

A roadmap towards inclusive destinations “Tourism for all – Inclusive hotels” an initiative by the Athens – Attica and Argosaronic Hotel Association

Anastasia Kalou

Access Greece, Athens, Greece

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the methodology used and disseminate the knowledge acquired during the course of the work on the Athens-Attica and Argosaronic Hotel Association’s initiative “Tourism for All - Inclusive Hotels”, launched in February 2014.

The Athens-Attica and Argosaronic Hotel Association (AHA) is the professional body of hoteliers operating in the Athens, Attica and Argosaronic region representing 102 hotels varying from 1 to 5 stars, including international chain hotels, boutique hotels as well as family owned hotels.

The associations’ aim is to promote the professional interests of its member hotels. To do so it liaise with government agencies, local authorities as well as private entities. Also the association offers counselling services to its members regarding financial, legal and labour issues. It carries out studies and collects statistical data on the tourism sector. Finally the association takes action in order to promote Athens, Attica and the Argosaronic region as a major touristic destination by organizing promotional events, participating at international exhibitions etc.

Athens is one of the world’s most historically significant cities and a modern metropolis, buzzing with life. From the centre of Athens, home of the Acropolis and other historical monuments, to the Athens riviera stretching as far as Sounion down the Attica peninsula and the islands of the Saronic Gulf, Athens offers a plethora of choices for visitors.

However, despite the attractiveness of Athens as a touristic destination, because of the economic crisis over the past few years, Athens has suffered a period of uncertainty and insecurity. This affected the tourism sector at large and the Athenian hotels in particular. Hoteliers have experienced a 36,4% loss in revenues (Revpar) leading to the closure of many Athenian hotels, especially small family-run ones.

In view of this situation AHA decided to take action and assist its members to broaden their customer base. So it undertook the initiative titled “Tourism for All – Inclusive hotels” in order to help its hotel-members to open up to the accessible tourism market and put forward Athens as an inclusive destination. As it is the case at the moment the accessible tourism market is pretty much underserved by the Greek tourism industry. So given its unique characteristics, it offers a good and sensible opportunity for Athenian hotels to turn to in order to gain a comparative advantage to other Greek or foreign

destinations and consequently increase their customer base and therefore contribute towards their sustainability.

By joining the initiative hotels will have a unique opportunity first to gain an understanding of the particular characteristics and needs of the accessible tourism market. Second they will be able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of becoming a player in the accessible tourism market. Third the initiative will guide Athenian hotels through the necessary steps that need to be taken towards inclusivity.

The initiative is in line with the general strategic plan of the Greek ministry of culture to promote Athens as an all year round tourism destination, and consequently increase revenues by prolonging the touristic period.

In order to successfully target the accessible tourism market the initiative "Tourism for All - Inclusive Hotels" is built upon the principles of inclusive design placing people at the heart of the design process, taking into account human diversity and difference in an effort to offer dignity, autonomy and choice while providing flexibility in use. Consequently it takes a holistic approach and addresses barriers to access throughout the Tourism Service Chain rather than just focusing on hotel accessibility. Although hotel accessibility is a necessary condition in order to attract disabled tourists, it is not a sufficient one to become a successful player in the accessible tourism market.

All travellers, disabled ones included, require reliable information about their travel and accommodation arrangements and detailed knowledge of the particulars of their destinations. Travellers need to have information about public transport, about how to get in and out of restaurants, about how to access historical sites or other attractions they want to experience. It is important that all these information is readily available in advance of their trip and in a variety of formats to be accessed by everyone.

Therefore the initiative by taking a holistic approach it considers both physical and non-physical aspects of access barriers along three different axes. The initiative first focuses on accommodation, second on Athens as an inclusive destination, and third it focuses on how to promote the work done on the previous two axes through the right channels to reach disabled travellers and the accessible tourism market at large.

On the first axis, hotels are access audited in terms of their build environment, their facilities and services and recommendations are made. Then access awareness training workshops for staff are organised, and finally tips on how hotels can better promote their inclusive services to the accessible tourist market are provided.

On the second axis an effort is made to identify what Athens has to offer in terms of multisensory experiences for disabled travellers and their parties. This is done by access auditing restaurants, museums, archaeological sites, cultural activities, shops, walks and short excursions within the region, in order to collect reliable access information.

On the third axis Athens, Attica and the Argosaronic region is promoted as an inclusive destination through the appropriate channels to reach out to the accessible tourism market.

Starting with accommodation on the first phase of the first axis of the initiative, a questionnaire was sent to all hotel-members of the association. The purpose of the questionnaire first was to assess the interest of hoteliers to become part of the initiative by their motivation to answer the questionnaire or not. Second the way the questionnaire was put up would reveal the hoteliers understanding of the notions of disability, accessibility and the accessible tourism market.

Following the questionnaire meetings were arranged with each one of those who answered the questionnaire. The purpose of the meeting was to elaborate and explain to hoteliers in detail what the initiative is about and the benefits of joining it. On the one hand the idea behind the meeting was to get hoteliers to identify what their hotel may already offer to disabled guests, and to show them how AHA through the initiative can help them improve their services for disabled guests and promote them through the right channels. On the other hand in those cases where the hotel in question did not in any sense cater for disabled guests, the meeting was set out to discuss what had prevented them from catering for disabled guests. Also to help them realize that even small steps towards inclusivity can make a big difference.

