourism stakeholders, which outlines essential actions, targets and conditions to achieve both green and digital transformations and ensure the long-term resilience of the sector (European Commission, 2022). The document emphasises the importance of accessible and inclusive tourism in fostering full societal participation. It also underscores the necessity of providing accessible tourism facilities at all destinations to cater to diverse needs, including those related to disabilities, health, economic factors, and various personal preferences. It stresses the significance of ensuring safety and services for individuals from different backgrounds, religions, sexual orientations, and travel preferences.</p>

European Agenda for Tourism 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2022)

The agenda is based on the Transition Pathway for Tourism and includes a multi-annual EU work plan to support Member States, public authorities, the Commission and stakeholders in transforming the tourism sector to make it more sustainable, resilient and digital. In the “Resilience and inclusion” priority area one of the three key topics is accessibility of tourism services, with the set objective of “enhancing social and economic inclusion, taking into account the elderly, persons with disabilities and other groups with specific needs”. It states that the Commission, Member States and other relevant public authorities and destination management organisations have a responsibility to promote awareness of the importance of accessibility in tourism. Their aim is to improve the accessibility of tourism services and to promote conditions that support accessible tourism.

Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the accessibility requirements for products and services (European Parliament, 2019)

The Directive (EU) 2019/882 sets accessibility requirements for products and services to improve the internal market and remove barriers for persons with disabilities. The Directive covers electronic communications services, audio-visual media services, passenger transport services, and consumer banking services, requiring them to be accessible to persons with visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive impairments. It mandates that websites, mobile applications, and self-service terminals be accessible, with support services provided to assist with accessibility.

Rights of Tourists with Disabilities in the European Union Framework (European Network of Accessible Tourism, 2007)

This document discusses the requirements set out by the World Tourism Organization to ensure accessible tourism for all, emphasising the need for equal opportunities for people with limited capabilities. It outlines accessibility requirements for various elements of tourist services and highlights the importance of accessibility in the tourism industry.

Many organisations in Europe specialise in accessible tourism and tourism for all and work to raise awareness, provide guidance and encourage tourism stakeholders to integrate accessibility and inclusion into their practices so that people with disabilities and other groups can participate equally in tourism activities. Some of them are (ENAT, 2008):

- **ENAT — The European Network for Accessible Tourism** (n.d.) was founded in 2006 by nine organisations with the aim of creating a network for individuals and organisations interested in or advocating for accessible tourism in Europe. A major achievement of ENAT is the

management of comprehensive information on good practice in the field of accessible tourism in Europe and an extensive database of individuals, companies and organisations involved in accessible tourism activities in Europe.

- **EDF — The European Disability Forum** (n.d.) is a self-governing, non-profit organisation in Europe that campaigns for the rights of 50 million people with disabilities in the European Union.
- **EIDD — Design for All Europe** (n.d.) is a European network originally founded in 1993 as the European Institute for Design and Disability in Dublin, Ireland. It is a distinctive international platform that unites various organisations under a common vision: to create a more inclusive Europe for all. The main objective of this European network is to improve the quality of life through the principles of Design for All.
- **Europe for all** (n.d.) is a website developed with the support of the European Commission as a result of a joint effort of the pan-European partnership OSSATE (One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe). This website serves as a comprehensive resource providing information on accessible tourist attractions and venues in nine European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Also worth mentioning is the *Accessible Tourism Destination Management Handbook* that was published in 2017 by the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT) and Turismo de Portugal. This handbook provides guidance on how to make tourism destinations more accessible and inclusive for all visitors. The handbook covers various aspects of accessible tourism, including destination management, marketing and training. It emphasises the importance of understanding the needs of travellers with disabilities and providing appropriate accommodation and services. The handbook also includes case studies and examples of good practice from different destinations, with the main aim of helping tourism organisations and destinations to do the following (ENAT & Turismo de Portugal, 2017):

- understand the concept of accessible tourism and its benefits,
- assess the accessibility of their destination and identify areas for improvement,
- develop and implement strategies to improve accessibility and inclusion and
- market their destination effectively to travellers with disabilities.

People with disabilities want to travel freely and usually do a lot of research to find suitable destinations, often relying on specialised tour operators to help them find suitable travel packages (CBI, n.d.). **The European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (FEG)** (n.d.) promotes accessible tourism through cooperation with organisations such as the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT) and Pantou. In addition, the FEG provides training programmes for its members, including *Tourism For All* and *T-Guide*, which focuses on guiding people with learning disabilities. They have also developed a practical accessibility checklist specifically for tourist guides (European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations, n.d.).

## A Tourist Guide's Checklist to Accessible Tourism

Accessibility is a **human right**. Accessibility legislation exists to remove barriers for all.


**1 in 5** people is directly affected by disability. The majority of people with a disability acquire it as adults.

**70%** of all disabilities are **hidden**, make no assumptions.

### Visual impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?

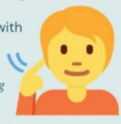
- Architectural barriers such as uneven staircases and surfaces, low ceilings and doorways, narrow passages
- Interpretation in Braille or large fonts
- Information in small fonts or bad contrasting colours
- Unexpected loud sounds



### Hearing impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?


- Hearing loop systems
- Comfortable lighting for lip-reading
- Pictograms
- Space acoustic assessments
- Evacuation alarms with light signalling



### Cognitive impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?


- Simplified well structured information
- Pictograms
- "Easy Reading" manuals and instructions
- Quiet spaces



### Motor impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?


- Accessible lifts, toilets ramps
- Wheelchair access to the whole of the site
- Walking aids, wheelchairs or scooters for rent or loan on site.
- Resting spaces
- Handrails for staircases
- High counters or showcases with exhibits



### Touch impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?


- Touch screens or other touch-operated devices
- Very sharp, very hot or very cold surfaces



### Sensory impairments

Does the place you are visiting with your clients have?

- Sharp objects/ edges
- Very hot or very cold foods and drinks
- Smoke, airborne pollutants, or allergens
- Foods allergy warning



### Your visitors come in all ages and sizes

- Have you checked for disabilities?
- Is the tour suitable for all ages?
- What can be done to make the tour more accessible?
- Do you have a plan B?
- Do you need more accessibility training?




Figure 8. A tourist guide’s checklist to accessible tourism [8]



Furthermore, in Europe there are a number of **EU-funded projects** that address various aspects of accessibility in tourism and play a significant role in raising awareness and promoting accessible tourism. These projects focus on improving travel opportunities for people with different needs, promoting social inclusion and improving the skills of industry professionals. Through the development of innovative solutions, the provision of training and the creation of accessible tourism products, these projects contribute to increasing the awareness and sensitivity of all stakeholders and to making European destinations, products and services accessible to all travellers.

## 3.2. Selected European National Strategies and Initiatives for More Inclusive Tourism

The development of a comprehensive strategic plan is the basis for the creation of an accessible and inclusive tourism ecosystem. At the national level, governments should include accessible tourism in their tourism development strategies, aligning them with previously mentioned international frameworks. Given the strong foundations and framework for the development of accessible tourism at the EU level, along with the existence of organisations specialising in tourism for all that have a large number of members, many countries have included the concept of accessible tourism in their strategic development documents based on EU guidelines, thereby creating the foundations and leverage for the development and promotion of accessible tourism.

The Croatian **Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy Until 2030** (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023) focuses on long-term sustainability, economic growth, and environmental preservation. This strategy aims to enhance Croatia's tourism competitiveness, while ensuring the protection of its natural and cultural heritage. In line with sustainable development goals, the strategy emphasises the importance of accessible and inclusive tourism practices. By integrating accessibility measures and promoting inclusivity, the strategy seeks to cater to a diverse range of visitors, including those with disabilities, seniors, and any marginalised groups. Through initiatives like infrastructure improvements, training programmes, and awareness campaigns, Croatia aims to create a tourism environment that is welcoming and accommodating to all, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable tourism sector by 2030. Moreover, by signing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and enacting the Act on the Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol, the Republic of Croatia committed to taking all necessary measures to ensure that persons with disabilities, among others, have access to (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, n.d.):

- tourist offerings
- tourist destinations
- tourist activities.

The Ministry of Tourism and Sports (n.d.) is responsible for three measures and two special goals, namely, “Improving the already built accessible environment and transport” and “Improving the accessibility of the content of public life and strengthening security in crisis situations”. These are part of the action plan of the National Strategy for Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2024. In addition, the Ministry promotes inclusion through tenders and public calls by awarding additional points if either people with disabilities are employed on a project or the project contains accessibility elements.

**Finland’s tourism strategy for 2022–2028** (Ministry of Labour and Economy, 2022) identifies four key priorities that will enable sustainable growth and renewal of the tourism sector, one of which is improving accessibility. The strategy emphasises the importance of cooperation and collaboration among various stakeholders. It also highlights the importance of accessible tourism as a human rights imperative and an exceptional business opportunity, as well as the potential market for travel and tourism that can be tapped by making tourism facilities and services accessible to all persons, regardless of their physical or cognitive needs. In practice, it is accompanied by significant improvements in accessibility in the great outdoors at national parks and nature areas. Examples of accessible trails in Finland can be found in subchapter 5.4. Inclusive Outdoor/Nature-based Experiences.

**Destination France: Plan de reconquête et de transformation du tourisme** (2021) is designed as a recovery plan following the health crisis, but also as a driver of transformation and is structured around five axes: attracting and retaining talent; strengthening the resilience of the sector and supporting the improvement of the quality of supply; promoting and developing French tourism assets; responding to the challenges of transforming the sector; promoting France as a destination (Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, 2024). The plan focuses on the attractiveness and sustainability of tourism offerings, but does not specifically emphasise tourism for all. However, among other measures, measure 9 aims to financially support holidays for young people and senior citizens, thereby promoting their stronger inclusion in tourism. In addition, France encourages accessible and inclusive tourism through the *Destination pour tous* national label, which promotes an accessible tourist destination that allows an inclusive stay for everyone, local residents and external visitors alike (Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, 2023).

This label is described in more detail in subchapter 4.1. More than a Badge: Labels as Quality Assurers and Identity Builders.

The German National Tourist Board (GNTB) identified sustainability and accessibility as important areas for action some time ago and has consistently treated them as key facets of the core brand Destination Germany. It is therefore not surprising that its tourism strategy, **Making tourism more sustainable**, places particular emphasis on accessibility, which is recognised as needed at every stage of the value chain (German National Tourist Board, n.d.). With regard to accessible and inclusive tourism, the following objectives are defined (German National Tourist Board, n.d.):

- Improve inclusivity
  - Make partners aware of the economic potential of accessible tourism offerings
- Increase the visibility of accessible tourism offerings
  - Position Germany as a destination with a wide variety of exemplary offerings for accessible tourism
  - Promote the Travel for All labelling system internationally
  - Give international visitors, trade partners and journalists access to the certified accessible products and services
- Step up community-building efforts
  - Expand networking activities with international partners
  - Work more closely with disability associations
- Adapt marketing to meet accessibility requirements
  - Intensify communication with stakeholder groups from the markets
  - Design marketing activities to be accessible.

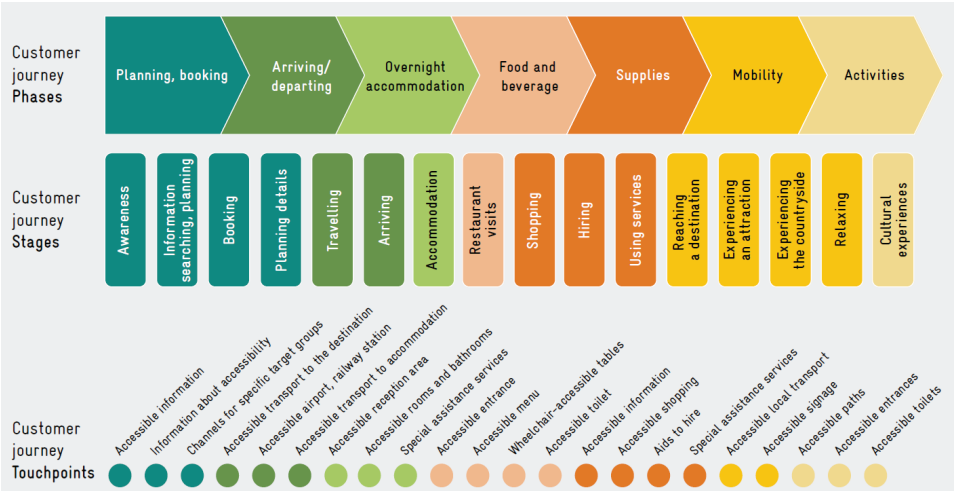


Figure 9. Accessibility throughout the customer journey [9]

On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, a manual entitled *"Inclusion and tourism: Analysis and practical approaches for development cooperation projects"* was published in 2021 (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2021). The manual offers practical guidance to officials in tourism ministries, tourism organisations, and developers on how to promote inclusivity in tourism. Furthermore, the manual encourages other interested parties to consider this topic and raises awareness about the significance of inclusion in the tourism sector (Roundtable Human Rights in Tourism, n.d.). The document emphasises that the tourist journey consists of different stages and steps where guests interact with the destination's offerings, such as visiting the website for information or checking in at hotel reception. These interactions are referred to as touchpoints, where, for example, touchpoints in the planning phase may include the destination's website or booking platform, while in the implementation phase they may include accommodation, transfer services and guided tours (Figure 9). For people with disabilities, it is essential that all aspects of the customer journey are accessible, so efforts should be made to ensure that as many touchpoints as possible are designed with accessibility in mind (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2021).

**People, regions and economy: Tourism strategy Luxembourg** (2022) aims to reinforce the positive impact of tourism and to support the sector in its rapid development, as well as to be relevant and responsive to the constantly evolving expectations of sustainability. The strategy includes ten guidelines, one of which states that Luxembourg tourism should “concentrate on the (changing) needs of people — customers, employees, residents, and cross-border workers — as well as reinforce and balance the quality of stay and the quality of life”. Another guideline states that Luxembourg tourism offerings should also “be experienced as comfortable for everyone and accessible to everybody” regardless of age, disability or heavy luggage (Visit Luxembourg, n.d.). The defined strategic orientation emphasises six fields of action and related measures, of which one key area is related to tourism for all: location quality that is sustainable for everyone.

