

ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN CROATIA – STATE OF THE ART AND KEY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

In today's world, there is an urgent need for tourism to be accessible to all tourists, especially people with disabilities. Looking at tourism from its sociological perspective, there is no question that no potential tourist should be left behind in the process of exchanging goods and services in the tourism market. However, the concept of inclusion has not yet reached its highest potential in all destinations worldwide, nor has it enabled all people to become part of the tourism market on an equal footing. Every destination should remove barriers that limit the opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in tourism demand. Regardless of the type of disability, whether it is temporary or permanent, it could be argued that any type of barrier is a direct interference with human rights. Therefore, it is both mandatory and reasonable that destinations become barrier-free and thus inclusive and prevent any form of exclusion or omission of people with disabilities. Based on the theoretical findings, this paper examines the current development of accessible tourism in Croatia. Primary research was conducted among people with disabilities to determine their satisfaction with the current state of accessible tourism in Croatia, to analyse their motives for travelling, the main obstacles they encounter on their trips, and their overall travel experiences and satisfaction. A total of 211 valid responses were collected. The research results indicate that people with disabilities are discouraged from travelling mainly because they are unsure about the accessibility of tourism facilities and are not satisfied with the information available before their travels. Although they enjoy travelling and see tourism as an important part of their lives, they would travel more if the quality of the infrastructure and the local offer were suitable and adapted to their needs. As there is a significant lack of academic research on this topic in the Republic of Croatia, this study builds on existing knowledge and provides guidelines for much needed future research.

Keywords: accessible tourism, disability, inclusion, tourism offer, Croatia

JEL classification: I31, O52, L83, Z32

Introduction

Although people with disabilities are better integrated into society today than they were a few decades ago, they still face numerous barriers and obstacles in their everyday lives. Today, one billion people have a disability, 15% of the world's population, 80% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries. Their disability can be visible or invisible; it can be physical, cognitive or sensory (The World Bank, n.d.). People with disabilities have always faced myriad barriers, be they physical, social, administrative, health or other barriers that hinder their full

integration into society. “Disability is the result of the interplay between people with a health impairment, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, and personal and environmental factors, such as negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support” (WHO, n.d.). Awareness of this inequity is increasing and efforts are being made to reduce barriers for people with disabilities, with particular attention being paid to tourism today.

“The social model of disability sees the issue mainly in the socially constructed environment that excludes people with disabilities from participation. In this case, it is not the person’s impairment that disables them, but the complex collection of social environments, practices and attitudes that are imposed in addition to a person’s impairment. Therefore, disability arises from the disabling social environment that requires social action for change, and it is the collective responsibility of society to make the environmental and attitudinal changes necessary for the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of citizenship” (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011, p. 4). In general, inclusion is “the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have been excluded in the past (e.g., because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While the act itself is in line with SDG 10 – reducing inequalities - the process of inclusion is complex and influenced by various factors. Human rights assume that we are all free and equal and that we should be free from discrimination of any kind. As human rights are inalienable, “people with disabilities are an important part of the spiritual, political and material components of human society and should have the same right to travel as able-bodied people” (Qiao, Cao & Zhang, 2023, p. 532). The same is emphasized by the WHO, which stresses that disability is a human rights issue because people with disabilities experience inequalities, their dignity is violated and some people with disabilities are denied their autonomy (2011, p. 9).

The definition of disability as interaction means that “disability” is not an attribute of the person. Progress in improving social participation can be achieved by removing the barriers that hinder people with disabilities in their daily lives (WHO, 2011, p. 4). This consideration has brought this debate into tourism, as its core idea is based on a sociological perspective that enables people to travel, socialise, learn and expand their knowledge in a respectful and inclusive way. The relationship between people with disabilities and tourism was first addressed by academia and government at the end of the last century (Darcy, 2006, p. 1). Darcy, McKercher and Schweinsberg (2020, p. 140) state that those who are excluded, overlooked or marginalised in tourism are usually excluded because of their low socioeconomic status, ethnicity, origin, age, gender, sexuality, ability or the intersections of these identity domains. Therefore, tourism for all is a widespread social imperative that should be enabled by public authorities and businesses involved in any way in the provision of tourism services (UNWTO, 2015, p. 3). The aim of this article is therefore to analyse the current state of accessible tourism in Croatia and critically examine the potentials and requirements for its development. Based on the results of the primary research, several guidelines for improving the existing offer are provided. As there is a significant research gap in this area, this study contributes to both academic and practical implications.

