





# ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN CROATIA - STATE OF THE ART AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Abstract

Despite the growing attention paid to the development of accessible tourism in the Republic of Croatia, the number of theoretical studies is not in line with this trend. This area has not yet been sufficiently researched and there is a need for contemporary and empirical research. The authors analyse the published research on accessible tourism in Croatia, provide an overview of the types of impairments that lead to disabilities and analyse both the age and gender distribution within the population. Based on these findings, the authors point out the research gap and emphasise the need to increase research interest in the field of accessible tourism. Considering that SDG 10 is aimed at reducing inequalities within societies worldwide, inclusion is a priority also in tourism. As Croatia is a strongly tourism-orientated country, it is expected that more attention and research will be devoted to the specifics of the accessible tourism market, especially with regard to the specifics of stakeholder involvement and the technical requirements for the private and public sectors.

Keywords: accessible tourism, disabilities, literature overview, accessibility, Croatia

### Introduction

Merriam-Webster (n.d.a) defines inclusion as the act or practise of including and welcoming people who have been excluded in the past (e.g. because of their race, gender, sexuality or ability). A report published by the WHO emphasises that people with disabilities have historically been excluded and in some ways segregated from the general population. However, Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency

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policies have now shifted towards community and school inclusion, and medicalised solutions have given way to more interactive approaches which recognise that people are disabled by environmental factors as well as their bodies (World Bank, 2011: 6). While the WHO estimates that 1.3 billion people (approximately 16% of the world's population) are affected by a significant disability today, "inaccessible environments create barriers that often hinder the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others" (WHO, n.d). In addition, the WHO (n.d.) lists several important facts about persons with disabilities, the following of which are closely related to tourism:

- people with disabilities find inaccessible and unaffordable transport 15 times more difficult than people without disabilities;
- health inequalities result from unfair conditions faced by people with disabilities, including stigmatisation, discrimination, poverty, exclusion from education and employment, and barriers in the health system itself.

Since tourism is above all a social phenomenon, Jafari defines it as the study of man (the tourist) outside his usual habitat, the tourist apparatus and the networks that respond to his various needs, as well as the ordinary (where the tourist comes from) and the non-ordinary (where the tourist goes to) world and their dialectical relations (2000: 585). When it comes to people with disabilities, it is important to understand how they can fulfil their tourism needs. The UNWTO defines accessible tourism as "the adaptation of environments and tourism products and services to enable access, use and enjoyment by all users" (UNWTO, 2016: 6). Accessibility should be addressed by all stakeholders involved in tourism, as more and more people are dependent on finding measures for inclusion and ensuring the technical accessibility of destinations and attractions. All of us require accessible environments, products and services at some point in our lives, whether due to a disability, illness, accident, pregnancy, advanced age or simply because we bring a lot of luggage or do not know our way around the area. These conditions can affect both tourists and local communities (UNWTO, 2016: 6).

As tourism aims to enable people to travel and experience different destinations and environments, accessibility is a growing issue today, challenging destination stakeholders to ensure technical adaptations for different specific needs. The aim of this paper is therefore to analyse how these requirements are addressed in academic research in Croatia and whether





adequate attention is paid to this particular segment of tourism demand, as well as to identify the needs and objectives of future research.

# Overview of theoretical findings

In order to fully understand the goals and scope of accessible tourism, it seems important to first address the concept of disability, which can be defined as a physical, mental, cognitive or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with or limits a person's ability to perform certain tasks or actions or to participate in typical daily activities and interactions (Merriam Webster, n.d.b). In the Republic of Croatia, the Croatian Institute of Public Health is responsible for publishing statistical data on people with disabilities. According to the report published by this Institute (2022), there are 624,019 people with disabilities living in the Republic of Croatia, of whom 56.7% are male and 43.3% are female. People with disabilities make up about 16% of the total population of the Republic of Croatia. Most people with disabilities, namely 45.7%, belong to the 65+ age group, while 43.1% of people of working age are between 20 and 64 years old. Disabilities are also found among children aged 0-19 years, with a share of 11.2%. The largest number of people with disabilities lives in the city of Zagreb. An overview of the types of impairments that lead to disability or are comorbidity diagnoses related to a person's level of functional impairment, as well as an overview of functional ability impairments in relation to gender and age groups (both on 1 September 2022) are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**: Overview of the types of impairments that cause disability or as comorbidity diagnoses relate to the degree of functional impairment of a person (state on 1 September 2022)