The **Italian Strategic Plan for Tourism 2023–2027** (Ministero del Turismo, 2023) focuses on five pillars to promote the competitiveness of the sector: governance, innovation, quality and inclusion, training and professional tourism careers, and sustainability. The document emphasises the importance of inclusivity and quality in tourism, aiming to enhance accessibility and ensure that tourism services cater to a diverse range of visitors. By highlighting inclusion as one of its strategic pillars, the plan addresses accessible and inclusive tourism practices, focusing on creating a more welcoming and accommodating tourism environment in Italy. Moreover, **Accessible Tourism Italy** (n.d.) is a portal that provides information and resources for tourists and visitors with specific accessibility needs to fully enjoy their travel experience in Italy. The website offers a wide range of accessible activities, including guided tours, museum visits, sports, workshops and nature experiences, all categorised according to the type of activity and the visitor’s specific needs, such as visual impairment, reduced mobility, deafness or intellectual disability. The platform offers personalised suggestions and accessible activities throughout Italy to help visitors organise their trip according to their needs. The website also aims to give visibility and support to those who offer accessible tourist experiences in Italy. Visitors to the site are encouraged to contact the platform for more information and to be put in touch with the most suitable operators, bodies or associations to meet their specific needs.

Like Italy, Austria provides information on accessible tourism on the tourism website **Accessible travel and cultural inclusion Austria** (n.d.). The website highlights a variety of options that enable people with different needs to enjoy a holiday in Austria. It offers a range of accessible options, with extensive facilities for guests with mobility or sensory impairments, both in the city and in the countryside. Visitors can find information on a range of accessible activities and facilities such as scenic walks, therapeutic horse riding, adaptive skiing, etc. In addition, many museums offer inclusive experiences with multi-sensory exhibits and guided tours specifically designed for visitors with disabilities, creating a welcoming and accessible environment for all travellers.

In a similar manner, Spain created a comprehensive tourism website — **Spain is Accessible** (n.d.) — that showcases Spain's rich and diverse tourism offerings that are accessible to all visitors, regardless of their abilities. The website provides comprehensive information on accessible tourism in Spain. It offers a guide to help travellers with disabilities or mobility challenges navigate and enjoy the country's rich cultural and natural offerings. The site covers accessible transport, including assistance at airports, as well as a wide range of adapted activities, accommodation and sightseeing options that meet the needs of people with disabilities. In this way, *Spain is Accessible* encourages travellers to focus on enjoying their experience rather than their limitations by serving as a valuable tool that provides the necessary information and makes it easier for travellers to explore Spain's accessible tourism offerings. Sites such as *Accessible travel and cultural inclusion Austria*, *Spain is Accessible* and *Accessible Tourism Italy* are good examples of how tourism websites can prioritise accessibility and provide a truly inclusive user experience.

**Perspective Destination Netherlands 2030** (2019) sets a new approach to tourism in the Netherlands, emphasising the common interests of visitors, businesses and local communities as well as ensuring that tourism contributes to the prosperity and well-being of all Dutch citizens. The document highlights accessibility as one of five key priorities, emphasising the need for cities and regions to be easily accessible. Additionally, the national Dutch tourism website provides comprehensive information for disabled travellers visiting the country, emphasising the accessibility of various tourist attractions, hotels and transport options. It provides details on how public transport, including buses and trains, is equipped to accommodate wheelchair users, and offers




tips on how to hire adapted bicycles and beach wheelchairs. The site also highlights the availability of accessible routes and facilities in major cities such as Amsterdam, as well as museums and amusement parks (Netherlands, n.d.).

**Portuguese Tourism Strategy 2027** (Turismo de Portugal, n.d.) focuses on stability, commitment to strategic options, integration of sectoral policies, joint action among tourism stakeholders, and strategic planning for the short/medium term. The document emphasises the importance of accessibility, inclusivity, sustainability, competitiveness, public participation, and regional development in shaping the future of tourism in Portugal. The strategy defines five strategic goals/pillars: add value to the territory; drive the economy; leverage knowledge; generate networks and connectivity; raise Portugal's profile. One of the activities under the "generate networks and connectivity" strategic pillar is directly related to tourism for all: "Promote tourism for all, from an inclusive point of view, incorporating the various tourism markets/segments". Furthermore, the brand "Accessible Portugal", established in 2006, has evolved into the leading organisation for promoting Accessible Tourism for All in Portugal (Tur4all, n.d. a.). In its current legal form, the private, non-profit association is well-suited to its objectives of qualifying tourism supply and demand for all market segments based on their unique features. By promoting the development of regions that cater to a diverse range of clients and tourists, Accessible Portugal enhances the quality of life for residents and visitors with diverse needs (Accessible Portugal, n.d.).



Figure 10. Tourists come in all shapes and sizes [10]

The **Swedish National Tourism Strategy** (Barents Council, 2021) outlines the country's vision for tourism development and is aligned with Agenda 2030 and the global Sustainable Development Goals, the government's gender equality goals, Swedish climate policy goals, and other parliamentary goals. The strategy's vision for 2030 is for Sweden to be the world's most sustainable and attractive destination based on innovation. Prioritised strategy areas include simplified entrepreneurship, jobs and skills, knowledge and innovation, accessibility, marketing, sustainability, digitalisation, place development, and collaboration. Moreover, the official website of the National Tourist Board of Sweden provides a link to the Accessibility Database ("Tillgänglighetsdatabasen"), where it is possible to find information about the physical accessibility of more than 9,000 locations, including stores and restaurants within public service, outdoor areas, and other destinations (Visit Sweden, n.d.).



In order to be accessible and welcoming to all, destinations should create a diverse range of inclusive tourism products and services that ensure seamless accessibility across the supply chain, including reservation systems, accommodation, transport and more (ACCESS-IT, 2020). The well-established EU strategic framework for tourism provides a solid basis and incentive for destinations across Europe to develop and enhance inclusive and accessible tourism. It also encourages collaboration between different stakeholders to create a welcoming environment for all visitors. Moreover, it is important to emphasise that a destination that effectively caters to visitors with specific needs will improve service quality, ensure a positive experience for all visitors and enhance the overall quality of life of the local community (ACCESS-IT, 2020). By strategically including accessible and inclusive tourism in their national plans, countries can foster this large and valuable market and provide inclusive travel experiences for all. However, many destinations and tourism providers still lack the necessary strategies, policies, measures, solutions and knowledge to meet the needs of travellers with different requirements. On the other hand, there are many good examples of destinations developing and promoting accessible tourism for all from which everyone can learn and draw inspiration.





Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio



# **SYMBOLS OF TRUST: LABELS IN ACCESSIBLE TOURISM**

**4.1. More than a Badge: Labels as Quality Assurers and Identity Builders**

**4.2. Looking Ahead: Future Branding of Accessible Tourism**

This chapter explores the role of labels in tourism that highlight accessibility and inclusion, emphasising their role in fostering experiences for all travellers. It discusses how these labels can serve as a guide for individuals with disabilities, seniors, and other groups with specific needs in making informed choices. By promoting transparency and accountability, such labelling systems contribute to a more inclusive tourism industry.



## 4.1. More than a Badge: Labels as Quality Assurers and Identity Builders

In addition to promoting greater attention and awareness of various issues, awards and labels can assist in rerouting consumers towards more benign or sustainable choices. In tourism, labels and certifications help consumers to identify and choose high-quality, safe, and sustainable tourism options.

Labels are granted to various tourism enterprises and services, pointing to the fact that these providers voluntarily adopt measures in sustainability, inclusiveness or other fields that exceed legal requirements. Given the diverse challenges and regulatory environments across different countries, it is not always possible to comparatively assess and categorise these quality labels. However, there are widely recognised tourism-related labels that focus on quality, safety, sustainability and service standards:

- **Green Key** — focused on tourism accommodation and infrastructure and their dedication to environmental sustainability.
- **Blue Flag** — labelling beaches and marinas that uphold high standards of water quality, safety, and environmental education.
- **Travelife** — certifies tourism businesses that implement sustainable practices.
- **EU Ecolabel** — awarded to accommodations and tourism services that ensure sustainability across their operations through energy efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable resource management.
- **Green Globe** — label focused on sustainable tourism, more precisely energy efficiency, social responsibility, and environmental conservation.
- **Safe Travels by WTTC** — awarded by World Travel & Tourism Council to destinations and businesses which adhere to global health and hygiene protocols.

The Green Key stands as one of the leading labels in the area of environmental responsibility and sustainability in tourism. Its requirements have been established by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), set to emphasize strong environmental practices. In addition to this, the Green Key program also points out social responsibility, which can involve accessibility and inclusivity in general. However, specific requirements regarding accessibility are not explicitly detailed in the general Green Key criteria.



Among these labels, Blue Flag stands out as a globally recognized quality certification that, in addition to its predominant focus on environmental and sustainability aspects, also incorporates accessibility criteria. Currently implemented in 51 countries, with over 5,000 certified beaches, marinas, and tourism boats, it ranks among the most widespread voluntary tourism certification programs worldwide. Attaining the Blue Flag requires adherence to a set of environmental, educational, safety, and accessibility standards, all of which should be consistently maintained. The accessibility requirements are explicitly outlined in Criterion 33, which states the following (Blue Flag, n.d.):

“At least one Blue Flag beach in each municipality must have access and facilities provided for the physically disabled. It is strongly recommended that all Blue Flag beaches have facilities that allow access by the physically disabled, granting them access to the beach, surrounding buildings, and the restroom facilities. It is a Blue Flag requirement that at least one beach in every municipality must provide these facilities. It is a Blue Flag recommendation that at this beach, if possible, there is access to the water for the physically disabled. Access to the beach must be facilitated by access ramps designed for users with various disabilities. It is recommended that the ramp design and material fit the natural environment and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly materials are used, i.e. recycled composite plastics...”

Although there is a possibility of waiving this criterion for municipalities that cannot meet it due to topography, it illustrates the recognized importance of accessibility in the planning and management of beaches.

Travelife, EU Ecolabel and Green Globe are mostly focused on sustainability requirements, each with a slightly different focus and criteria. Safe Travels label was established as a recovery protocol for health and hygiene, due to COVID-19 crisis that significantly affected tourism sector.

In addition to these, there are many other, more localised labels focused on similar areas such as sustainability, ecology, and health, which aim to help consumers identify their preferred and needed options. These labels contribute to a regulated market by providing reliable information and guiding consumers towards appropriate choices. ISO standards can also function similarly to a label in some contexts (certification process and scope), but not inherently

the same. Specifically, they can signify high standards of safety, accessibility or quality and increase consumer trust in the tourism sector. However, its main goal is systemic improvement, not consumer-facing branding.

Labelling schemes focused on accessibility in tourism share similarities with the above labels in their aim to provide standardised, reliable information to tourists while promoting best practices within the industry. Both types of labels seek to highlight specific attributes that align with global values like inclusivity and environmental stewardship. However, accessibility labelling differs in reflecting a more specialised focus and ensuring information on access for individuals with diverse needs, targeting issues like mobility, visual impairments or hearing loss.

The following examples present the most pertinent national, regional and local accessible tourism labels, delineating their defining characteristics and their implementation.

#### 4.1.1. National Accessibility Labels

There are accessible certification schemes in different European countries that recognise a commitment to promoting accessible tourism by ensuring that facilities and services are accessible to people with different needs and abilities. Not all countries in the EU have introduced national labelling schemes, but the following are examples of some of the different labels that exist in the European Union.

In **France**, the Tourism & Disabilities Association established the **Tourisme & Handicap** label 2001, aiming to provide precise, unbiased, and uniform information concerning the accessibility of tourist infrastructure and services across four disability categories (Association Tourisme & Handicaps, n.d.):

- Motor,
- Cognitive,
- Auditory, and
- Visual impairments.

The primary goal of this label is to foster the development of tailored tourism offerings that accommodate the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities.



Figure 11. Tourisme & Handicap label logo [11]

The Monts du Lyonnais region is a notable example of inclusive tourism initiatives. As evidenced by detailed information available online, the region's tourism strategy is aimed at making its rich natural and cultural heritage more accessible to visitors with disabilities. The initiative is focused on enhancing accessibility in various areas, including accommodation, outdoor activities, cultural sites, and transportation. The central web site offers information on accessible cinemas, theatres, hiking routes, medieval parks, etc.

There are three tourist offices holding the Tourisme & Handicap label. The Mornant tourist information office demonstrates accessible tourism practices through its comprehensive approach to inclusiveness. This tourist office is the Winner of the Accessible Tourism Trophies reward for tourism players holding the label "Tourisme & Handicap" (special jury award). It provides detailed information on accessible routes and attractions, ensuring visitors with mobility issues can enjoy the scenic beauty of the region. Furthermore, the office provides a free-of-charge single-wheel all-terrain chair that allows anyone with reduced mobility, children or adults, to go hiking with the help of four companions. It also offers tactile maps and Braille brochures for visually impaired tourists, enhancing their ability to navigate and appreciate local sights.

As a contribution to replicability and the scalability of accessible initiatives, there is a guide developed under the Tourisme & Handicap label for all tourism professionals (hoteliers, restaurateurs, managers, etc.). It gives detailed information on how to welcome people with disabilities — what attitudes to adopt when dealing with this clientele, what services and benefits should be offered to them in order to better meet their expectations and thus facilitate contact (Comité Régional de Développement Touristique d'Auvergne, 2020). Through these initiatives, tourism actors such as Monts du Lyonnais set a high standard for accessible tourism, promoting equal access for all visitors.

**“Travel for All” (Reisen für Alle)** stands as the prevailing label for accessible tourism across **Germany**, encompassing a comprehensive set of criteria aimed at ensuring high cross-sectoral quality standards. These criteria were developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including tourism associations and individuals directly affected by disabilities. There are two complimentary labels under the “Reisen für Alle” initiative, acting as an information and rating system, as shown in Figure 12.

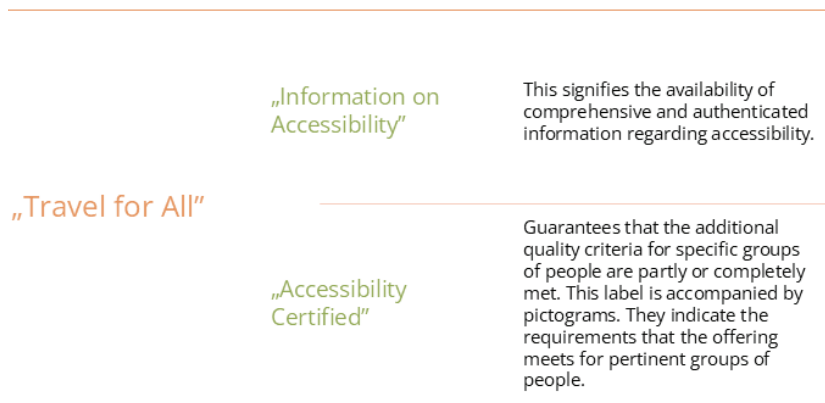


Figure 12. “Travel for All” accessibility labels [12]

“Travel for All” provides detailed insights for tourists, enabling them to carefully assess the accessibility of tourism offerings prior to booking, thereby empowering them to make informed choices tailored to their needs. This labelling initiative differentiates seven groups of visitors, together with their needs:

- People with reduced mobility,
- Wheelchair users,
- People with impaired hearing,
- Deaf people,
- Visually impaired people,
- Blind people, and
- People with learning difficulties.