Theoretical background

The UNWTO (2016, p. 7) lists four reasons why destinations should become accessible – accessibility is a right, it is at the service of users, it is an investment and it brings great results. Specifically, “accessibility means that people with disabilities are able to access (on an equal

basis) the physical environment, transportation, communication and information technologies, education and other services and facilities” (Popiel, 2014, p. 56). Accessible tourism offers solutions for all people – people with temporary disabilities, older people, parents with baby carriages and many other groups of people. For this reason, accessibility should be considered an integral part of tourism development policy. “Accessible tourism aims to provide and facilitate leisure and recreational opportunities for all travellers (people with disabilities or injuries, elderly travellers, parents with young children, etc.)” (Sisto et al., 2021, p. 3). It is therefore crucial to identify people with disabilities not only with wheelchair users, as this segment includes numerous groups with accessibility issues, but as mentioned earlier, it is quite possible that every person, regardless of their current accessibility status, will become part of this segment at some point in their lives, most likely as we approach old age. “The link between disability and ageing is undisputed and presents a challenge to the global tourism industry” (Darcy, 2006, p. 2).

Darcy and Dickson emphasise that “accessible tourism empowers people with access needs, including mobility, sight, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to live independently, equally and with dignity through the provision of universally designed tourism products, services and environments” (2009, p. 34). This demand is in line with the above-mentioned human rights, but also highlights the debate on the importance of accessibility issues in tourism development policy. While not enough attention was paid to these issues in the past, more is being done today. Darcy et al. believe that there needs to be a greater focus on accessible tourism for people with access needs that are not shared with other marginalised identities (2020, p. 141). However, Kim and Akwasi Adu-Ampong state that “two main conceptualizations prevail in the literature on accessible tourism – the medical model and the social model of disability” (2024, p. 2). Therefore, “the social model contributes to the understanding of tourism by assuming that socially constructed relationships have evolved from three elements: experiences of people with disabilities; identifying disability as a combination of impairment and socially constructed barriers; and Part of conceptual clarification to facilitate a scientific attack on the limitations and barriers that oppress people with disabilities and therefore lead to their impoverishment and social dysfunction” (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011, p. 29).

“If all tourism products were offered by a single company, the general customer journey concept could easily be applied to tourism, just as it is applied to other types of services (e.g. banking, retail and insurance services)” (Cassia et al., 2021, p. 209). This is not the case, and numerous service providers are working together to create a high-quality offering for tourists. From an accessible tourism perspective, this means that the necessary infrastructure must be created by both the private and public sectors, as accessibility must be ensured at all levels. The ISO 21902:2021 standard provides guidelines for accessible tourism for all, “with the aim of ensuring equal access and enjoyment of tourism for a wide range of people of all ages and abilities” (ISO, n.d.). This document emphasizes that “stakeholders include public administrations, accommodation providers, catering and restaurant services, transportation companies, tour operators and travel agencies, MICE and leisure activities, and service providers from other economic sectors involved in tourism, travel and destination management, including their contractors and suppliers” (ISO, n.d.). The entire service chain must be coordinated, as the accessibility of individual facilities does not constitute a quality experience for people with disabilities. Darcy points out that for overnight stays away from the normal place of residence, appropriate arrangements must be made to provide access to a bedroom and bathroom as a basis for the stay (2010, p. 816). Such an accommodation provider must ensure that people with disabilities can reach its facility by various means of transportation and that the overall offer at the destination is accessible, which can only be achieved through cooperation

at the destination level. “During the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Beijing made the Olympic venues barrier-free and improved the accessibility of public transportation and major attractions” (Qiao, Cao & Zhang, 2023, p. 532).