Type of disability	Total number	Share in the total number of people with disabilities	Prevalence / 10,000 inhabitants
Multiple disabilities	188,182	30.2	484
Damage to the locomotor system	177,547	28.5	457
Damage to other organs and organ systems, chromosomal diseases, congenital anomalies and rare diseases	162,135	26.0	417
Mental disabilities	153,021	24.5	394
Damage to the central nervous system	110,756	17.7	285
Speech-voice communication impairments	51,149	8.2	132

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Intellectual disabilities	31,291	5.0	80
Visual impairments	20,526	3.3	53
Hearing impairments	17,679	2.8	45
Damage to the peripheral nervous system	17,642	2.8	45
Autism spectrum disorders	4,177	0.7	11
Deaf blindness	172	0.03	0.4

Source: Benjak, 2022: 6

**Table 2**: Impairments of functional abilities - overview according to gender and age groups (state on 1 September 2022)

Type of disability	Gender	Age groups		
Type of disability		0 - 19	20 - 64	65 +
Mental illnesses	f	1,485	21,481	22,647
	m	3,684	48,504	27,976
Chronic diseases	f	965	28,059	34,173
	m	1,174	21,494	23,320
Voice, language and speech disorders	f	8,125	6,000	507
	m	14,794	10,758	707
Physical disability	f	855	7,499	12,215
	m	1,050	8,552	7,478
Intellectual difficulties	f	2,762	8,454	1,015
	m	4,133	11,570	949
Visual impairment	f	620	2,892	5,186
	m	779	4,280	4,326
Multiple disabilities	f	3,093	3,150	54
	m	5,488	5,560	41
Chronic diseases in children	f	7,419	/	/
Chrome diseases in children	m f m f m f m f	9,079	/	/
Developmental disabilities that are not defined in the List of	f	5,174	/	/
impairments	m	9,064	/	/
Hearing impairment	f	527	2,274	2,797
	m	801	3,862	3,404
Autism spectrum disorders	f	541	239	10
	m	2,264	695	6
Deaf blindness	f	2	12	5
	m	2	12	5

Source: Benjak, 2022: 8

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In Croatia, Ministry of Tourism and Sports is in charge of creating policies for tourism development. Within the program Tourism for all, special emphasis and importance is given to accessible tourism, and Republic of Croatia has committed to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities (among other things):

- have access to tourism services,
- have access to tourism destinations and
- have access to tourism activities (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, n.d.).

In order to achieve equality between children with difficulties and people with disabilities, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports has developed and implemented a series of measures to encourage the Croatian tourism market to enable people with disabilities to enjoy the tourism offer equally, but also to be integrated into the labour market. In order to remove access barriers and obstacles, the Ministry is cooperating with organisations representing people with disabilities, because only through synergetic action can we achieve the set goal - equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The Ministry is the owner of 3 measures in 2 specific objectives (Improving the accessibility of the built environment and transport and Improving the accessibility of the content of public life and strengthening security in crisis situations) in the Action Plan of the National Strategy for Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities from 2021 to 2024, the adoption of which is underway.

Although accessible tourism is receiving more and more attention in national policy and is becoming increasingly important in the planning of tourism products and the removal of access barriers, academic research has not progressed at the same pace. Indeed, after an extensive search in all relevant databases (the search terms used were "accessible tourism", "inclusive tourism", "people with disabilities", "tourists with disabilities", "Croatia", "limitations", "inclusion"), only six papers were found that deal with this specific topic, all of which have been published since 2019. Their topic and main findings are discussed below.

1) Gonda, T. (2021). Travelling habits of people with disabilities. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, *37*(3), 844-850. https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.37315-717

The author discusses the specifics of the travel demand of people with disabilities, with a special focus on analysing the most popular tourism product from the perspective of people with disabilities. The survey is conducted in Hungary and compared with the results of studies





in Germany, Italy, Spain and Croatia. The research results show that people with disabilities are strongly in favour of the policy of inclusion, their frequency of travel is higher than the average of the total population and therefore it seems reasonable for tourism stakeholders on the supply side of the market to pay adequate attention to this segment of tourism demand.