The quality standards of this labelling system, along with associated training programmes, were developed in close consultation with pertinent associations and stakeholders within the tourism industry. Since its inception, approximately 3,000 facilities or comprehensive holiday options have undergone evaluation under this initiative, which receives funding from

the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy (Inclusive Germany, n.d.). The initiative also promotes accessibility through a range of barrier-free brochures and guides, accessible via the website. These resources provide comprehensive information on accessible accommodations, attractions, and services across the country. They aim to facilitate travel planning for individuals with disabilities by offering detailed descriptions of accessible facilities, transportation options, and cultural sites.

**Spain's** TUR4all badge and labelling scheme is part of the "Accessible Tourism for All" collaborative platform focused on travel destinations and businesses that adhere to accessibility guidelines. Trained specialists conduct a thorough assessment as part of the accreditation process, which covers criteria such as service, information, and physical accessibility. This labelling scheme has two levels of criteria: basic and premium. The TUR4all Basic criteria include the level of accessibility of tourist facilities and the information provided to the customer on their accessibility, while the TUR4all Premium criteria, in addition to the basic criteria, focus on the accessibility of services to the public, the information provided to the customer through different media, and accessibility management through different processes of the organisation (TUR4all, n.d.b).

Establishments that have earned certification use the TUR4all label to indicate their dedication to accessibility. The system offers assistance and direction to travel service providers and promotes ongoing development. Benefits include giving travellers with disabilities better travel experiences and promoting and engaging diverse groups of tourists in travel activities. While the principles and standards promoted by TUR4all are applicable and beneficial internationally, its operational base and initial focus remain in Spain. Therefore, it is considered primarily a Spanish labelling system for accessible tourism. Lately this initiative has also been extended to Portugal, reflecting its growing influence beyond national borders in fostering inclusive travel experiences.

The **Access Denmark** label serves as Denmark's tourism labelling initiative aimed at enhancing accessibility. Through this platform, tourists can explore accessible accommodation, transportation, attractions, and more, along with detailed information about facilities catering to various impairments. The primary objective of this labelling system is to deliver accurate accessibility information, empowering individuals to make informed decisions regarding

their visits (Godadgang n.d.). The criteria cover the needs of seven user groups:

- Wheelchair users,
- Hand-, arm- and walking impaired,
- Visually impaired,
- Hearing impaired,
- Asthma and allergy,
- Cognitive/mental needs, and
- People with reading difficulties.



Figure 13. Official sign with the indication of all groups encompassed by the “Access Denmark” label [13]

which operate under the EureWelcome label, are described in subchapter 5.2. Making Accommodation Facilities More Accessible.

In Luxembourg, the **EureWelcome** label is rooted in the Design for All principle and endorsed by the Ministry of Economy. This certification recognises tourism establishments, services, and events that make deliberate efforts to cater to the diverse needs of all guests, including those with reduced mobility (EureWelcome, n.d.). The example of Camping Martbusch and Auf Kengert in Luxembourg,



Figure 14. EureWelcome Luxembourg label logo [14]

“**Destination Pour Tous**” (DPT) is a French label designed to promote a tourist destination that ensures inclusive extended stays for both local residents and external visitors. It aims to cater to a wide range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, cognitive, mental, psychological, multiple disabilities, as well as health conditions that affect mobility. Additionally, it

addresses challenges related to age-related loss of autonomy, family travel, and provides comprehensive tourist activities and services. These offerings are designed to meet the diverse needs of tourists. There are six essential steps in the labelling process, as presented in Figure 15.

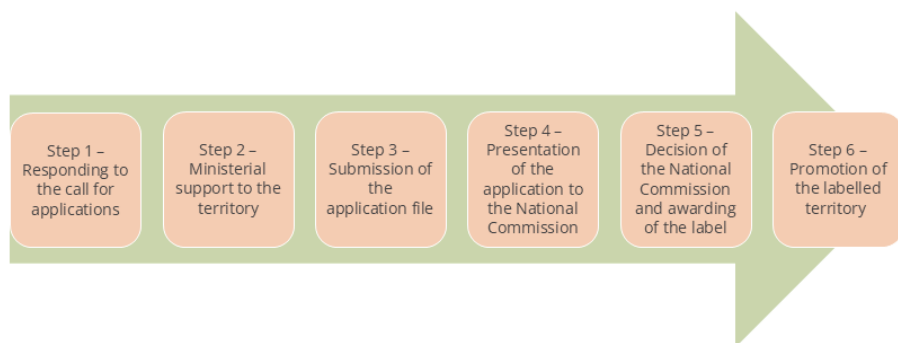


Figure 15. Labelling process for "Destination Pour Tous" [15]

In 2021, a Gold Level Mark was awarded to the Dunkirk Urban Community under the DPT brand. This recognition was earned for its outstanding features that make the destination stand out, including (La Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque, n.d.):

- Comprehensive transportation options accessible to all, including free on-demand services like the "Handibus"
- A diverse range of accessible tourist attractions and offerings, featuring seaside resorts and a variety of coastal activities, community facilities such as a zoological park, PLUS facilities, and a port museum, along with leisure activities and opportunities for exploring the area. The destination also boasts restaurants and accommodations designed for accessibility.
- A community-driven tourist and conference office with eight reception points, five of which are recognised under the Tourisme & Handicap label, providing accessible information about the region.
- Accessible events like the La Bonneaventure festival, ensuring inclusiveness and participation for all visitors.
- Personal services tailored to accessibility needs.
- A workforce of professionals who are both aware and trained in accommodating diverse accessibility requirements.

When it comes to sun and sea destinations, labelling very often focuses on beaches and their accessibility. In this context, accessibility labels not only ensure that beaches offer essential amenities — such as ramps, beach wheelchairs, and adapted restrooms — but also raise awareness among local authorities and communities about the importance of inclusivity.

**In France**, there is the **Handiplage label** pointing to inclusive beaches and resorts like Côtes d’Armor (Handiplage, n.d). Over one hundred coastal municipalities across 43 French departments provide specialised equipment and services for beach accessibility, including amenities like the amphibious wheelchair and the aquatic wheelchair. One great example of an accessible beach with high standards of accessibility and a holder of the Handiplage label is the Le Havre beach. It provides a wide range of amenities to facilitate water access for individuals with mobility challenges. Specialised equipment is complemented by accessible pathways, reserved parking spaces, and adapted restroom facilities. Trained staff are available to assist visitors in using the equipment and accessing various services.



Figure 16. Handiplage label logo [16]

The **Accessible Beach — Beach for All!** (Praia Acessível — Praia para Todos!) is a Portugal programme and a pioneering initiative aimed at making beaches accessible to everyone, including individuals with reduced mobility. It has been running since 2005 as a partnership between various public stakeholders with the aim of promoting compliance with accessibility legislation by awarding

the “Accessible” label to beaches that comply with a list of mandatory criteria relating to barrier-free access to the sea, accessible parking, and the presence of a lifeguard, but also encouraging compliance with additional criteria relating to amphibious equipment for bathing and/or walking, changing rooms, showers and drinking fountains accessible to all, personalised reception and guidance for the visually impaired, colour identification system for colour-blind people on sea state and on selective waste collection containers, tactile maps of the beach with directions in Braille, etc.



This programme is the result of a collaboration between local municipalities and national organisations, ensuring high standards of accessibility while promoting inclusive tourism.



Figure 17. Praia Acessível programme logo [17]

The success of the programme is underlined by the increase in the number of beaches that are awarded the label each year. In 2023, 242 beaches were designated as accessible and the programme covered 37% of the beaches officially designated as bathing waters (Accessible Beach — Beach for Everyone, n.d.).

More information on accessible and inclusive beaches can be found in subchapter 5.3. Sun and Fun by the Sea for Everyone.

#### 4.1.2. Regional and Local Labels

In addition to national labels, there are good examples of regional and local accessible tourism labels across the EU, which are highlighted below.

VISITFLANDERS encompasses A+, A and M labels pertaining to the accessibility of holiday homes, information and visitor centres in the **Flanders** region. A+ denotes infrastructure that is readily and independently accessible to individuals with reduced mobility, while A indicates basic accessibility. For meeting and conference venues, the M label is utilised, assessing the accessibility of this type of infrastructure for attendees with disabilities (wheelchair users and individuals with hearing or visual impairments). The rating system comprises three tiers: basic (M), good (M+), and excellent accessibility (M++). More detailed information can be found at: <https://www.visitflanders.com/en/travel-information/labels> (VISITFLANDERS, n.d.).

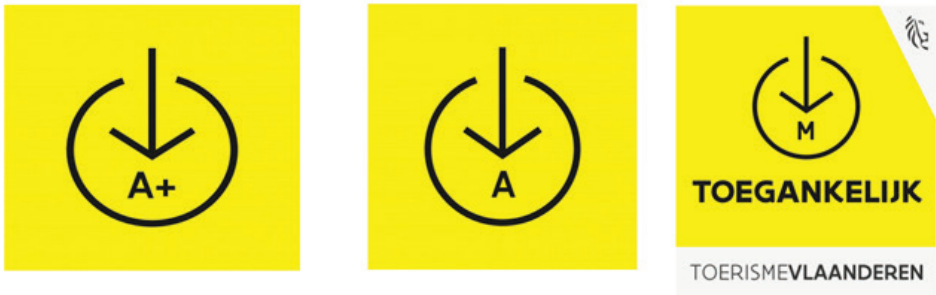


Figure 18. VISITFLANDERS accessibility labels [18]

Details on accessibility are provided in the brochure “Accessible holiday accommodation in Flanders and Brussels”. The brochure provides comprehensive information about various accommodations that offer facilities for guests with disabilities, such as wheelchair accessibility, customised care, and specialised equipment. It includes a wide range of options, from hotels and holiday homes, to guest rooms and campsites across different regions of Flanders. The brochure also gives practical information on transportation and accessibility services, ensuring a smooth and enjoyable travel experience for all visitors. This and other brochures and guides at VISITFLANDERS highlight various tourist attractions, events, and activities that are accessible to people with disabilities.

The “Accessible holiday accommodation in Flanders and Brussels” brochure features just those vacation rentals that have earned an A- or A+ accessibility label, in addition to those that provide extra care services. The accessibility of accommodation and/or environment is evaluated for various types of disability by specially trained accessibility supervisors. According to the findings of the measurements (taken for the parking lot, entry, reception area, restrooms, etc.), this information is added to the database and assigned a symbol (+, ±, -). Some vacation spots include a care structure available to guests, indicating caregivers, assistance, and additional elements such as hoists or high-low beds. This is represented by the “+ Extra Care Framework” icon for accommodations. More accessible accommodation examples can be found in subchapter 5.2. Making Accommodation Facilities More Accessible.

Additionally, there is an organisation in Flanders called Vzw Kompaan which provides trained volunteers who can assist travellers in need of assistance and an option of organised travel for people with disabilities. Many travel organisations offer to include health insurance funds, disability organisations and welfare services, while it is also possible for volunteers and staff to provide personal assistance (VISITFLANDERS, 2024).

Furthermore, there is an initiative aimed towards labelling accessible events in Flanders. At the moment, the Accessible Event's label procedure serves as a guide, giving a precise overview of how to plan accessible events.

In **Italy**, there is the Marchio Open certification as part of the "Trentino for all" project funded by the Ministry for Disabilities, which promotes accessibility and inclusiveness of Trentino accommodations. The certification process consists of four stages (Provincia autonoma di Trento, n.d.):

- Requirements pre-analysis (mapping),
- Verification audit,
- Submission of certification application, and
- Issuance of the label and grant allocation.

In addition to this, there is another certification process developed in Trentino for the "Family in Trentino" label for private and public entities which aim to satisfy different needs of families, including some of the tourism facilities.



Figure 19. "Ospitalità senza barriere" initiative logo [19]

Another initiative in Italy, "Ospitalità senza barriere" (Hospitality Without Barriers) refers to accessible and inclusive travel in Bergamo and the surrounding province. The identification and promotion of services and accommodations that are accessible to those with disabilities is the main goal of this certification. By verifying that establishments adhere to

accessibility guidelines, the idea is to increase inclusion for all visitors. With the goal of creating a network of completely accessible services and boosting the region's capacity for hospitality, their promotional efforts are directed at accommodation, both hotel-style and non-hotel, cultural centres, and tour companies that provide experiences in the province of Bergamo. After an audit verifies all the characteristics reported in the self-report form, the "Ospitalità senza barriere" certificate is awarded free of charge to facilities and institutions. In addition to this, the initiative also provides a variety of tourism services in an effort to accommodate inclusive and accessible experiences, from food and wine tours to Bergamo city tours.

### 4.1.3. Awarding Accessible Destinations

Awarding accessible destinations is important for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism. There are some good examples of this across the EU, such as “Accessible Tourism Destination”, “European Capital of Smart Tourism” and “Access City Award” which are presented in this subchapter.

In Spain, the **HOLA Família!** Award is given out by the Catalan Tourist Board (ACT) to identify travel locations that are especially considerate and offer amenities and services tailored to the requirements of families with young children. To qualify for this recognition, destinations must submit a comprehensive proposal outlining their tourism strategy, family-oriented products and services, as well as their commitment to innovation and sustainability in tourism. The programme committee of the Catalan Tourist Board evaluates each application, granting the HOLA Família! award to destinations that fulfil the established criteria. Loret de Mar, Salou and Santa Susanna have been recognised as such destinations.

The **“Accessible Tourism Destination” (ATD)** initiative was introduced in 2019 by the UN World Tourism Organization and the ONCE Foundation for Cooperation and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities. This award aims to acknowledge and enhance accessible tourism destinations. It is granted annually



Figure 20. Hola Família! Award logo [20]

through evaluation by an Expert Committee and it recognises destinations that prioritise inclusivity, ensuring a seamless experience for all tourists, irrespective of their abilities. While the first ATD was awarded in 2019, the programme has been temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Portugal received special recognition for its commitment to accessibility and development as well as implementation of travel-related products and services that are accessible to everyone, in every aspect of their design. Furthermore, the city of Porto was recognised as an Accessible Tourism Destination on that occasion, while Barcelona was noted as a destination that has really advanced in terms of accessibility. Additionally, the

Indian city of Thrissur was specifically recognised as an emerging destination because of its development in terms of accessibility and substantial engagement by government entities in this regard (UN Tourism, 2020).



