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“INCLUSION THROUGH ACCESSIBILITY”

*- fostering new partnerships among
tourism actors and stakeholders*



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“INCLUSION THROUGH ACCESSIBILITY” - FOSTERING NEW PARTNERSHIPS AMONG TOURISM ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Tourism enterprises and destinations are perhaps unusual partners when it comes to promoting and safeguarding human rights. Often we think of human rights as being concerned with having equal access to justice, education, work, the power to vote and freedom of speech. Indeed, all these things are essential if we are to develop a fair and open society. Yet our lives are also enriched and enhanced by leisure activities, by having the ability to travel to new places, to meet and exchange experiences with different people and cultures. The value of being a tourist and having the right to travel – for holidays and also for work - is easily overlooked in the discussion of human rights and human fulfilment. Perhaps even those who work in the travel sector do not pay enough attention to travel and tourism as factors which contribute to personal well-being, social balance and understanding between cultures.



When we look at who travels and who does not travel on holidays, it is very clear that people with disabilities face enormous challenges. Being disabled, it is not easy to function well outside your home boundaries, perhaps with people who do not understand your requirements and where the environment may not have the supports you are used to at home. Indeed, for many disabled people, it is impossible to go on holiday at all, perhaps for economic reasons but also due to the lack of accessible means of transport, inaccessible hotels or lack of the necessary services and assistance.

Where an outsider might see this as a matter of inconvenience, a disabled or older person nowadays is more likely to ask: Why can't I travel like everyone else? And why can't the train, the hotel, the museum or the beach be accessible for me? After all, it is essentially a matter of how we design our streets, transport systems and the environment that keeps disabled people away – and these things can be made accessible at little or no extra cost, if planners and designers are asked or required to plan tourism facilities and services “for everyone”. Essentially, lack of access is not a problem of technical ingenuity or even money. It is more often a problem of lack of will or misguided and stereotypical thinking about what disabled people can do or what they need.

The market of tourists with disabilities has been compared to the discovery of a new country the size of China, in tourism terms. An estimated 1 billion people or 15% of the world's population is disabled, according to World Bank and World Health Organisation (2011) and about one in four or five households includes someone who is disabled. It is clear that this is large proportion of the population that represents a very sizable economic potential for the tourism sector, if only tourism providers can cater for the needs of this market.

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

The Georgian NGO, PARSA, was formed by a group of enthusiastic friends and work colleagues to take up the challenge of spreading the philosophy and practice of Tourism for All in the country, due to the obvious demand from disabled people which was not being met with a supply of suitable facilities and offers in the tourism sector. PARSA has two important “missions”:

- to advance the rights of disabled people to have holidays and travel, and
- to encourage, inform and promote accessible tourism in the Georgian tourism sector.

The PARSA team has worked hard to establish its non-profit association and engage with many stakeholders including the Georgian public authorities, tourism businesses, disability NGOs, research and educational institutions. It has proved itself to be a trustworthy partner and resource for many public, private and third sector organisations, as well as international funding bodies.

A couple of years ago PARSA also joined ENAT – the European Network for Accessible Tourism, a non-profit association based in Brussels, Belgium which itself is only 5 years old. ENAT was formed for much the same reasons as PARSA, being concerned with the lack of equal opportunities for people with disabilities to travel in Europe and also being convinced that the tourism sector has everything to gain and nothing to lose by making itself more open to this clientele, as well as to seniors, families with small children, and others who need good access when travelling.



The project, Inclusion Through Accessibility (ITA), supported by European Commission funding, was initiated by PARSA NGO, and has been developed with ENAT, to raise awareness about the rights of people with disabilities and to help build new partnerships in the Georgian tourism sector to strengthen the institutional base and help to develop Accessible Tourism for All.

Working together during 2013, PARSA and ENAT have developed and delivered accessible tourism training programmes in Tbilisi and Batumi for the specialist advisors who will help build up new accessible destinations, attractions, hotels and tourism services in venues across Georgia. We have also organized and taken part in the first ever International Conference on Tourism for All held in Georgia, with the participation of Government Ministers and agencies, Ministry of Economics and Sustainable Development, Georgian National Tourism Administration, Public Defender's Centre for Disability Rights, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, Ministry of Justice of Georgia, International Organizations, private tourism businesses and NGOs. This has been a uniquely rewarding and stimulating experience for the ENAT team of experts: Architect Katerina Papamichail from Greece, Tourism Consultant Chris Veitch from the United Kingdom and me.