The research results also show that there were 32 respondents from Croatia, most of whom were in the 26 to 50 age group. They mainly faced difficulties with transport and finding places of interest, followed by the use of catering facilities and sports activities, while the use of accommodation was the least difficult. Furthermore, their motivation was mainly related to sightseeing and nature, followed by cultural, gastronomic and wellness motives.

Although this study provides a valuable insight into the current level of satisfaction of people with disabilities in Croatia, it should be noted that the sample is quite small and therefore not really representative, as Croatia was only one of four markets analysed for comparison with Hungary. The research results should not be generalised. Future research must therefore include a much larger sample that would draw reliable conclusions. However, in terms of gaining much-needed information on the current state of this tourism product, the particular study can be considered as very valuable.

2) Gregoric, M., Skryl, T. V., & Drk, K. (2019). Accessibility of Tourist Offer in Republic of Croatia to People with Disabilities. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*, 4(36), 903-915. https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v10.4(36).22

The authors of this study aimed to identify the need for adaptation of tourism facilities for people with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia. The authors emphasise that although tourists and travellers with disabilities want to be equal members of the community and enjoy all tourist facilities without restrictions, there are precisely those tourists who are often restricted due to the inadequacy of tourism facilities. Therefore, this article analyses various tourism services, amenities and infrastructures to assess their level of accommodation for people with disabilities. The research results are based on a sample of 200 people with disabilities from Croatia. The results show that the offer should be significantly improved to meet the needs of tourists with different types of physical disabilities. The authors also propose several recommendations for improvement, including creating appropriate plans and knowledge for the management of tourism destinations; focusing on new forms of tourism that are better adapted to the needs of people with any type of disability; encouraging collaboration between





health facilities, tourism communities, family businesses, small business owners apartment renters, who would offer a joint range of resources for people with disabilities; working to remove the so-called mental barriers and training tourism staff about people with disabilities.

As the sample is representative, the results can be considered reliable and development policies should be adapted to these findings. It is important to emphasise that the training of tourism staff is highlighted as an important element in the creation of quality products and services within the accessible tourism offer.

3) Pókó, N. (2022). Turizam bez prepreka u Mađarskoj i Hrvatskoj [Barrier-free tourism in Hungary and Croatia]. *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, 8(2), 195-214. https://doi.org/10.46672/aet.8.2.3

The author of this study analyses accessible tourism as a new and fast-growing segment of the tourism market. In contrast to previous research, this study is an exploratory study that expands the body of knowledge by highlighting the circumstances and difficulties that people with disabilities face during their travelling experiences. The study is conducted in Hungary and Croatia and identifies the objectives of the motivation of people with disabilities for travelling. Based on online secondary sources, the author shows where tourists with disabilities travel to, whether they are satisfied with the existing offer and content adaptation, and what types of services they use. The contribution of this article lies in emphasising the need for new travel services for people with disabilities at both national and international levels.

In particular, the author proposes the following recommendations to improve accessible tourism services: a reliable online database of trips and accessible facilities in neighbouring countries - Croatia and Hungary - would encourage more people to opt for trips and cultural programmes or trips to nature; more products and programmes (gastronomy, concerts, sports) should be accessible in tourism that do not primarily target people with disabilities but meet their needs; with more reliable and diverse online information about accessible tourism, about the places that are easily accessible by wheelchair, more people would opt for a trip to nature, sports and extreme sports.

4) Popović, D., Slivar, I., & Gonan Božac, M. (2022). Accessible Tourism and Formal Planning: Current State of Istria County in Croatia. *Administrative sciences*, *12*, 181. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci12040181





The authors of this study point out that people with disabilities encounter various challenges when travelling and that many of them do not travel at all. The theoretical framework of this paper provides an overview of the necessary conditions for designing tourism products that are accessible and usable for all. The authors emphasise that, contrary to popular belief, accessible tourism goes beyond mobility to include people with intellectual, mental, visual, speech, hearing, stroke and other conditions. The paper also includes an analysis of various categories of accessible tourism offer based on the case study of Istria County. The analysis compares the main cities in Istria County and the degree of their adaptation to the needs of this market segment, with possible practical implications. The concept of accessibility is based on three pillars: physical, informational and service-based. This, the removal of physical barriers, the incorporation of universal design principles into the design of any new building and trained staff to formulate and implement strategies and other plans appear to be key factors in creating added tourism value. The authors strongly emphasise that it is essential to include people with disabilities in tourism and in society.