Figure 21. Accessible Tourism Destination logo [21]

The **“European Capital of Smart Tourism”** award, an initiative by the European Commission, acknowledges outstanding practices in accessibility, sustainability, digitisation, and cultural heritage preservation as well as creativity. Since its inception in 2018, this award has been granted to exemplary cities across Europe, with a Compendium of

Best Practices compiled from their submissions in 2019 and 2020. Gothenburg (Sweden) and Málaga (Spain) won the 2020 European Capitals of Smart Tourism title, Valencia (Spain) and Bordeaux (France) were awarded the title of European Capitals of Smart Tourism for 2022, while Dublin was named the European Capital of Smart Tourism for 2024.

In 2025, this title was awarded to the city of Torino for its commitment to smart urban regeneration. Not only does this city boast 100% accessible buses and metro stations, but its museums and cultural sites offer a wide palette of sensory experiences where visitors with disabilities are welcome. A step forward towards inclusion and accessibility was made with the creation of the Turismabile platform in 2007. Created as a project of the Piemonte region, this platform is an information point where visitors with specific needs can check out what the city has to offer.

The annual European award for accessible cities — **“Access City Award”** — established by the European Commission in May 2010, recognises cities that have made tangible improvements in various aspects of urban accessibility. These aspects encompass the built environment, public spaces, transportation infrastructure, information and communication technologies (ICT), and public facilities and services. The award is presented to cities committed to ongoing advancements in accessibility, serving as exemplars to encourage the adoption of best practices across Europe. Notably, while the competition emphasises accessibility in the daily lives of city residents

and partially addresses accessibility in tourism offerings, specific criteria for accessible tourism products, services, and marketing are not included.

The cities which were granted this award are Borås, Sweden (2015); Milan, Italy (2016); Chester, United Kingdom (2017); Lyon, France (2018); Breda, the Netherlands (2019); Warsaw, Poland (2020); Jönköping, Sweden (2021); Luxembourg City (2022); Skellefteå, Sweden (2023); San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Spain (2024).

As the 2025 winner, Vienna's exceptional efforts to simplify the lives of people with disabilities resulted in better accessibility to public areas, public transportation, information and communication technologies, and public services. The capital city of Austria took a comprehensive approach which blends environmental, social, and economic sustainability. This is a great example of accessibility incorporated into all facets of urban life through specific projects like accessible swimming pools, intelligent traffic lights, and support for housing and employment integration. With the use of low-floor vehicles, multisensory emergency systems, and tactile guide systems, all metro stations and more than 95% of bus and tram stops in Vienna are accessible. The city's strong commitment to attaining accessibility is further evidenced by the Inclusive Vienna 2030 policy and its cooperative approach, with organisations of people with disabilities as crucial in decision-making (ENAT, n.d.).

Initiatives such as the Accessible Tourism Destination, European Capital of Smart Tourism and the Access City Award encourage destinations and cities to adopt innovative solutions to improve accessibility, thereby enhancing the quality of life for residents and the overall experience for visitors.



Figure 22. Vienna, winner of the 2025 Access City Award [22]

## 4.2. Looking Ahead: Future Branding of Accessible Tourism

As seen in the previous examples of accessible labelling, there are EU countries that have developed their own labelling schemes, either at national, regional or local levels. However, each of these labels has its own criteria and standards that must be met in order to obtain a particular label, and their users, especially those coming from abroad, may not be familiar with what exactly is behind a particular label. In the field of inclusive and accessible tourism infrastructure and services, the lack of a common standardisation and regulatory framework poses significant challenges, including:

- Competing national standards within the European market
- Obstacles for travellers with disabilities, who struggle to access reliable information on the accessibility standards and quality of tourism services and infrastructure.

Eichhorn et al. (2008) point out that existing accessibility tourism information schemes often fall short in meeting the needs of tourists with disabilities, highlighting the need for a pan-European approach. As demonstrated by the NOP Consumer study (2003), the credibility of accessibility of products and services can only be established if a three-stage process is followed (NOP Consumer, 2003):

- Existence of standards and criteria that are preferably set by a respected disability-related organisation,
- Assessment of facilities against the standards and criteria by an independent authoritative body, and
- Dissemination of clear and detailed information including the criteria that led to the accreditation.

Gillovic and McIntosh (2020) further stress the importance of inclusive outcomes in accessible tourism, calling for increased involvement of people with disabilities as tourism producers and consumers.

With a goal of answering these challenges, ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) emerged as a collaborative effort among nine sponsoring organisations spanning six EU Member States. The association was established in January 2006, with the primary objectives of advocating



for accessible tourism, facilitating collaboration among stakeholders, and promoting policies that enhance accessibility for travellers with disabilities. ENAT works towards fostering inclusiveness in the tourism sector, ensuring that destinations, accommodations, and services are accessible to all, thus enabling equitable travel experiences for everyone. Among these goals, the ENAT Code of Good Conduct and the ENAT World Tourism for All Quality Programme should be mentioned.

The **ENAT Code of Good Conduct** serves as both a commitment label and a certification programme for public and private enterprises and organisations. It acknowledges their dedication to advancing accessible travel and tourism by recognising their efforts in this regard (ENAT, 2009).



Figure 23. ENAT organisation logo [23]

The **World Tourism for All Quality Programme** is offered exclusively by ENAT to tourism operators who strive to deliver the highest standards of excellence in accessible tourism services.

Designed to accommodate businesses of diverse types and sizes, the programme ensures inclusiveness across the entire tourism value chain. It promotes sustainable, responsible, and accessible tourism practices in line with the principles of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism advocated by the UN World Tourism Organization. The program is exclusively delivered through its licensed agents and overseen by an independent supervisory board.

The initial certifications under the World TFA Quality Programme were awarded to three hotels operated by the Gleneagle Group, a family-run enterprise in Killarney, Ireland. This group is dedicated to becoming Ireland's foremost hotel and leisure provider through a welcoming environment as well as ensuring accessibility for all guests. Therefore, the Access Policy and Action Plan of the Gleneagle Group aim to enhance accessibility for individuals with impairments, including those related to mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive disabilities, and other impairments. Unfortunately, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism businesses, this programme was suspended in 2020 (ENAT, 2023).

The implementation and adoption of a label varies from one country to another. Some countries may have developed their own national accessibility labels or certification schemes that align with the principles of inclusive tourism, while in some countries there is no formal label in use. This inconsistency, together with unclear guidelines across countries for making tourism facilities and services accessible, continues to pose significant barriers. Overcoming these challenges depends on actively promoting accessible and inclusive tourism and encouraging best practices. Moreover, by implementing standardised accessibility labels and certifications tourism providers can offer clear, reliable information to travellers with disabilities, thereby enhancing their travel experience and confidence. Such initiatives not only empower individuals with disabilities to explore new destinations but also encourage tourism operators to adopt inclusive practices. Ultimately, a cohesive approach to accessibility labelling and promotion can foster a more inclusive tourism industry, benefiting both travellers and service providers alike.

This is why the efforts of ENAT as an organisation are crucial in promoting accessible tourism across Europe and in collaborating with tourism stakeholders to improve accessibility and inclusiveness in the tourism sector. It is also recommended that ENAT further develops the World Tourism for All Quality Programme to provide consistency and clarity for travellers seeking inclusive and accessible destinations and services.

Through a systematic comparison of various national strategic plans and practices across the EU, it can be concluded that different countries address the issue of accessibility in tourism in different ways. While labels can be employed as a specific “soft policy” instrument, as exemplified by environmental labels, accessibility labels serve to inform customers of accessibility features that can be expected at a particular destination, site or facility, catering to different types of needs. While quality, environmental and cultural labels in tourism are employed for the purposes of communication and promotion towards the general market, accessibility labels hold particular significance for very specific target groups. Such labels can be compared to those indicating a facility's suitability for cyclists, pet owners or families with children. However, labels referring to accessibility and inclusiveness hold more significance compared to the other labels that might be relevant to the general public or other user groups.

The authors' desktop research into accessibility label systems in Europe revealed that while, some systems are highly proactive and up-to-date in terms of relevant information and guides, many, particularly those funded by EU projects, have experienced a period of stagnation following the initial surge of activities and certifications. This is particularly evident in the concept initiated by ENAT for the global "World Tourism for All Quality Programme", which was suspended due to the impact of the 2020 pandemic and has not yet been revived.


Therefore, the key question is whether it would be more beneficial to develop new labelling schemes for accessible tourism offerings or to employ modern technologies and rely on new sources of feedback, such as user reviews and mobile applications, to ensure the quality and effective promotion of accessible products and services, and to develop trust among users.

The authors recommend pursuing further development and growth of the existing, well-recognised national and regional accessible tourism labels. Additionally, the potential for developing similar schemes in countries lagging in terms of information and overall development of accessible tourism offerings should be explored. The objective of these new initiatives would be to encourage destination decision-makers and, in particular, private tourist stakeholders to enhance their visibility and attract new target groups, especially during off-season periods. It is recommended that these labelling schemes be initiated and financed by public sector stakeholders. In order to raise awareness of this topic among tourist services providers and destination authorities, it is also essential that they include an educational and consultancy component.

It is nonetheless recommended to optimise the existing information and promotion systems and develop new ones, tailored to assistive technology and based on universal design principles, given the current resources available. It is recommended that the aforementioned type of intervention be conducted with appropriate communication directed towards potential tourists with disabilities. This approach may prove more successful than the one that does not take such individuals into account, even in the absence of an official accessibility label.

In tourism, labelling various infrastructure, facilities or services indicates that their providers voluntarily adopt measures in sustainability, inclusiveness or other fields that goes beyond legal requirements. In contrast to other labels in tourism, accessibility labels represent a more specialised focus and provide key information on access for people with a variety of needs, addressing concerns such as mobility, hearing loss or visual impairments. In addition to labelling programmes, a number of awards promote accessible destinations in Europe. ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) was established as a cooperative endeavour to address the difficulties brought about by the lack of a unified standardisation and legislative framework. ENAT's efforts to promote and advance accessibility and inclusivity in the travel industry resulted in the ENAT World Tourism for All Quality Programme and the ENAT Code of Good Conduct. A label's recognition and implementation differ from one country to another — while there may not be an official label in use in certain countries, others may have created their accessibility labels or certification programmes that adhere to inclusive tourism principles.

Significant obstacles still exist because of this discrepancy as well as the lack of clear guidelines for providing accessible tourism facilities and services. Nevertheless, considering the present resources available, it is advised to optimise the existing information and promotion systems and create new ones, based on universal design principles and tailored to assistive technology.





Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio





# **BEST PRACTICES IN ACTION: SHOWCASING ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN TOURISM**

- 5.1. Airports as Hubs of Accessibility**
- 5.2. Making Accommodation Facilities More Accessible**
- 5.3. Sun and Fun by the Sea for Everyone**
- 5.4. Inclusive Outdoor/Nature-based Experiences**
- 5.5. Making Castles and Museums Inclusive**

## 5.1. Airports as Hubs of Accessibility

Accessibility of airports is typically discussed from the perspective of persons with reduced mobility (PRM). In transport terminology, PRM is a person whose mobility is reduced when using transport because of a physical disability (sensory or locomotor), intellectual impairment, age, illness or other disability and whose condition requires special assistance and adaptation to his or her needs of the services made available to all passengers. Since 2008, airports have been responsible for providing assistance to persons with reduced mobility and there are specific categories of PRM as well as quality parameters that allow airports to offer different PRM assistance services. Apart from individual assistance to PRMs, the airports should continuously invest in and plan improvements to enhance service and experience for all passenger categories.

According to the ACI World Insights (2022), some of the accessibility features that can improve the overall passenger experience for all (including the persons with disabilities) are:

- Universal food and service counters for people using wheeled mobility devices,
- Low-resistance carpeting — easier for wheeled mobility devices while providing improved acoustics for people who are hard of hearing,
- Using texture and colour to assist with wayfinding,
- Curb side assistance on request,
- Accessible parking and shuttle bus services,
- Universal seating throughout the terminals,
- Universally accessible common washrooms and dedicated accessible family washrooms,
- Pre- and post-security pet relief areas for individuals travelling with assistance animals,
- Public address systems that are friendly to people using assistive listening devices, including hearing aids,
- Back-lit directional signage and consistent wayfinding techniques throughout the terminals, and
- Management and customer care staff that have received disability awareness training.



It is imperative that the precise level of accessibility at the airport be clearly communicated to final users. One of the options is to integrate additional information into existing official airport websites, either under the general “Assistance and Inclusion” tab or by dividing them into specific categories (families with children, senior citizens, categories of PRMs, etc.). Not to forget, airport websites need to be in line with standards for accessibility of information (more information on those standards and their importance can be found in subchapter 2.1.).

Another method of increasing visibility, which is not only focused on transport and airports (where it is often implemented), is to participate in the “Hidden Disabilities Sunflower” programme. This programme enables users (passengers) to voluntarily disclose information regarding any disability or condition that may not be immediately apparent, but may require assistance, understanding or additional time in shops, on transport or in public spaces (Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, n.d.).



Figure 24. Hidden Disabilities Sunflower programme logo [24]

Airports which participate in this programme have information about it on their official website and offer passengers with hidden disabilities or their companions the possibility to request a mark/lanyard with the sunflower symbol. Wearing that mark is voluntary, but it enables airport staff to discreetly recognise those passengers who may need more help, time and understanding during their stay at the airport.

In addition to the “Hidden Disabilities Sunflower” programme which focuses on a particular category of people, airports can also increase the quality and visibility of their accessible and inclusive services by participating in the “Accessibility Enhancement Accreditation Program”. Implemented by the ACI World — Airport Council International, the programme focuses on long-term support and increased visibility of accessible airports at the international level. The accreditation encompasses improvements in accessibility policy

plans and governance, airport design and infrastructure, organisational culture and operations, airport stakeholders and partners, ICT to support the passengers' journey and customer experience. The programme also considers various forms of disabilities, including physical, hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities (ACI World, n.d.).

### Krakow Airport, Poland

Krakow Airport is one of the most accessible European airports and also ranks high in terms of the quality and availability of information (Krakow Airport Poland, n.d.a). It has very detailed information on assistance for people with disabilities, including different +categories of PRM. There is also a special "blue path" at the airport, which is actually a system of signs and special help points which aims to facilitate the movement of individuals with disabilities throughout the airport and towards terminal facilities (Krakow Airport, n.d.a). While giving special consideration to people with disabilities (including hidden disabilities), Krakow airport also provides on its website, dedicated information for people who travel with children, animals, unaccompanied minors, as well as pregnant woman. For example, for people travelling with children, the airport area offers play areas, baby care facilities, vending machines with baby products, baby changing facilities in both ladies' and gentlemen's toilets, and free use of the airport's pushchairs (Krakow airport, n.d.b).