The UNWTO lists several characteristics of the demand for accessible tourism: – it is constantly increasing, due to improvements in infrastructure, information, facilities granted or other determining factors; it is cross-customer; it appears that for every person with disabilities, on average 1.5 people travel with them; it can improve the image of the destination; it has a significant impact on reducing the seasonality of certain destinations, especially in the case of beach tourism; it generates more than the average revenue from conventional tourism (UNWTO, 2015, p. 4). As the UK is considered one of the most inclusive and accessible countries for travellers with accessibility needs, it is interesting to analyse the potential of this market. Spend on trips taken by people with disabilities and their companions accounted for 2.2% of all domestic travel spend in England in 2018, 24% of domestic overnight spend and 18% of day visit spend in England in the 12 months to June 2023. The average spend per domestic overnight trip in England was £267 for all trips, compared to £264 for trips taken by people with disabilities and their companions. The total spends on tourist travel in England by people with a disability, or by people travelling within a group where one member has a disability, is estimated at £14.6 billion per year (Visit Britain, 2023).

If a destination is to become barrier-free, the measures must apply to all stakeholders and the same standards must be met at all levels. Some characteristics of regional accessibility legislation are: “current legislation is mainly aimed at removing barriers rather than laying the necessary foundations for tourism for all; there seems to be a lack of standardisation, and this is an important factor in an activity such as tourism, the nature of which involves mobility and moving from one autonomous region to another; the fragmentation of legislation does not contribute to the consolidation of technical criteria in the implementation of specific measures and leaves room for interpretation by the experts in charge of the work; the existing regulations recognise the need for adequate treatment, but the current legislation needs to be more precise and comprehensive; and the application of the regulations could be improved” (UNWTO, 2015, p. 16). It seems that the issue of standardisation must be one of the first to be addressed, as tourists tend to look for information before their trip, especially if they have specific requirements. Therefore, the indicators developed for tourism destinations to assess, monitor and manage the accessibility of their accessible tourism offer are of great importance and have the role of “assessing the level of development and management of a destination's accessible tourism infrastructure, products and services; contributing to the production of objective comparative analyses between the elements of tourism infrastructure, products and services; provide a useful tool for the prioritisation of accessibility measures; contribute to the standardisation of accessibility in the industry; enable the adoption of appropriate strategies and improved planning for the future based on the results obtained; and justify the adoption of decisions on the planning and management of tourism in the area” (UNWTO, 2016, pp. 13-14).

Popiel (2014, p. 55) cites reasons why accessible tourism is neither properly nor sufficiently developed: lack of knowledge about the market for tourists with disabilities, lack of dialogue, coordination and information exchange between the different levels of stakeholders involved in product development. In Croatia, however, the situation is very specific and academic research is extremely scarce. There are only a few studies in the scientific literature that focus on analysing this specific market segment (Gregoric, Skryl & Drk, 2019; Škaja et al, 2019; Gonda, 2021; Pókó, 2022; Popović, Slivar & Gonan Božac, 2022; Tubic, Vidak & Kovacevic, 2022). Based on this research, several conclusions can be drawn about the development to date and

the current state of accessible tourism in Croatia: The area is still very under-researched; the samples are rather small; there is a need for an analysis of the current state of accessible tourism provision; the majority of research on accessible tourism in Croatia is student work (at least ten student papers are currently available); the area would greatly benefit from collaboration between academics and practitioners; and there is a great and urgent need for training for tourism staff with regard to the special needs of people with disabilities. However, some measures are also being taken at national level. Under the Tourism for All programme, special emphasis is placed on accessible tourism, and the Republic of Croatia has committed to taking all appropriate measures to ensure that people with disabilities have access to tourism services, destinations and activities (among others) (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, n.d.).