The study covered five towns and municipalities in Istria County – Rovinj, Poreč, Medulin, Umag and Pula, i.e. the five most important tourism destinations in terms of the number of overnight stays. The research shows that the town of Umag is the best adapted for people with disabilities in three categories – accommodation (hotels), beaches and in the restaurants category, which also makes it the best adapted town in Istria with 42.3% accessible facilities. Pula ranks second in the total number of accessible facilities and is the best equipped town in the culture category (museums and galleries). It is followed by the municipality of Medulin, then Poreč and the least adapted town is Rovinj.

The aim of this research was to examine the following elements of destinations in terms of their accessibility: a) physical planning and other relevant documents of municipalities; b) activities of organisational units or individuals; c) participation in projects; d) being informed on activities caried out in the city by third parties (collaboration, coordination and networking). The results have indicated the following – none of the selected cities and municipalities has a study or programme for the purpose of equalising the opportunities of people with disabilities, but activities and measures are an integral part of any town's development strategies, social programmes, spatial plans and health plans, some of which are from past planning periods.

Although this particular study does not include people with disabilities in the sample, it is worth noting that its contribution lies in the fact that it is one of the few to look at local government Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.





units and their role in accessible tourism. One of the authors' conclusions is that consideration of accessibility should be included as standard in any responsible tourism policy in order to recognise these vulnerable groups and create revenue streams for accessible destinations. Accessible tourism can thus be seen as a means of transformation that enables everyone to enjoy a dignified tourism experience.

5) Škaja, L., Bašić, K., Vuk, R., Stiperski, Z., & Horvat, A. (2019). Pristupačnost Zagreba za korisnike motornih invalidskih kolica [Accessibility in Zagreb for power wheelchair users]. *Hrvatski geografski glasnik*, 81(2), 43-68. https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2019.81.02.02

Even though this particular research is not primarily focused on accessible tourism, it deals with the topic of accessibility in Zagreb for power wheelchair users, with transportation being one of the key elements for people with disabilities when deciding about the destinations which they are going to visit, as pointed out in the previously discussed research by Gonda, 2021. The research conducted by Škaja et al. examines the physical barriers that power wheelchair users encounter while moving around Zagreb. A participatory approach was applied and wheelchair users were included in the part of the research where navigability of the streets was assessed and the barriers which made moving difficult of impossible were also assessed and mapped. Based on the conducted research, accessibility maps were created and a corresponding interactive GIS map was uploaded online. The results showed that, in the researched areas, power wheelchair users were not able to navigate 22% of total pavement length and 16% of pedestrian crossings by themselves and they required the assistance of more than one person in order to navigate 19% od pavement length and 9% of pedestrian crossings. The most common barriers include inadequate pavements, kerbs and stairs.

In conclusion, the authors believe that the prospects for utilising the work on the issues presented in this study lie both in the further elaboration of the navigation methodology and in the development of a mobile application that would direct wheelchair users to the optimal routes to their desired destination. In addition to information on the accessibility of pavements and the physical barriers on them, it would be very beneficial if the application also included information on the accessibility of public facilities and public transport, thus creating an integral system of support for people in wheelchairs moving around the city of Zagreb. The results of this research could be used for the development of inclusive solutions for transport,





that would also be used for tourism purposes to remove the barrier for people with disabilities and enable them to participate in tourism experiences specifically in the city of Zagreb.

6) Tubic, D., Vidak, I., & Kovacevic, M. (2022). Accessible tourism in the national parks of the Republic of Croatia. *Proceedings of 89th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development* – "Economical, Agricultural and Legal Frameworks of Sustainable Development", Novi Sad. 36-44.