Figure 25. Krakow airport Terminal T2 (Arrivals) [25]

## Tokio Haneda Airport, Japan

Tokyo Haneda Airport (also known as Tokyo International Airport) is a prime example of an airport committed to meeting the diverse needs of its passengers. With the goal of creating a stress-free environment and enjoyable travel, the airport's official website has a dedicated page for customers who require special assistance. The page also contains information on initiatives related to barrier-free access and universal design. Furthermore, clear information is provided for customers with mobility, hearing, vision, and speaking impairments, as well as those with developmental, intellectual or mental disabilities.



Figure 26. Assistance dog toilet at Tokyo Haneda Airport [26]

Tokyo Haneda offers a plethora of services and amenities designed to accommodate customers that require special assistance (Haneda Airport, n.d.):

- Information counter (wheelchairs/strollers' loan, writing communication boards and communication support boards available for speaking- and hearing-impaired customers)
- Accessible stations (drop off area, parking, etc.)
- Special assistance reservation (qualified "Care-Fitter" staff to assist)
- "Calm down, cool down" areas created to help people who have trouble calming down with a goal of preventing panic attacks (especially for those living with dementia or other developmental, intellectual or mental disabilities)

- Telephone relay service (ensuring interpreter operator of sign language or text and voice for individuals with hearing or speech difficulties)
- Information on universal facilities
- Multipurpose toilets (tailored for people in wheelchairs, seniors, people with ostomates, infants, toddlers, etc.)
- Assistance dog toilets
- Clinic
- Drugstore
- AED devices for defibrillation
- Hidden disabilities sunflower (initiative to create optimal environment for guests with intellectual/mental impairments or other invisible illnesses such as diabetes and dementia)
- Autonomous wheelchair (WHILL autonomous service).

In addition to this, the airport is accessible for arrivals and departures, with fully accessible subway and monorail trains providing direct connections to the city centre. Wheelchair users have the option of using taxi vehicles or the airport limousine bus.

Haneda has gained global recognition for its commitment to ensuring that every passenger has a smooth travel experience, regardless of their physical or mental abilities.



Figure 27. Autonomous wheelchair that operates in the departure security area of each terminal at Tokyo Haneda Airport [27]

## 5.2. Making Accommodation Facilities More Accessible

Designing accessible accommodation is a complex challenge that requires recognising the diverse needs of individuals with different types of disabilities. Whilst accessibility is most often associated with wheelchair users, in order to create a truly inclusive environment, it is essential to address a wide spectrum of disabilities. This includes mobility impairments that do not require wheelchairs, sensory, cognitive and other disabilities, as well as other factors that may impact guests' comfort during their stay at an accommodation (age, education, pregnancy, allergies, food restrictions, etc.). For instance, a person using a wheelchair may require features such as a step-free entry, wider doorways, roll-in showers, and adjustable furniture. On the other hand, a blind individual would benefit from tactile wayfinding aids, braille signage, and auditory announcements. A person with a feather allergy might also require specific adjustments to their accommodation, while a person with cognitive or hidden disabilities has a completely different set of needs, usually very specific to their individual state and diagnosis.

The one-size-fits-all approach to accessibility is inadequate in meeting the diverse requirements of users, although universal design principles offer a solid foundation for the creation of spaces that are designed to meet varied needs from the start, with the potential for future adjustments. Therefore, creating accessible accommodation offerings in tourism can be viewed as a complex interplay between consumer demand, tourism supply and government coordination/regulation (Darcy, 2011). In this context, an initiative was launched in Portugal, where the national tourism authority, Turismo de Portugal (2021), supported the publication of a practical guide to accessibility in tourist accommodation, which lists "the variables that must be taken into account in a hotel unit that wants to be accessible and inclusive" (Ferreira & Villares, 2024; Turismo de Portugal, 2021, 24-25):

- Compliance of the infrastructure of the entire accommodation establishment with international accessibility standards and national legislation;
- Qualification of care and service for customers with disabilities;
- Fostering teamwork between all employees, taking into account social responsibility and the image of the tourist establishment;

- Recruitment of staff with disabilities in whom tourists with functional diversity can see themselves in the tourist resources and destinations they are looking for;
- Networking with partners from other areas of the destination to create an accessible and integrated tourism offer.

This practical guide to accessibility in tourist accommodation presents a way to promote inclusivity in tourist accommodation not only in Portugal but can be a good example for accommodation establishments across Europe, providing good starting points to help establishments meet the diverse needs of all travellers. This type of accommodation will enable customers to use the available facilities independently and to move around comfortably.



Figure 28. Practical guide on accessibility in tourist accommodation [28]

As stressed in previous chapters of the book, for all tourism offering providers, it is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal role that the pre-trip phase plays in the travel decision-making process for individuals with temporary, permanent or situational disabilities. In this context, the accessibility of information pertaining to accommodation facilities and their specific features assumes paramount importance (Vigolo & Simeoni, 2023).

Accessibility of information and physical infrastructure is only one aspect of creating inclusive accommodation facilities. Equally important is the education and training of staff to assist and communicate effectively with guests who have disabilities. Incorporating disability-awareness training into employee development programmes not only improves service quality but also demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity. Guests with disabilities are more likely to feel welcomed and valued when they encounter knowledgeable and empathetic staff.

There is a multitude of examples of hotels, campsites and other accommodation establishments that have achieved a high level of accessibility. These examples



represent merely a small fraction of the extensive and constantly growing global system of inclusive accommodation.

### **Middelpunt Hotel, Middelkerke, Belgium**

One exemplary accommodation holding the A+ label and ‘+ Extra Care Framework’ within VISITFLANDERS label is the Middelpunt Hotel in Middelkerke (see more information about VISITFLANDERS label in subchapter 4.1.). It offers a seamless blend of comfort and comprehensive care services. Having in mind the needs of guests with disabilities and/or (high) care needs, this hotel provides (VISITFLANDERS, 2024):

- Accessibility: Easy access with ample clearance, wheelchair-friendly reception, spacious lifts, and key areas on the ground floor
- Dining: Sufficient space for wheelchairs in the restaurant, with tables designed for easy manoeuvring
- Facilities: forty-four adapted rooms, of which five have ceiling hoists (high level care rooms), roll-in showers, adjustable bathtubs, and accessible sinks; safety rails and manoeuvring space in bathrooms
- Additional Services: Allergy-friendly rooms, dietary accommodations, various aids, nursing services, braille elevator buttons, and low-stimulus décor
- Infrared wellness area for wheelchair users.

Middelpunt exemplifies top-tier accessible accommodation, ensuring a comfortable, inclusive, and relaxing stay for all guests.



Figure 29. Middelpunt hotel [29]



## Scandic Hotel Chain

Scandic Hotels, the largest hotel operator in the Nordic countries, with 224 hotels, has made accessibility for all individuals one of its key priorities.

The first step was to ensure information accessibility — the hotels' web pages have a "Special needs" tab under the "About the hotel" section. In this manner, it is possible to prepare each stage of the journey in advance and obtain significant information, including about the parking area for people with disabilities, the width or height of the bed, and the availability of smart solutions such as instructions in Braille or a hearing loop for conference meetings.

The Scandic Grand Örebro hotel is a great example of barrier-free accommodation. Its offer adheres to the Design for All principles (Scandichotels, n.d.):

- Non revolving, wide entrance door (minimum width of 80 cm)
- Door/s can be opened automatically at main entrance
- Nighttime doorbell, accessible from wheelchair
- Seating available close to main entrance
- Corridors in hotel accessible with wheelchair
- Portable hearing loop available for meeting rooms
- Disability toilet available in meeting and conference areas
- Disability rooms with bed height is 55 cm from floor to top of mattress, accessible wardrobe without doors or with sliding doors, minimum of 80 cm free floor space around the bed
- Bathroom with reachable hooks and towels, mirror, wash basin, shower hand and available shower stool.

Moreover, the hotel's public areas (including restaurants and bar) and parking are fully accessible for people with disabilities. As in all other Scandic hotels, their commitment to accessibility and inclusion is visible in the fact that their staff is trained to cater to guests with disabilities.



Figure 30. Standard Twin Accessibility room in Scandic Grand Örebro [30]

### Camping Martbusch and Auf Kengert in Luxembourg

Camping Martbusch and Auf Kengert in Luxembourg stand out as models of accessibility accommodation under the EureWelcome label. These campsites are dedicated to providing an experience for all guests by offering adapted and accessible facilities for people with limited mobility, hearing and visual impairments. To be more precise, in camping Auf Kengert there is an arm-supported toilet, a wall-mounted shower chair, and an en-suite sink with a moving mirror. To get from the wheelchair to the bathroom or shower and return, there is a trapezium. The unit is large enough to provide enough space for wheelchair users.

Moreover, guests can access the swimming pool through a separate entrance, and an alternative path can be used to access the restaurant and shop.



Figure 31. Camping entrance and the swimming pool access area [31]

### 5.3. Sun and Fun by the Sea for Everyone

Regardless of the constant changes in tourism trends, the allure of coastal areas and beach destinations for recreational activities, relaxation, and enjoyment of natural beauty makes beach tourism still a highly sought-after vacation choice (Abbasi, 2023). It is especially evident when considering that visits to the beach are beneficial in terms of improved health and psychological well-being (Santana-Santana et al., 2021).

There is a large number of public and non-governmental initiatives specifically aimed at making beaches accessible to all and one of the best organised initiatives is active in Australia under the name Accessible Beaches Australia. This non-for-profit organisation works with persons with disabilities and their families, life-saving clubs and the government in order to raise awareness and contribute to making Australian beaches more accessible (Accessible Beaches, n.d.a). They also manage an online beach directory with key information on accessible beaches, their location, amenities, overall accessibilities, and additional services they offer for people with disabilities (Accessible Beaches, n.d.b).

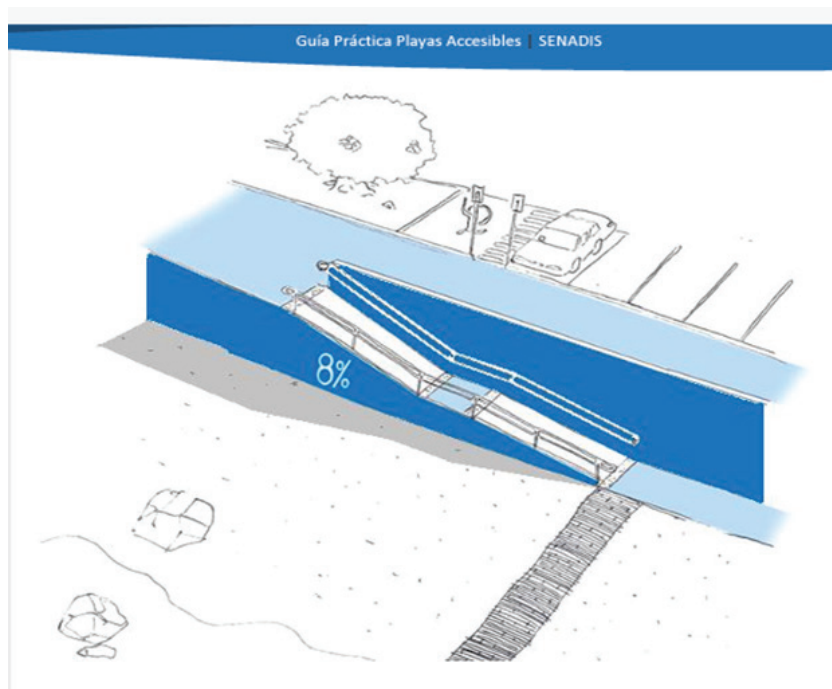


Figure 32. Accessible path to the beach [32]

Combined efforts to improve beach accessibility have resulted in a large number of available online manuals with very detailed guidelines on how to make beaches more accessible and inclusive, based on specific needs and different types of beaches. Figure 27 is retrieved from the manual on accessible beaches in Chile which is part of a long-term partnership between Chilean institutions (SENADIS, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2018). Desktop research revealed that most of these guidelines focus on the physical accessibility of beaches for people in wheelchairs, and efforts are concentrated on wheelchair-friendly beach design in terms of ramps and beach matting, as well as accessible toilets, showers and changing rooms. The ability to hire beach wheelchairs is also highly valued, as are parking facilities with accessible paths to the beach. However, manuals on beach inclusivity for people with other types of disability are less common.

On the other hand, family-friendly/child-friendly beaches are far more present in terms of promotion and marketing of such beaches (with a special focus on play areas), but also quite vague in terms of what makes them particularly “friendly” for children (and their parents/guardians). For instance, beaches that have been designed or adapted to accommodate individuals with disabilities, particularly those who use wheelchairs, can also be highly suitable for families with young children in strollers. In addition, the needs of the growing number of elderly beachgoers should also be considered, which brings us to the critical importance of using universal design principles in the development and management of beach infrastructure and in the promotion of beaches as tourist attractions.

While it is important to understand that not every beach can be made accessible due to topography and other contextual characteristics, there should be no excuse for not making information on beach characteristics, accessibility, and available facilities accessible and up-to-date at all times for the best interests of all potential beach users.

### **Nazaré Beach, Nazaré, Portugal**

Nazaré Beach has been recognised as Portugal’s most accessible and inclusive beach since 2008, with continuous improvements made to the infrastructure. The avenue was renovated, with the elevation of pedestrian crossings, which have tactile signage for blind people. Moreover, in order to help them locate beach services, a 3D map featuring Braille indications has been placed at the

beach entrance. More parking spaces reserved for people with reduced mobility were also built, and they are free of charge. Specially designed ramps were placed there to provide easier access to the beach due to the existing unevenness of the terrain. They feature a podotactile floor as well (Portugal Agent, n.d.).

Foot washers accessible to people in wheelchairs have been installed, allowing them to lean over and reach the button that activates the washer. Signs have been placed along the sand that indicate the two zones created for people with reduced mobility, with an area of shading (pergolas) and access to the bathing area, through a conveyor belt. The beach also has the ColorAdd system for colour blind people, providing information about the state of the sea and containers for selective waste collection. Praia da Nazaré won 1st place in the “Praia + Acessível” Award in 2018 and 2nd place in the 2020 edition of the same Award.



Figure 33. Compilation of pictures of accessible elements of Praia da Nazaré [33]

Additionally, “[praiaparatodos.cm-nazare.pt](http://praiaparatodos.cm-nazare.pt)” page was created in accordance with accessibility standards for visually impaired people. It contains information about the beach and its services, trained lifeguards, and concessionaires and on how to interact with users with disabilities.