Methodology and sample

The overarching aim of this paper is to examine perceptions and attitudes of people with disabilities about the quality of accessible tourism development in Croatia. The primary research was conducted from October to December 2023 using a Google form sent to over 100 associations for people with disabilities, who were asked to forward the form to their members. A simple random sample was used to ensure the representativeness of the results. In the end, a total of 211 questionnaires were collected and the responses were analysed using descriptive statistics methods. Questionnaire was developed and adopted based on the former research by Farkas, Raffay & Dávid (2022) among people with disabilities. The sample consisted of 124 (59 %) women and 83 (39.5 %) men; they were predominantly (33.2 %) 36-50 years old, followed by 51–65-year-olds (23.6 %), over 66-year-olds (14.4 %) and 26–35-year-olds (14.4 %). The youngest group, 18 to 25-year-olds, accounted for 13.5% of the total number of respondents. In terms of marital status, 40.8 % of respondents were married, 39.3 % were single, 5.8 % did not wish to provide any information, 5.3 % were in a non-marital relationship, 4.9 % were divorced and 3.9 % were widowed.

When analysing employment status, the majority of respondents (23.5 %) were pensioners, employees (19 %), receiving a disability pension (14.8 %) or dependent on their relatives (9 %). Of the total number of respondents, 16 (7.6%) were unemployed. Almost a third of respondents (27.1 %) live in Zagreb, 20.5 % of them in towns with 25,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, 13.3 % in villages with more than 1,000 inhabitants, 10 % in small towns with 10,000 to 25,000 inhabitants and 10 % in small towns with up to 10,000 inhabitants.

Results

The respondents mainly lived with motor impairments (65.2 %), visual impairments (16.9 %), multiple disabilities (15.5 %) and intellectual impairments (11.6 %). More than half of the respondents (60.4%) were not born with their disability. Most of them (29.8%) were slightly restricted in their daily activities, 22.1% were very severely restricted in their daily activities, while 21.2% constantly needed help with their daily activities.

In terms of mobility restrictions, 30.6% of respondents require assistance when using public transportation, 27.3% are unable to get around without help, while 24.9% of respondents are able to use all modes of transportation without assistance. At the same time, however, almost half of the respondents (47.1%) travel for leisure purposes and require assistance. 30.3% of respondents are not travelling for leisure, while 22.6% of respondents are travelling for the same

reason and do not require assistance. To determine the frequency of their travel, respondents were asked to answer questions about the number of trips they would take in 2022. In terms of domestic travel, 51.2% have made more than three trips that year, with an equal proportion of those who have made two trips and those who have not made a trip that year (12.9%). In terms of trips abroad, 54.1% of respondents did not take any trips abroad, 19.3% took one trip, while 9.2% of respondents took more than three trips abroad in 2022. Respondents were asked to rate certain statements on a Likert scale with seven options; the results are analyzed below.

Table 1: Causes of difficulties during leisure trips

Item	Average	Mode	Standard deviation
Use of transportation	4.38	7	2.34
Use of accommodation	4.01	7	2.39
Use of catering facility	3.51	1	2.13
Sport activities	4.50	7	2.21
Visiting attractions	4.24	7	2.18
Lack of reliable information on actual accessibility	4.74	7	2.21

Source: authors' own work.

The results show that the values are relatively uniform and that the respondents have the same views on the causes of difficulties during their leisure trips. While only *the use of catering facilities* is not perceived as a discouraging factor for their leisure trips, all other items are quite frequently the cause of difficulties, with the highest average score given to the item *lack of reliable information on actual accessibility*. Although the Guide to Accessible Tourism for People with Disabilities was published in 2023 (Centar za razvoj vrijednosti, 2023), it is clear that the information has not yet reached the target group. Such materials are the first step in bridging the gap between service providers and tourists. All other causes are related to the quality of infrastructure, which has also been pointed out by the UNWTO and discussed earlier in this paper. Furthermore, these barriers are in line with the reasons for the poor development of accessible tourism that Popiel (2014) has pointed out by stating that lack of coordination and lack of dialogue hinder the more intensive development of accessible tourism.