It has to be pointed out that the meetings are handled in such a way that it is made very clear that AHA's main concern is to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect with hoteliers in an effort to help and promote their work. Initially ten percent of AHA members has shown interest about the initiative and responded to the questionnaire. From all the answered questions and the meetings that followed some very clear findings were revealed.

Common to all is a confusion as to who is identified as disabled. To the relevant question at the questionnaire most hoteliers have answered that they consider only wheelchair users to be disabled, while one or two also considered blind or deaf people to be disabled, leaving out people with cognitive impairments or people with asthma or allergies.

In other words there is a total lack of understanding as to who actually comprise the accessible tourist market, since hoteliers don't know who the disabled tourists are.

Another common misunderstanding, mostly a direct consequence of the first, is as to what needs to be done towards accessibility and the costs implicated. Most hoteliers believe that having ramps, lifts spacious enough for wheelchair users and accessible toilets would render their hotel accessible, and in any case such alterations would be too expensive to carry out.

The questionnaire also revealed that even hotels that cater for disabled tourists fail to advertise and promote it through the right channels. Even

international 5 star chain hotels which have the facilities to accommodate for disabled guests do not promote their services. They don't even have information on their accessible facilities and services uploaded on their sites.

Concerning hotels that cater for disabled tourists, it was also revealed that their staff lacked any kind of formal access awareness training. In some cases hotel staff not only did not know how to meet and greet disabled guests, but they were not even informed of the accessible facilities and services their hotel provide for their disabled guests.

As far as smaller hotels are concerned two things were revealed. First ignorance about Greek Legislation relating to access matters and the necessary amendments needed to comply with. Second concerns that they could not ensure the safety of disabled guests in an emergency situation because of staff shortages. For example it was made clear in the meetings with owners of 3-star or less hotels, who are not required to have more than one member of staff on call during the night, that they prefer not to cater for disabled guests, since just one member of staff will not be able to handle an emergency situation.

Finally most hoteliers who responded to the questionnaire, in view of their current situation, considered becoming inclusive to be like "looking for a needle in a haystack", and in the meeting that followed, strongly expressed their scepticism and doubts about hidden costs that the initiative may involve for them.

With these findings at hand, as well as the commitment and cooperation of the hoteliers the initiative can proceed to the second phase along the first axis. During this phase participating hotels will be access audited. Careful consideration will be given not only to the build environment but also to facilities and services offered, and measurements and photos will be taken in order to be uploaded on AHA's web site.

The next step of the second phase is to formulate recommendation towards inclusivity on the basis of the findings of the first phase, and the results of the access audit. Recommendations will take the general form of "Tips and Guidelines towards inclusivity" and the form of "Access awareness workshops" for hotels' staff.



Steps taken towards inclusivity



Colour designated access level entrance

Moving on to the second axis, the initiative “Tourism for All - Inclusive Hotels” takes a closer consideration of the city of Athens. As it was previously mentioned disabled travellers need detailed, extensive and reliable information about their destination. It is the initiative’s aim to collect such information and make it available for its members to communicate it to their disabled guests, as well as to upload it to its web site.

This axis moves further from the scope of AHA and its members and requires the cooperation and in many instances the close collaboration of public authorities, the Athens municipality, NGOs and associations of disabled people. A joint effort is taking place in order to collect access information about public and private transport, restaurants, archaeological sites, cultural and sporting events, shops, walks, small excursions and places of interest. Once all information is collected suggestions for accessible walks and multisensory experiences will be put together.

The information gathered will be put forward in such way that will assist travellers to make an informed choice rather than follow someone else's recommendation based on arbitrary considerations of what may or may not be accessible.



Obstructed tactile routes and uneven pavements in the centre of Athens



The Athens metro accessible for all travellers

Last but by no means least the third axis of the initiative "Tourism for All - Inclusive Hotels" takes action to disseminate information. In order for the Athens, Attica and Argosaronic region to be put on the map of inclusive destinations the results of the first two axes should be appropriately publicized.

A field on inclusive tourism at AHA's site will be opened. This field will be home for all member hotels inclusive information, including photos, measurements, services, facilities etc. Also it will host all information gathered along the second axis of the initiative. This field on inclusive tourism will serve as a point of reference for the initiative's next task along this third axis. That is the initiative's effort to reach out internationally and advertise the Athens, Attica and Argosaronic region as an inclusive destination not only on media, reaching disabled travellers, but also to associations for people with disabilities world wide and to travel agencies that specialise on accessible tourism. This effort will be supported by organizing fam trips for the press and representatives of associations for people with disabilities world wide.

So far things are progressing at a slow pace. It is the first time in Greece that such an effort is put forward and although it is clear that hoteliers are really interested to participate to the initiative, doing so is not their main concern. At the moment the initiative has reached up to the beginning of phase two of the first axis and has come to a standstill because of the high touristic season. As far as the second and third axes are concerned only some preliminary steps have been taken.

In any case, from all the work done up to now, it has become clear that it all comes down to getting hoteliers and other entrepreneurs involved with the tourism industry familiar with disability and accessibility matters. And in the end, if things are to move forward, attitudes and mentalities of the community as a whole have to change and stereotypes have to break.