### Plage Lumière, La Ciotat, France

France is devoted to creating accessible surroundings and accommodating everyone on the beach. This commitment is reflected in the Handiplage label (more information on this label can be found in the section 4.1.1. National Accessibility Labels).

Plage Lumière is a beach located in La Ciotat, a coastal town in the Bouches-du-Rhône department in southern France. La Ciotat has a long coastline, where three specific beaches offer diversity for all audiences. One of them is the Lumière beach which carries the Tourisme & Handicap and Handiplage labels.

All necessary information regarding the beach is available on the Handiplage website, which simplifies planning before arrival. In addition to lifeguards, this beach has thirteen educated handiplayers, as special personnel, educated to assist people with diverse needs. There is a large number of parking spaces for people with disabilities, with lower sidewalks near it and access ramps. The paths to the beach are also equipped with guide strips for visually impaired or blind people. On the beach, there are eight amphibious floating wheelchairs (tiralos). The beach offers accessible and adapted sanitary facilities and services such as toilets, showers, and changing rooms with equally adapted signage and information about it.



Figure 34. Entrance to the Lumière beach [34]

In addition to this, the city itself is focused on offering senior and family friendly services in order to promote an inclusive experience. There is an ongoing project to redevelop several public spaces with the objective to rethink and promote a more pleasant and accessible living environment. Through this, emphasis is put on soft mobility, greening, and improving public spaces for all users. One of the focus areas in this project is access to the seaside for the elderly and families.

## 5.4. Inclusive Outdoor/Nature-based Experiences

Nature-based tourism is one of the fastest growing types of tourism and it involves different activities based on the observation and appreciation of nature, usually also comprising recreational activities in a natural setting (UN Tourism, n.d.c). Engaging with natural environments and ecosystems characteristic for nature-based tourism can include activities such as: wildlife observation, hiking, birdwatching, eco-tourism, visits to national parks, protected areas, and other natural attractions. Benefits from engaging in nature-based tourism for tourists and visitors include relief from stress, and increased physical and psychological well-being (Puhakka et al., 2017), as well as perceived health benefits in terms of a faster recovery (Bell et. al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, many people with disabilities are in risk of losing benefits of a nature-based setting due to the combination of a disabling environment and other structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers, including social perceptions on what persons with disabilities can and cannot do (McKercher & Darcy, 2018; Wall-Reinus et al., 2023). The creation of nature-based tourism offerings for visitors and tourists presents a significant challenge for public authorities and private actors alike. It necessitates the development of diverse products and services, while ensuring the protection of natural resources. This entails limiting the expansion of built infrastructure and ensuring nature conservation, along with minimising disruption to the natural environment. The provision of nature-based experiences for people with disabilities presents an even more significant challenge, particularly in light of the potential necessity for additional infrastructure and interventions, such as paved surfaces and wider trails (Wall-Reinus et al., 2023). It is therefore essential to exercise great sensitivity in balancing the needs of persons with (usually physical) disabilities and the specific context of each natural area.

At the planning stage of designing inclusive nature-based tourism experiences, it is crucial to involve people with disabilities in the planning as representatives of the target group. Perhaps their perspectives on experiencing nature do not inherently necessitate significant environmental modifications (e.g. broad concrete paths) that could alienate users from a sense of connection to nature (Wall-Reinus et al., 2023). Instead, thoughtful adaptations can foster a sense of wilderness and facilitate personal challenges for individuals with disabilities



without confining them to designated areas solely for “disabled people” (Tregaskis 2004; Zhang et al., 2017; Corazon et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is often a lack of clear and detailed information regarding the level and type of accessibility of each natural area, which significantly discourages people with disabilities from visiting them.

As part of a joint effort to make recreational activities in nature more accessible, specialised agencies and organisations offer **adaptive hiking** experiences. This approach is characteristic mainly for North America (Canada and the United States of America). Adaptive hiking is considered the “practice of making hiking trails and outdoor experiences accessible to people of all abilities, including those with mobility, sensory or cognitive impairments. It’s about modifying hiking equipment and tailoring trail design to ensure everybody has the opportunity to experience the serenity and joy of nature; it’s also about reshaping perceptions and fostering inclusivity (AdventureITE, n.d.).

To make the hiking experience more inclusive, adaptive hiking relies on a combination of (AdventureITE, n.d.):

- trail design (wider trails with gentle slopes, more stable surfaces and clear signage);
- adaptive equipment such as specialised wheelchairs designed for rugged terrain, harness systems, all-terrain crutches and walkers, tactile maps for visually impaired hikers, etc.;
- guided hikes and programmes (guided adaptive hikes where trained guides accompany hikers along trails and provide assistance and adaptive equipment to ensure a safe, enjoyable experience tailored to individual needs).

The examples provided in this subchapter are primarily focused on illustrating effective strategies for enhancing accessibility of natural areas for individuals with mobility disabilities, but they also showcase an overall heightened awareness of the importance of inclusive tourism development.

## Hoge Kempen National Park (Flanders, Belgium)

In Hoge Kempen National Park, accessible walking routes have been established, such as the 1.5 km Zandloper path in Mechelse Heide which guides visitors through a former sand quarry and shows the park's characteristic biotopes.



Figure 35. Zandloper path in Mechelse Heide [35]

The park also boasts highly accessible attractions, including Entopolis in Lieteberg and Cosmodrome in Kattevennen, which provide insights into the worlds of insects and astronomy, respectively. Joekelbos, a large adventure playground, includes a partially paved path suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs. Moreover, visitors can join a ranger on an adapted route, specifically designed to accommodate individuals with disabilities. Thanks to the availability of two special off-road wheelchairs, it is also possible to explore the national park on unpaved paths.

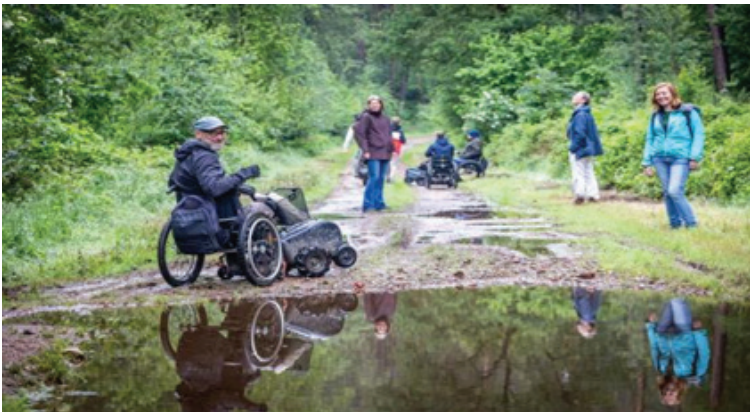


Figure 36. Accessible routes in National Park Hoge Kempen [36]

## Accessible Trails in Finnish National Parks

Dozens of accessible trails are available in regions all over Finland, with the longest being 3,8 km long and situated in Liesjärvi National Park. Finnish accessible trails are divided into two categories: “regular” accessible trails (usually hard-surfaced, and in most cases suitable for wheelchair users to navigate without any assistance) and “demanding”, meaning that the surface may be softer and slightly uneven, and the trail may have a steeper gradient, therefore potentially requiring a personal assistant (Mäkinen, 2023).

Logo for accessible trails



Logo for demanding trails



Figure 37. Logos of different types of trails in Finnish national parks [37]

Accessible trails typically have an accessible dry toilet or WC and a campfire site, while many places also have an accessible bird tower or viewing platform for observing nature. Still, for visitors using mobility aids it is strongly advised to have an assistant on most of the trails or to use the services of specialised companies, available at many Finnish nature sites. Moreover, almost all visitor centres and other customer service points are located in accessible buildings.

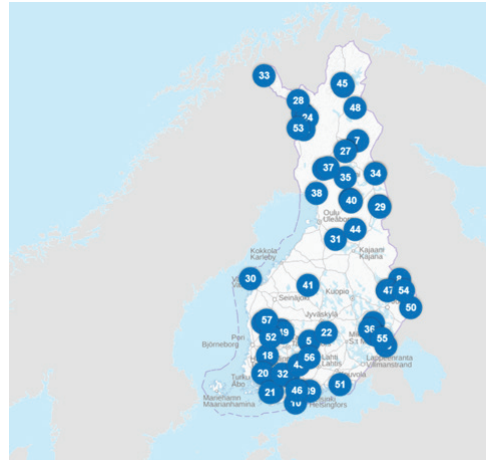


Figure 38. Map of accessible destinations around Finnish National Parks [38]

All details and offers of accessible trails can be found on the website of Finnish national parks (National Parks Finland, n.d.), and there is a map that can be searched using the option “accessible destinations”. At the time of writing, there were fifty-seven accessible destinations in Finnish national parks, as shown in Figure 38.

## Universal Access Program (Massachusetts, USA)



Figure 39. Adaptive hiking [39]

The Department of Conservation & Recreation of the State of Massachusetts implements the Universal Access Program. The programme is dedicated to providing outdoor recreation opportunities in Massachusetts state parks for visitors of all abilities, and accessibility is achieved through site improvements, specialised adaptive recreation equipment, and accessible recreation programmes. It is a year-round programme consisting of Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn programme seasons, and it is conducted with the support of local specialised partners (agencies and organisations working with people with disabilities).

Activities organised in a nature-based setting include: adaptive (tandem) cycling, adaptive cross-country skiing, adaptive hiking, etc.

### Bliznec forest trail, Medvednica Nature Park, Croatia

Another example of making nature accessible to everyone is the Bliznec Forest Trail in the Medvednica Nature Park, close to the Croatian capital, Zagreb. The trail is 800 metres long and is dotted with educational panels highlighting the rich history, flora and fauna of this part of Medvednica. As well as being wheelchair accessible and suitable for families with young children, all the information texts are in Braille, ensuring accessibility for blind and partially sighted visitors. The idea behind the construction of this path was the adoption of healthy habits, the promotion of spending time in nature, but also empathy and inclusion (Medvednica Nature Park, n.d.). Moreover, in 2021, this trail was included in the “Accessibility and Inclusive Tourism Development in Nature Areas – Compendium of Best Practices” published by World Tourism Organisation (World Tourism Organisation, 2021).



Figure 40. Bliznec Forest trail [40]

## 5.5. Making Castles and Museums Inclusive

Both **castles** and **museums** are repositories of cultural, historical, and artistic significance. They serve as venues for education, storytelling, and the preservation of heritage. Castles often embody architectural and historical narratives, while museums curate and interpret artifacts, art, and historical materials. Despite their differences in form, both are spaces where cultural identity and collective memory are celebrated, making them crucial elements of cultural tourism.

From the perspective of accessibility, castles and museums share common challenges and opportunities. Both address physical barriers, such as stairs and uneven surfaces, as well as the need for protection and limited access to valuable artefacts. In terms of accessibility, many castles present particular challenges due to their historical defence-oriented architecture, which is designed to prevent unauthorised access (e.g. fortified castles). Still, in ensuring inclusive interpretation castles as well as museums can use sensory aids, tactile models, and digital technologies in order to offer immersive and educational experiences to people of all abilities.

**Museums**, as a part of the cultural offer, are of great importance for the preservation and exhibition of cultural objects, but they also have an important role to play in promoting learning through educational and entertaining content and in fostering an understanding of cultural heritage. Cultural exclusion has been very common throughout history, and making culture and museums accessible and available to all is an undeniable and necessary fact that requires the adoption of measures to promote an inclusive culture, regardless of the physical, sensory, intellectual, etc. condition of the people (Gonzales-Herrera et al., 2023). Therefore, accessibility and inclusiveness of museums is crucial from the point of view of all visitors (tourists as well as local residents).

It is important to notice that many museums in old and listed buildings, as well as in buildings they do not own, struggle with the challenges of providing elements of physical accessibility such as lifts, ramps, etc. Although the situation is getting better, it is far from perfect in museums which are housed in purpose-built buildings.



In addition to (often limited) physical improvements for accessibility, investing in innovative solutions to make museums more inclusive for all categories of visitors is a sustainable and lucrative idea. For example, one of the steps forward in terms of meeting the needs of visually impaired persons is to give them the opportunity to touch, smell, and hear the information in order to experience it.

Some of the improvements in the field of implementation of ICT for increased accessibility in museums include (Garcia Carrizosa et al., 2020):

- Indoor video-guides — Location-based systems to serve 3D multimedia content for understanding architectural spaces
- Augmented Reality (AR) for providing an opportunity to experience sites and artefacts that are not accessible
- Haptic telepresence systems: e.g. robot equipped with haptic display (RGB-D sensor and haptic interface)
- Microcontrollers and sensors
- 3D printing and replicas
- Different types of mobile apps enabling people with different types of disabilities to have a higher quality experience of museums.

Accessibility improvements can be focused on a museum as a whole but can be implemented for particular exhibitions as well.

### **Natural History Museum, London, the United Kingdom**

Maybe one of the best examples of museums devoted to the development of inclusive experiences is the **Natural History Museum in London**. It is committed to providing an accessible and inclusive experience for all visitors, including those with disabilities. The museum offers a range of services and facilities to ensure that everyone can enjoy its world-class collections and exhibitions. One of the key initiatives is the Accessible Morning Visits programme, which offers early morning sessions specifically designed for disabled and neurodiverse visitors. These sessions provide a quieter and more relaxed environment with reduced crowds and noise levels. The museum also offers audio-described tours for blind and partially sighted visitors, allowing them to explore exhibitions such as “Birds: Brilliant and Bizarre” with the help of trained guides. The museum provides a friendly, accessible environment for all visitors and the widest possible access to buildings, exhibitions, and collections. For visitors with reduced mobility, the museum has step-free access and a



limited number of privileged parking spaces on site, which can be booked in advance. Inside the museum there are accessible toilets and lifts to all floors. The museum also offers a free wheelchair hire service, subject to availability. Visitors with guide dogs are welcome (Natural History Museum, n.d.).

In addition to physical accessibility, the museum also prioritises sensory accessibility. The Dawnosaurs programme offers early morning visits for neurodivergent children (including autism, ADHD, Tourette’s, OCD, and other sensory processing difficulties).

- + Luggage, cloakroom, parking and photography
- + Toilets, lifts, wheelchair hire and assistance dogs
- + Neurodiversity
- + Audio guides
- + Visually impaired visitors
- + D/deaf and hard of hearing
- + Gallery closures and maintenance works



Figure 41. Part of the website of the Natural History Museum focused on accessibility features [41]

The museum website provides detailed information on accessibility, along with a guide to facilities for visitors with disabilities. This includes information on luggage storage, cloakrooms, and parking. The website also features a map of the museum showing accessible routes and facilities. The museum's commitment to accessibility extends beyond its physical spaces. The website features a range of online resources, including virtual tours and educational materials, which are designed to be accessible to a wide range of users. The Natural History Museum's dedication to accessible tourism is not only about providing equal access to its facilities and exhibitions, but also about fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for all visitors.