Table 2 lists the factors that discourage people with disabilities from travelling as tourists. The main discouraging factor is the fear that *accessibility will not meet the promises and/or their needs*. Based on the fact that the main discouragement factor is the lack of reliable information about actual accessibility, one of the first steps seems to be to build trust between service providers and tourists. However, in this context, the issue of standardization should also be highlighted, as such a step would improve the quality of information provided to users. Considering that this particular demand segment is highly dependent on the quality of information, there is an urgent need to provide reliable, trustworthy and timely information to all potential customers.

Respondents disagree with the statement that they *do not like travelling*, simultaneously emphasizing that they disagree with the statement that they *can get travel experiences at home, using internet and technology*. Such attitudes strongly support the main characteristics of tourism – it is not possible to consume tourism products and services without personal participation of tourists. In terms of evaluating development of accessible tourism offer, it seems that *previous bad experiences* and the *fear of new situations* do not have prevailing impact on discouraging people with disabilities from travelling as tourists. These results should be kept in mind in the process of developing tourism policies for this specific tourism product.

Table 2: Factors that keep people with disabilities from travelling as tourists

Item	Average	Mode	Standard deviation
I do not like travelling	1.83	1	1.77
Lack of time	3.13	1	2.07
Item	Average	Mode	Standard deviation
Lack of money	4.08	5	1.91
Lack of company	3.61	1	2.29
Lack of language skills	3.36	1	2.70
Lack of assisting person	3.43	1	2.73
I am afraid of new situations	2.95	1	2.55
Travelling there and back is problematic	3.65	1	2.40
I am afraid that accessibility will not meet the promises and/or my needs	4.68	7	2.23
My health conditions do not allow travelling	2.95	1	2.34
Previous bad experiences	2.76	1	1.84
I can get travel experiences at home, using internet and technology	2.65	1	2.13

Source: authors' own work.

Finally, respondents were asked to evaluate various aspects of the development of accessible tourism in the Republic of Croatia (Table 3). The respondents do not agree with the statement that the *possibilities of accessible tourism in Croatia are continuously improving*. One could argue that such a state of affairs is disappointing for a tourism-oriented country like Croatia, but the above-mentioned initiatives at NGO and national level suggest that some progress can be expected in the future.

Furthermore, respondents are fairly unanimous in their opinion that the infrastructure is not sufficiently developed to be suitable for the development of accessible tourism. There is a great need to *make trains and buses accessible to wheelchair users* to increase the number of trips made by people with disabilities; to *build tourism trails in park forests* to enable people with disabilities to make trips; to *create a reliable online collection of wheelchair-accessible tourism trails* to encourage people with disabilities to hike in nature; and to *provide adequate safety and assistance* to encourage people with disabilities to participate in extreme sports and activities. These are all infrastructure requirements that stand in need for collaboration between all stakeholders in the planning, funding, construction, monitoring and promotion of the infrastructure in question.

Regarding the emotional and social component of tourism, all respondents agreed with the statements that tourism has a positive impact on their lives, either from an individual or social perspective, as it increases opportunities for social engagement. Finally, the aim of the survey was to identify the tendency to use the potential of virtual reality as a means of overcoming physical barriers in destinations. Respondents show no interest in using these opportunities and point to the potential. Although there are studies that try to identify the potential of virtual reality in the context of accessible tourism, especially when it comes to people with disabilities (e.g. Iftikhar, Saud Khan & Pasanchay, 2022), this research indicates that the potential tourist demand in Croatia is not interested in using this option and prefers to meet their tourism needs through traditional travel. This result is quite encouraging for tourism services providers as it points out that potential tourists with disabilities are willing to travel, if circumstances allow it, and efforts made by all stakeholders should result with increased travels among this segment.