In this study, the authors emphasise that the tourism offer must be adapted to people with disabilities, who must be treated as an integral part of tourism demand. An accessible infrastructure, a multidisciplinary approach to the guest and the understanding of vulnerable groups by all actors involved in tourism are important factors in the creation of a specific tourism offer. Considering that communication in tourism is based on direct access to the guest, it is necessary to use different methods and tools to address people with disabilities. With regard to the necessary adaptation of tourism content for people with disabilities, this paper aims to show to what extent there are tools for easier interpretation of content in the national parks of the Republic of Croatia. The empirical research focuses on identifying and analysing disabled people, lines for easier orientation, tactile digital sensors, adapted mobile applications, audio descriptions in places, adapted sanitary facilities and others. The research instrument was an in-depth interview, and the research was conducted on a convenience sample of directors of Croatian national parks. The contribution of the research is reflected in the overview of the current state of equipment of national parks for the needs of accessible tourism development.

The study carried out shows that accessible tourism in national parks is not yet established and is only in the process of adapting its content to people with disabilities. As there is virtually no statistical monitoring of this segment in national parks, it is difficult to imagine the actual number of people who would need certain assistive technologies to facilitate the interpretation of tourism content. From the description of the represented assistive technologies, it is clear that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the interpretation of tourism content for this segment, of which the respondents are aware. Considering that the population with disabilities predominantly obtain information from internet sources, it is disappointing that only a small number of respondents have edited websites. This results in the segment being poorly informed and at the same time not deciding to visit the National Park. If the population with disabilities decides to travel, they should first and foremost make a request for the organisation of a tourist tour, while the individual NPs do not even have the possibility to adapt a tour for this segment.

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The problem continues in the training of staff. It is obvious that the staff is hardly trained to access this segment. Although the interviewees are aware of the fact that there needs to be progress, none of the interviewees indicated where room for such improvements could be found. From the previous findings and this particular survey, it can be concluded that today's tourism is not ready for this segment. Starting with the training of tourism staff, a proper foundation could be laid for the creation of better-quality tourism content and experiences that are accessible to all. Future research addressing the necessary training is recommended.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

Based on the research conducted, several conclusions can be drawn about the academic research on accessible tourism in Croatia to date:

- (a) **the field is still very unexplored** of the six studies analysed in this paper, one does not directly refer to the topic of accessible tourism but focuses on limiting barriers in transportation, and two are part of broader studies that include several other countries in the sample in order to conduct a comparative analysis;
- b) the samples are rather small only one study is based on a sample of 200 respondents, the others are either based on secondary research or include only a small number of respondents or destinations included in the research. Although these results have almost no statistical relevance, they nevertheless provide an important and useful insight into the current state of development of accessible tourism in Croatia;
- c) there is a need for an analysis of the current state of the accessible tourism offer it is not enough to just provide an insight into the theoretical findings on tourism or the supply side of the accessible tourism market in Croatia, there is an urgent need to assess best practises and compare past development with neighbouring and competitive tourism markets;
- d) most of the research on accessible tourism in Croatia is student work currently there are at least 10 student theses on accessible tourism in Croatia, which indicates that this area is currently receiving more attention from the perspective of student insights than from the academic research and perspective;





e) besides the need for more academic research on this topic, the field would greatly benefit from cooperation between academics and practitioners – based on the results of such research, it would be possible to gain much needed in-depth research and relevant findings on the needs and potentials of this tourism product. It is also about gaining knowledge on the specific needs of this demand segment and adapting the tourism offer accordingly in order to remove any barriers that people with disabilities face at this point;

f) a great and urgent need for training of tourism staff on the specific needs of people with disabilities – even though the number of studies on this topic is still small, all studies conducted so far emphasise the importance of training tourism staff on the specificities of this demand segment and on the need for inclusion in tourism that offers all tourists equal opportunities to consume and experience tourism products and services. Training is a first and extremely important step in this process, enabling all stakeholders to create and offer high quality and competitive services to all tourists, regardless of their level of disability.

Despite the rather poor quantity of research and the few individual efforts to conduct quality research on accessible tourism in Croatia, there are several examples of good practises in various destinations. In addition, the efforts of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports aim to include people with disabilities in the process of development and consumption of tourism products and services. These efforts are also noteworthy in the area of educating service providers about the specific needs of people with disabilities and possible solutions for adapting tourism infrastructure to this demand segment. This knowledge, combined with the results of academic research, can build on existing findings and provide all people with the much-needed equal opportunities to participate in the exchange of products and services in the tourism market.

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