Figure 42. Entrance to the Birds gallery at the Natural History Museum, London [42]

### **Aquatika, freshwater aquarium, Karlovac, Croatia**

Aquatika is the first and only freshwater aquarium in Croatia, built with the aim of raising awareness of exceptional biodiversity and supporting education on the sustainable use of natural resources. It was built in 2016 and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (3LHD, n.d.). The complex is fully adapted for people with disabilities in terms of wheelchair access to the whole area, adapted toilets, low level descriptions of the contents of each aquarium, audio descriptions available, etc. It frequently visited by members of associations of people with disabilities from Croatia. In addition, in 2017 it was recognised for ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities and other

people with reduced mobility, and for the application of universal design, by receiving the Blue Flower of Accessibility award. It was selected for the award by a jury consisting of representatives of associations that gather people with all forms of disabilities, who evaluated the architectural, communication, economic and social accessibility criteria (Aquarium Karlovac, n.d.). It was also identified as an example of good practice by people with disabilities - participants in the research conducted by Gregorić and associates (2019) on the accessibility of the tourist offer in the Republic of Croatia.



Figure 43. Interior of Aquatica [43]

### Canadian Museum for Human Rights

This museum pays very close attention to accessibility and inclusion for visitors, in line with its overarching theme. The museum has been designed with accessibility as a fundamental consideration, with the objective of “guaranteeing that all members of the public, irrespective of age, background or ability, are able to experience all aspects of the museum in full” (Canadian Museum for Human Rights, n.d.). This unique museum has been designed with accessibility in mind, and visitors will find a variety of options available to them at every stage of their visit. These include parking, entrances, washrooms, elevators, strollers, mobility aids, ramps, support persons, service animals, canes and cane seats, and a mobile application (Canadian Museum for Human Rights, n.d.).

According to McRae (2019), the following seven features available at the museum are the most successful in creating an inclusive and accessible experience for everyone:

### 1. Universal Keypads

The museum uses different technology to tell the stories of human rights, including touchscreen kiosks found in almost every gallery. As a tool for bringing digital content of the museum closer to visitors who are blind or have low vision or restricted mobility, **Universal Keypads (UKP) are developed and installed. They are** large, tactile keypads that use simple symbols and audio instructions to help visitors navigate through the kiosks and discover exhibit content through audio tracks. These keypads are found beside nearly every touchscreen kiosk in the Museum and include a headphone jack and volume control for users.

### 2. Universal Access Points (UAP)

UAP helps make the museum's digital content available to everybody. To make artifacts and photographs along with their text descriptions more accessible, the museum has created its own unique system in the form of over 120 **Universal Access Points (UAP)**. Visitors can use those Universal Access Points in sync with the museum's mobile app. Cane stops allow visually impaired visitors who use a cane for navigation to locate accessible features such as Universal Access Points. Each UAP is a small metal square that features a number and a braille version of that same number, and it connects visitors to all kinds of information about an exhibit or a gallery. Using a personal wireless device, visitors can punch the number into the museum's mobile app and hear about the exhibit in front of them. In some instances, American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue de signes québécoise (LSQ) are available as well. To help visually impaired visitors locate the UAPs, there is a raised strip on the floor, indicating that a UAP is nearby.

### 3. Museum's mobile app

The mobile app, in addition to accessing the UAP information, also contains fully accessible self-guided tours and an interactive map. The tours are available in sign language and with audio description. It also contains augmented reality for certain content.

#### 4. Accessible galleries

The ramps at the museum feature double railings for different height levels and rest stops at intervals along the route. The height of exhibit displays and digital touchscreens were selected for optimal reach distances whether the user is sitting or standing. Similarly, the size and typeface of the texts on display were chosen for easy viewing. All the benches in the museum feature arms and backs. There are also over 800 metres of ramps crisscrossing from one museum gallery to another. For those who prefer, there are a number of accessible elevators providing access to any level. Finally, the museum's washrooms have also been designed to be accessible to all. Almost every level includes at least one gender-inclusive, barrier-free, single-room washroom and all of them are equipped with baby change tables.

#### 5. Tactile images

Tactile images allow visually impaired visitors to experience some of the powerful images featured in the museum's galleries through touch and sound. These three-dimensional images are accompanied by audio descriptions so that visually impaired visitors can both feel the pictures and hear descriptions of what they are touching.

#### 6. Accessible films

Much work went into creating captions and sign language interpretation for the more than 100 hours of video featured in the museum. Many also feature an option for audio description — which describes what is happening on screen — and individual volume controls.

#### 7. Accessibility online

Whenever the museum is sharing pictures on social media platforms, a photo description is provided in order to be accessed through screen readers. This way people who are visually impaired can also have insight into images the museum is sharing. For videos, the museum often adds captions for the hearing impaired as well as audio description as a part of the official website.



Figure 44. Universal keypads, universal access points and accessible galleries in CMHR. [44]

**Castles** are important cultural monuments and, depending on their condition, historical significance, state of preservation and overall appearance, are very often tourist attractions.

Making castles more accessible is a challenging task, given that many of them have significant levels of conservation protection. This severely limits the scope for infrastructural improvements (elevators, ramps, paths) and some major interventions to the interior. However, castles that successfully address accessibility challenges lay a strong foundation for enhancing their visibility and attracting more visitors.

### Haut-Koenigsbourg Castle, Alsace, France

Many castles and fortresses may not be equipped to provide inclusive experiences for different categories of people with disabilities as part of their standard offer, so it might be interesting to consider the idea of having one or more days when the castle and its staff are open (and prepared) for certain specific categories of visitors. A similar idea has been successfully implemented at the medieval castle of Haut-Koenigsbourg in Alsace, France. Almost every year, usually during one weekend in September, the castle hosts an event called “A castle for everyone” (2Un château pour tous”), which allows people with different types of disability to enjoy tailor-made visits to the castle, free of charge (Global Heritage, 2017).





Figure 45. Aerial view of the Haut-Koenigsbourg castle, Alsace, France [45]

The event includes visits in sign language (French and international sign language) for deaf visitors or multi-sensory visits for people who are blind or visually impaired. People in wheelchairs are also welcome and are assisted (carried by firefighters) around the castle. Specially adapted tours are also available for people with intellectual disabilities. Although this example does not directly demonstrate the overall idea of inclusiveness in providing tourism experiences for all, it is valuable for raising awareness and community involvement and can also be an important first step towards investing in the continuous provision of inclusive services on castle sites.



## Hoensbroek Castle, Limburg, the Netherlands

Hoensbroek Castle is the sole castle in the Netherlands to feature an elevator and is largely wheelchair accessible. It also provides a parking space for individuals with disabilities fifty meters from the entrance. Despite the castle's numerous stairs and steps, it remains relatively accessible for individuals with mobility impairments through the implementation of a specially mapped wheelchair route. The presence of assistant dogs is permitted, and families with young children can utilise the cloakroom for the storage of strollers (Kasteel Hoensbroek, n.d.).



Figure 46. Hoensbroek Castle [46]



Source: EFFEKT Architects, Rasmus Hjortshøj Studio



# **BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE: DESIGNING INCLUSIVE TOURIST DESTINATIONS**

**6.1. Conceptualising Success: Framework for Creating Accessible and Inclusive Destination Offerings**

**6.2. Develop with Care: Universal Design in Tourism Infrastructure Planning**

**6.3. Information = Promotion: Communication Dos and Don'ts for Destination Stakeholders**

**6.4. “Nothing About Us Without Us”: Cooperation with Stakeholders in Need of an Accessible Tourism Offering**

The aim of this chapter is to provide decision-makers and public and private sector authorities with practical recommendations for implementing accessible and inclusive tourism practices and therefore designing inclusive tourist destinations. The chapter presents the most pertinent findings from literature and practice, contextualising them within the framework of destination management and focusing on how to develop and promote an accessible/inclusive tourism offering. The main elements of the chapter include a conceptual framework graphically representing the efforts needed to make destinations more inclusive, recommendations for implementing universal design and assistive technologies in offerings, as well as the promotion of the destination and the description of the importance of including different target groups (people with disabilities) in tourism planning processes.



## 6.1. Conceptualising Success: Framework for Creating an Accessible and Inclusive Destination Offering

In order to create an accessible tourism offer, instead of making individual attractions more accessible, or focusing efforts only on specific tourism service providers, it is important to focus on a long-term strategy and to promote joint cooperation of all relevant tourism stakeholders (Medarić et al., 2021). In this sense, the formulation of frameworks for the implementation of accessibility and inclusivity elements can help to address the needs of different stakeholders within the tourism system. It also provides opportunity to focus efforts in providing quality services to all tourists, including people with different temporal, situational and permanent disabilities. The body of research on this topic reveals a wealth of studies that identify barriers in existing tourism destination systems, but very few that offer strategic frameworks for creating accessible travel experiences. Also, most of these frameworks offered focus on addressing the needs of specific destinations (e.g. Phuket in Fuchs, 2023), or emphasise only specific elements of accessibility, such as multisensory and smart approaches (Agapito & Guerreiro, 2023).

The framework proposed in this sub-chapter will be general in terms of implementation, but also very practical and specific in terms of addressing the key barriers and inconsistencies identified during the review of the literature, policies, labelling schemes and best practice examples.

Desktop research conducted during the creation of this book has revealed problems and great potential for further improvement in terms of accessible and inclusive tourism theory and practice. Some identified elements are as follows:

- Precise use and further clarification of terminology related to accessible and inclusive tourism,
- Harmonisation of the different criteria for specific offerings to be considered as “accessible”,
- Ensuring continuous cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities in all stages of the tourism product development, including promotion (respecting the “Nothing About Us Without Us” principle),
- Use of accessible communication tools and models to promote tourism products and services, with a particular focus on digital assistive technologies and universal design, and

- Understanding the need to be very detailed and informative about the level of accessibility achieved for different types of disabilities, but inclusive in the sense of not placing disabilities at the forefront, but rather promoting an inclusive environment.

By systematising the previously outlined research results, practical insights, and experiences from different EU countries and accessible labels, the authors propose the following simplified schematic model of the system shift from “ordinary” to inclusive tourism, with special emphasis on promoting successfully implemented accessible/inclusive solutions.

<b>0. IMPROVE USABILITY OF TOURISM PRODUCTS AND SERVICES</b> Modernisation and innovation of the products and services in response to the interests of modern tourists	
<b>1. ENABLE ACCESSIBILITY &amp; ENSURE INCLUSIVENESS</b> Learn about the different types of disabilities and how to take them into account in order to:	
<b>ENABLE ACCESSIBILITY</b>  Enable <b>physical accessibility and assistance</b> for people with certain impairments such as: physical, sensory, communicative, intellectual/mental, and “hidden” restrictions of functionality	<b>ENSURE INCLUSIVENESS</b>  Ensure the desired <b>experience and welcoming feeling</b> for all users, regardless of their particular state/disability, age, cultural, economic or educational background
<b>2. INTEGRATE &amp; PROMOTE THE TOURIST OFFERING IN AN ACCESSIBLE MANNER</b> <i>by using principles of universal design, easy language and advantages of ICT and assistive technologies</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide information on the destination’s tourism offering, including detailed information on travel options and local transport, in a way that is understandable and accessible to all. Improve/enrich existing destination information platforms with data on accessibility of the elements of the tourist offering.</li><li>• Integrate currently separate sites that provide information on inclusive and accessible products, services, activities and experiences into new itineraries and promote them through specialised campaigns.</li><li>• Apply sustainable promotional channels, without focusing on printed materials but rather on online content and web applications.</li><li>• Cooperate with the networks of people with different impairments and bring them together with tourism offering providers for the purpose of creating and promoting new inclusive experiences.</li><li>• Educate employees and providers of different tourism-related services about communicating and meeting the needs of various groups of people.</li><li>• Make every effort to ensure that the experiences being promoted are inclusive of as many target groups as possible.</li></ul>	

Figure 47. Framework for the development and promotion of an accessible and inclusive destination [47]

The framework presented is a conceptual model comprising simplified steps for the development of more inclusive tourist destinations. Key focus is given to providing information on the available tourism offering and its accessibility elements, as research has shown that people with disabilities are unlikely to choose a particular destination without clear and consistent access to information on accessibility. Therefore, Step 2 in the framework is mostly oriented on the pre-trip phase of the tourist experience because the availability, accessibility, and reliability of information on access is often a prerequisite for participation in tourism and destination selection for people with disabilities (Cloquet et al., 2017).

Although the framework is primarily aimed at destination managers, it can be used by individual tourism and hospitality facility owners as a guideline for improvements. Moreover, this framework will form the basis for the practical recommendations and discussion in the subsequent subchapters.



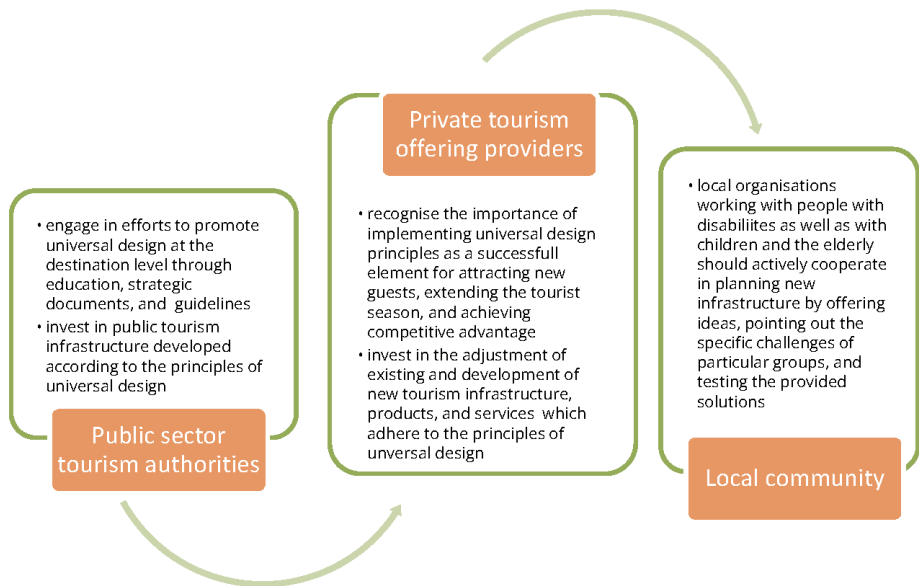
## 6.2. Develop with Care: Universal Design in Tourism Infrastructure Planning

In order to comprehend the significance of incorporating universal design principles into the planning and construction of various tourism-related infrastructure, it is essential to recognise that numerous countries have already adopted building codes and legislative frameworks that include specific accessibility requirements. These regulations frequently mandate features such as step-free entrances, ramps, accessible restrooms, and designated parking spaces, ensuring that public and private spaces are accessible to individuals with disabilities (MEOSZ et al., 2022). While these provisions represent significant progress, they frequently fall short of adopting a holistic approach to accessibility and focus usually on addressing mobility impairments while overlooking other disabilities. Moreover, accessibility elements are very often implemented with minimal compliance (just to “tick the box”) and without thinking about inclusive solutions.