Table 3: Attitudes of people with disabilities towards different aspects of accessible tourism development in Croatia

Statement	Average	Mode	Standard deviation
The possibilities of accessible tourism are continuously improving in my country.	3.36	2	1.86
Tourism service providers are more and more prepared and open to receive guests with disabilities.	3.45	3	1.82
False communication of accessibility by accommodation providers and other establishments is becoming less and less common in my country.	3.38	3	1.78
Society in my country is more and more tolerant and open to the problem of people with disabilities.	3.59	3	1.77
People are disturbed by spending their holidays in places where people with disabilities also are.	3.61	3	1.95
If trains and coaches were more accessible by wheelchairs in my country, more people with disabilities would travel.	5.37	7	2.05
If in my country there were tourism paths in park forests, at least in the vicinity of cities, more people with disabilities would make excursions.	5.51	7	1.89
If there were a reliable internet collection of tourism paths accessible by wheelchair, more people would choose hiking in nature.	5.30	7	1.96
Extreme sports and activities would attract people with disabilities, if they were given adequate security and assistance.	4.86	7	2.10
Tourism is an important part of my life.	4.76	7	2.09
Tourism significantly promotes my wellbeing.	4.68	7	2.10
My experiences from tourism make me happier.	5.32	7	2.03
Tourism improves my relationships to others.	5.26	7	1.96
I have an increasing interest in the potential of virtual/digital tourism.	3.23	1	2.04
I have already used online tourism services, e.g. “visited” a museum with an online application or participated in virtual tours.	2.47	1	1.93
I own/am planning to buy a device that makes virtual experiences more enjoyable, e.g. VR glasses.	2.02	1	1.71
During my travels I like to use modern technological tools (apps, AR, i.e. augmented reality, I also used VR glasses during a city tour and VR, i.e. virtual reality devices that facilitate and/or enhance the travel experience).	2.68	1	2.02

Source: authors' own work.

Based on the results of this study, there are several recommendations that can be emphasized in the process of improving the quality of accessible tourism in Croatia. Firstly, it seems useful to involve the academic community in the process of identifying the current state of development. Building on this knowledge, it is necessary to develop coordination between the different levels of stakeholders in the destinations in order to create an accessible environment and provide accessible tourism infrastructure. The authorities at national and regional level must play an active role in this process by creating legal and regulatory frameworks. It would be advisable to standardize the tourism offer and use these standards as a competitive advantage in the accessible tourism market. After creating such an environment, it is crucial to involve all stakeholders in appropriate promotional activities and enable the exchange of meaningful, trustworthy and timely information about the accessible tourism offer in Croatia.

Conclusion

The research conducted underlines the importance of understanding the specific needs and preferences of travelers with disabilities in order to develop and promote accessible tourism in Croatia. By addressing the identified gaps and using the findings of this study, Croatian tourism stakeholders can work towards creating a more welcoming and accessible environment for all tourists and improve their reputation as a destination that prioritizes accessibility and inclusion.

The research findings have several implications for the future development of tourism. First and foremost, they should encourage policy makers and tourism businesses to invest in accessible tourism infrastructure, including better transportation services, accessible public spaces and tourist attractions. In addition, there is an urgent need for increased awareness and specialized training of tourism and hospitality staff to better meet the needs of tourists with disabilities. To achieve these goals, it is crucial that academia and practitioners work together to create an environment that enables the development of accessible tourism, based on the key assumptions of tourism markets. In addition, all stakeholders need to take a much more active role in creating networks between the public and private sectors that enable NGOs to communicate the needs and specific requirements of potential tourists with disabilities. Such collaborations are expected to lay the much-needed foundations for high-quality and competitive accessible tourism in Croatia.

Recommendations for future research relate primarily to the sample size – it should be based on a much larger number of respondents. However, as this study is one of the first in Croatia to include such a number of respondents, its results should be considered reliable. Future research should focus more on the analysis of development policies related to accessible tourism, but also on the analysis of the broader social and regulatory environment of accessibility and inclusion in Croatia in order to gain a more thorough insight into possible barriers and potentials of more intensive accessible tourism development.

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