For ENAT the cooperation with PARSA in the ITA project has provided us with a chance to get an "inside view" of how Georgian society is not only moving

towards greater awareness of human rights but also how very ready and able the tourism sector businesses and public agencies are to move in the direction of supporting accessible tourism for all.

The enthusiasm with which new ideas are freely debated in Georgia is particularly heartening and the speed of decision-making has impressed us very much. Moving from words to actions seems to come more easily to the Georgian authorities than we are used to seeing in many countries - although public authorities may never seem fast or responsive enough for the NGOs! Yet the NGOs we have met show a mature and responsible approach and have acted as strong partners in the implementation of the project.

Georgian tourist destinations and private businesses are showing a lively interest in the opportunities which accessible tourism presents. Focusing on customer needs is always at the heart of running a successful business, but by learning how to cater for people with disabilities, business managers and tourism personnel gain a much closer understanding of all visitors' needs, preferences and requirements. It is essential to know your customers if you are to gain their trust, and offer the quality of service which visitors expect.

GEORGIA – OPENING FOR ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

While the tourist sector is already showing strong signs of growth in Georgia, both summer and winter, and in cities and the countryside, we would predict even greater growth through the development of infrastructure, facilities and services that can include all visitors, so that no potential customer is excluded from the experience of having a holiday in Georgia. All kinds of tourism can be opened up to people with disabilities: skiing and other snow sports, beach holidays, nature tours, 4X4 expeditions, city breaks, gastronomy, heritage, culture and religious tourism, health and wellness... The richness and variety of Georgian tourism offers is unique and can be uniquely inviting for all visitors.

Businesses that invest now in making their facilities and offers accessible will gain an increasing share of the market in the coming years. The ageing population will only bring more customers who have certain access requirements. But there is one important condition that shall be fulfilled:

Destination managers must also play a supporting role in creating accessible destinations. It is indeed a responsibility of destination management bodies – the country as a whole, cities, regions or other entities, to ensure that they provide accessible transport connections, infrastructure, information and services. They must also actively market Georgia’s accessible destinations to domestic and foreign visitors, so that the full potential of every small contribution to this goal can be realised.

As we all know, the tourism sector is made up of many players, and each must contribute their part to achieve success. With NGO PARSA acting as a catalyst and destinations playing their part, the Georgian tourism sector has a golden opportunity to make Georgia stand out from the rest of the countries in the region as a place where tourism is both welcoming and accessible for all visitors.

By establishing a national strategic plan of action for accessible tourism, and marketing ‘Accessible Georgia’ the country can reap the benefits, not only for its businesses but also for its cities and local communities, as good accessibility supports disabled and elderly citizens, as well as tourist visitors.



The ENAT network looks forward to supporting the PARSA, the ITA project and Georgian partners, on the road to a more inclusive society where tourism can be enjoyed by everyone.

Ivor Ambrose,
Managing Director, ENAT

PERSPECTIVES OF INCLUSIVE TOURSIM DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA

Today, when tourism is proclaimed to be one of the priorities of Georgian economy and considering the fact, that 2013 has been proclaimed as the year of the “Protection of the Rights of People with Disabilities”, it is very important to create the baseline for development of accessible tourism, providing accessible services not only for 250 000 persons with disabilities residing in Georgia, but also to different groups of the society.

Statistically, accessible tourism is the rapidly growing and economically effective sphere of tourism industry, benefiting not only the persons with disabilities, but also the other groups of the population, in particular: elderly people, families travelling with small children, etc. It can be said that their environmental requirements are practically identical. Accessible tourism is one of the parts of the constituents of independent life philosophy.

Everyone, despite their physical or any other kind of disability should have an equal opportunity to get tourism services – this is one of the fundamental rights, highlighted by the General Assembly of the UN in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability adopted on December 13, 2006. The document has been signed by 140 countries, among them by Georgia.

With this brochure, we’d like to address and invite all the stakeholders, the state and private sector to join the efforts for development of one of the important segments of tourism industry.

NGO “PARSA”

The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Union.