As explained in subchapter 2.2., universal design goes beyond basic compliance by creating spaces, products, and environments that are inherently usable by all people, regardless of their age, ability or circumstance.

In considering the five components of a destination system — Access, Accommodation, Attractions, Activities, and Amenities — it is imperative to recognise that the accessibility of almost all of these components (apart from accommodation) is of great importance not only to tourists, but also to the local residents. Consequently, enhanced usability and social inclusion resulting from universally designed spaces prove to be equally beneficial for both of those categories.

In line with the proposed “Framework for the development and promotion of an accessible and inclusive destination” presented in the previous subchapter, the following scheme outlines the key considerations for implementing universal design in tourism for various categories of destination tourism stakeholders.



**Figure 48.** Role of stakeholders in enabling accessibility & ensuring inclusiveness of destination through universal design [48]

Figure 48 illustrates the key roles of three major stakeholder groups in implementing universal design into a destination's offering. It is vital to emphasise the significance of partnership among stakeholders, motivation, and collaborative efforts in ensuring that destinations are genuinely inclusive at all levels.

### 6.3. Information = Promotion: Communication Dos and Don'ts for Destination Stakeholders

It can be stated that the main intention and purpose of promotion is to inspire potential tourists to visit destinations and facilities and to engage with the products and services that are available (Halpern et al., 2024). When thinking about promotion in tourism, especially in relation to accessible tourism, it is important to understand that “customer satisfaction depends highly on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of specific information on destinations’ accessibility, facilities, attractions and activities” (Buhalis, 1998). Therefore, promotion can be viewed as precise and targeted information related to the offering of a particular destination or tourist facility.

Goossens (2000) stated that taking part in tourism activities depends on a decision-making process which includes two modes: “information processing” and “affective choice”. In terms of the information processing mode, potential tourists evaluate the qualities of products and services based on criteria such as price, facilities, and service quality. Naturally, people with certain disabilities additionally need very detailed access information among other pertinent elements (Cloquet et al., 2017). In the absence of the aforementioned information, it is unlikely that they will select the destination or facility, regardless of all its other appealing elements. When it comes to “affective choice”, quality promotion of a tourist offering is also of great importance because affective choice is based on a preference for some attributes of the activity or place, and it is influenced by marketing (Goossens, 2000). The use of textual and visual images to elicit a positive reaction from the intended audience and the utilisation of tourism imagery for promotional purposes can significantly influence people’s opinions and alter their mindsets (Decrop, 2007). A number of studies have demonstrated that, despite the promotion of diversity in tourist materials through the visual representation of individuals from different racial and age groups, people with disabilities are seldom visually present and they are typically only included in specialised promotional materials and web sections dedicated to accessibility (Benjamin et al., 2020; Cloquet et al., 2017). Without any doubt, it is important to involve people with disabilities in the visual representation of tourism promotion as a significant step towards true inclusivity.

In the context of accessible and inclusive tourism, promotion should therefore take the form of clear, detailed and, most importantly, accessible information provision. Some of the issues pertaining to the credibility of the information provided on the accessibility of tourist offerings are already addressed in subchapter 4.1. while the importance of web accessibility was outlined in subchapter 2.1. Still, as a part of Step 2 of the “Framework for the development and promotion of an accessible and inclusive destination”, it is of the utmost importance to understand the level of priority that must be given to the richness and reliability of the information provided, to the choice of appropriate tourism information sources (with emphasis on ICT), as well as to the existence of efficient communication services and customer-oriented service, as suggested in the work of Eichhorn et al. (2008). In the process of creating accessible information on the tourism offering at destination level, it is important to understand in more depth the specific needs of different categories of persons with disabilities and to incorporate very detailed and specific information about how those needs are addressed on site. If a particular product, service or experience within a destination is not entirely accessible for people with a certain impairment, it is important to clearly describe the existing situation and, where possible, offer assistance of the staff for overcoming certain barriers. For example, in a museum, if there is a part of the exhibit that is available for blind people (audio-guide, signs with Braille), it is important to also include the information on the accessibility of the site as a whole, and alternatives for identified barriers for potential visitors with sight impairments. Incomplete, inaccurate, and generalised information can easily discourage people with disabilities from the visit.

When developing systems to appropriately inform tourists with different and specific needs, while promoting the most suitable tourism destinations, services and products, there are many challenges that are not usually found when developing traditional tourism information systems and some of them include (Ribeiro et al., 2018):

## **Stakeholder involvement**

Tourism stakeholders should work together to provide a wide range of accessible tourism products and services. Initiatives showing synergies between the knowledge of users' needs and the professional experience of tourism sector enterprises are very important. Potentiation of possible synergies is an important element of the design of any information system developed to support the accessible tourism industry.

## **Integration**

The need to use information from many different sources that must be accessed by many different applications calls for their integration into a common database. Competition in the market is already present in terms of the existence of many applications, with their own databases and narrow focus, which makes it harder to integrate all relevant data and appropriately promote tourism products and services on a larger scale and in an integrated way. This fact highlights the importance as well as the challenge of creating common platforms to facilitate the tasks of tourism managers, regional entities, and interested stakeholders in promoting an accessible and inclusive tourist offering.

## **Accessible design**

Application design should consider the specific needs and disabilities of each user, allowing customisation according to the tourist profile. The objective of accessible design is to eliminate obstacles and limitations, ensuring that information is more readily accessible for individuals with disabilities, thereby enhancing their autonomy. It is essential that applications and information systems designed for individuals with disabilities enhance their functional capabilities. It is therefore essential that application design takes into account the specific requirements of each user and is tailored to their profile. Applications must provide appropriate mechanisms and alternative access methods to information, enabling individuals with disabilities to utilise systems that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. There are a number of well-known technologies in the field of information accessibility for individuals with impairments, including text-to-speech technology, speech-to-text or voice recognition technology, translation technologies, and so on. It is important to note that customisation is also necessary for all relevant web

content created for general informational and promotional purposes. This is to ensure that it is more suitable for use within assistive technology applications. This customisation is in line with European regulations as mentioned before in subchapter 2.1. Assistive Technologies: Catalyst for Inclusive Travel.

## **Personalisation**

The applications must fulfil the tourists' requirements, providing information that closely matches their needs. It is crucial to personalise both the content and the presentation to meet the specific needs of the user. Information and services provided to people with disabilities should be tailored to their specific requirements and interests, while also being adapted to ensure accessibility and clarity for them. This entails the presentation of information and services in suitable formats and through appropriate interaction mechanisms, thus enabling people with disabilities to utilise these applications effectively. It is crucial to recognise that generic systems which present the same information in the same format to all users will not achieve the desired results.

## **Collaboration**

The opinions of tourists with similar needs and their feedback can and should be used to improve system behaviour and the precision of the information and recommendations provided.

From the perspective of tourist providers and destination managers who are not interested in or do not have the capacity to develop their own accessible information platforms or applications, there are a number of already existing mobile applications and websites that assist people with disabilities in making travel decisions and choosing tourist facilities. These applications and websites allow new entries in terms of the information on the accessibility of particular sites. The main challenge with these applications is that they are largely geographically focused. As a result, it is crucial for each provider to identify and engage with the relevant applications and information websites that already cover their destination area. Some of these applications, such as Wheelmap.org (Wheelmap.org, n.d.) and AccessNow (AccessNow, n.d.), have a global reach and are based on the Open Maps system, enabling users to contribute their own reviews of the accessibility of specific sites. Others are subscription-based and provide guides for specific countries and types of disabilities, such as Accessible Travel Press (Accessible Travel Press, n.d.).

While some of the existing platforms and applications are related to tourism and are relatively easy to find, many of those operating at the national or regional level are usually developed and maintained by associations and companies dealing with the needs of people with disabilities. They are developed in the national language and designed to be used by local residents. Nevertheless, these applications and websites can offer valuable assistance to tourism providers and destination managers in promoting domestic tourism and enhancing the accessibility of their products and services on the national/regional market.

Although not directly related to promotion and information provision, an important topic is the creation of onsite informational signs for people with disabilities: how to graphically represent people with disabilities in pictograms. For example, the International Symbol of Access (ISA), also known as the International Wheelchair Symbol was designed in 1968 by Danish design student Susanne Koefoed and has been widely accepted as the symbol of improved access to certain services or products, particularly for wheelchair users, but also for other disability issues (Persson, 2021). However, the symbol has been the subject of criticism, with the argument that it conveys the perception that people with disabilities are dependent on a caregiver, rather than reinforcing a sense of their independence. To address the issue of raising awareness of the independence of people with disabilities, a new symbol was designed by accessibility activists Sarah Hendren and Brian Glenney. It is unofficial and available for voluntary use as a part of the initiative The Accessible Icon Project (The Accessible Icon Project, n.d.).



Figure 49. The comparison of the original accessibility icon and the proposed new icon [49]



While the new version of the sign is a positive step towards empowerment and a better understanding of and respect for people with disabilities, a key issue remains: how to (or is it even possible to) represent different types and levels of disabilities with a single sign that highlights only one specific mobility impairment. It is also important to highlight that many disabilities are invisible and can often be overlooked. The simplified Vitruvian man used as inspiration for web accessibility logos (more details in subchapter 2.1.) also provides one of the potential solutions to this challenge.

## 6.4. “Nothing About Us Without Us”: Establishing Continuous Cooperation with Stakeholders in Need of an Accessible Tourism Offering


The old Latin phrase “Nihil de nobis, sine nobis” which is translated as “Nothing about us without us” is a principle used for centuries by advocates across the world to emphasise that policies and programmes about certain people and groups should include them fully in the decision-making process (Perryman, 2024). From the 1990s, it has been used by many different organisations and movements to fight for the rights of marginalised individuals and groups.

Creating an accessible and inclusive tourism offering requires meaningful partnerships with individuals and organisations of persons with disabilities. These organisations represent the lived experiences, perspectives, and needs of individuals with disabilities, making them invaluable collaborators in designing tourism initiatives that truly reflect inclusivity. Moreover, cooperation either with organisations of people with disabilities or directly with individuals with particular impairments or states can provide public as well as private tourism stakeholders with authentic insights and expertise on diverse challenges faced by particular groups during travel and leisure activities and facilitate creating **tailored solutions for them (Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2010). This kind of partnership also contributes to the long-term sustainability of a destination and builds trust and credibility among the potential end users of tourism products and services.** When it comes to key areas for cooperation and partnerships among destination tourism stakeholders and organisations of persons with disabilities, they can include:

- **Infrastructure Planning:** By giving feedback on the existing situation and providing useful ideas for improvements, persons with disabilities can directly positively affect the process of planning and implementing changes in the transport system, public infrastructure, and tourism facilities creation.
- **Service Development:** Involving organisations of persons with disabilities in creating inclusive tours, activities, and attractions helps address diverse needs and expectations, as well as create additional promotion of the new offering directly to the target groups, due to the well-established collaboration among organisations supporting individuals with similar disabilities.

- **Training and Education:** It is particularly important that all employees within a destination tourism system — from information providers in tourism offices to receptionists at hotels, waiters, lifeguards, taxi drivers, etc. — have a basic knowledge of adequate communication with persons with disabilities. Organisations of people with disabilities can be of immense help in raising awareness on this topic. It is particularly important to raise awareness also among individuals with hidden disabilities because they can encounter discriminatory behaviour when utilising accessible facilities and services, such as parking spaces or restroom facilities. This is often due to a lack of awareness and understanding of what it truly means to be disabled, and the perception of the public on that matter is shaped by the visual cues that are commonly associated with disabilities (Persson, 2021).
- **Monitoring and Feedback:** Partnering with different organisation of persons with disabilities can help in long-term feedback and evaluation of investments made and can provide a basis for future refinement and improvement.

The development of accessible and inclusive tourism at the destination level is essential for fostering equity, social inclusion, and economic growth. Inclusive destinations strive to make tourism experiences available to everyone, regardless of physical, sensory, cognitive or other impairments. Creating accessible destinations requires a comprehensive approach that integrates physical infrastructure, services, and community engagement. Attractions, accommodations, transportation systems, and public spaces must be designed or adapted to remove barriers and ensure usability for all. However, accessibility extends beyond infrastructure to include clear promotional tools, up-to-date information and communication. The conceptual framework presented in this chapter outlines key steps in transforming the tourism offering of a destination to a higher level of accessibility and overall inclusivity. The synergy between information accessibility (including enabling the use of assistive technology) and the implementation of principles of universal design can make the tourism offering of a destination much more sustainable and competitive in global terms. Using promotion as precise and targeted information about the offering of a particular destination with emphasis on detailed and up-to-date information on the accessibility of each segment results in the increased overall number of tourists visiting the destination. Beyond improvements in infrastructure and informational systems, achieving true inclusiveness hinges on partnering with individuals and organisations representing people with particular disabilities in order to gain ideas and insights regarding the further development of the offering and the enhancement of promotional tools, as well as feedback information on the quality of what has already been done.



# CONCLUSION

Bertrand Russell is quoted as saying, “Freedom, in general, may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realisation of desires.” In that sense, the removal of barriers to the development of inclusive tourism offerings contributes to the achievement of freedom for a substantial number of people with disabilities interested in travelling. In addition to social responsibility and the promotion of the values of equity, dignity, and human rights, accessible and inclusive tourism also represents a global economic opportunity. It has the potential to drive substantial revenue growth, while increasing accessibility contributes directly to the overall quality of tourism products and services, and benefits all travellers, regardless of their abilities, as well as the local community.

This book is a valuable source of information for academics and researchers, systematically synthesising the state-of-the-art in the field while offering new insights into the topic. It also serves as a call to action for further research, encouraging exploration of diverse topics ranging from examining user experiences from the perspective of persons with disabilities to analysing supply-side attitudes towards increasing accessibility of tourism infrastructure. It is also designed to provide information and ideas to various tourism stakeholders on how to plan and create a more accessible and inclusive tourism offering.

When considering future projections regarding the demography, number of people with disabilities, as well as global trends in legislative frameworks that emphasise accessibility as a mandatory characteristic rather than an optional feature, it becomes clear that creating inclusive tourism is a crucial component of the sustainable future of tourism.

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