

# Accessible tourism: the golden key in the future for the specialized travel agencies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the comprehension of the importance of “Accessible Tourism” for the specialized travel agencies by proposing suggestions and key factors to improve the supply of accessible tourism offers.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The paper adopts specialized travel agencies on the accessible tourism perspective of disabled tourist flows. Also, this paper describes the circumstances, social, politic, economic consequences and key decisions that thereby Turkey would be recognized, preferring, establishing on the intention of purchased and suggested positive word of mouth among people.*

**Findings** – *According to European Commission (EU) (2013) more than half of the individuals with disabilities in the EU made approximately 170 million day trips and a similar number of overnight trips within the EU during the 12 months between mid-2012 and mid-2013. Despite the developments in tourism, lack of product/service appropriate to the travel rights of the individuals with accessibility needs is one of the obstacles should be overcome. Accessible tourism is one of the keys for the survival of the specialized travel agencies in the future. Providing appropriate product/service by targeting the individuals with accessibility needs together with a correct approach and strategy, the specialized travel agencies will be able to have a competitive advantage and continue their activities. Also this market segment will create having sustainable activity and a golden opportunity for the specialized travel agencies in the future.*

**Originality/value** – *Little research has been done on accessible tourism, future development and on the impact that disabled tourists have on tourism. The paper presents suggestions on what the specialized travel agencies should do with regards to making Turkey be preferred in the future by the individuals having accessibility needs.*

**Keywords** *Accessible tourism, Specialized travel agencies, Disabled people*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction: context for accessible tourism

In the recent years, together with giving a different meaning to the concept of “being disabled”, disabled people are seen as a community who have the same equal rights with the other individuals in the society and who struggles to become integrated with the society in accordance with these rights, not as passive and needy indigent individuals (Ministry of Family and Social Policies of Turkey (T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı), 2014). However, in spite of the present legal regulations, the disabled population in the world which is now more than 785 million – that is nearly 15 per cent of the world’s population – (World Health Organization (WHO), 2011), come across with various obstacles about travel and tourism. When accessible tourism is considered as a right that the individuals have, it appears as a necessity that the governments should carry out the necessary applications with respect to serving accessible tourism. Nonetheless, the precondition for the individuals to be able to use the right they have depends on the consciousness about this subject and the coordination between the government and private sector. Tourism activities today are indispensable necessities for the individuals. At the same

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time, this has a similar significance for both developed and developing countries. So as to meet the expectations from these important activities, regulations that can appeal to various tourist types and that can meet the necessities of the tourists should be made (Mesci *et al.*, 2014).

Together with the implementations of the regulations in various countries which are disregarded for years, the disabled individuals have begun to travel more. In Turkey and in the developed countries, in accordance with the importance given to the fundamental human rights and liberties, legal regulations have been made in order for the disabled people to be able to get more easily involved in social life. These legal regulations are considerably significant both for the orientation of the disabled to social life and for the participation of them in tourism activities. Especially the 26th article of the Charter of Fundamental Rights accepted by the European Union, The Americans with Disabilities Act legislated in 1990 and Disability Discrimination Act – aims to end the discrimination that many people with disabilities face – has played important roles in tourism sector (Darcy, 1998; Official Journal of the European Union, 2007; Akdeniz University Project Development Research and Application Center (APGEM), 2012). In Turkey, the approval of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the implementation on the 21st of June 2005 of the regulation dating 1982, numbered 2,634 made in accordance with Tourism Encouragement Law, the regulations about the disabled people in the “c” passage of 18th article titled “General Qualifications of Original Accommodation Businesses”, the products that Turkey’s tourism potential presents to disabled market and the establishment of the “Committee of Tourism without Burdens for All” by the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (Türkiye Seyahat Acentaları Birliği/TÜRSAB) on the 15th of June 2006 so as to detect the inconveniences encountered in this area and help domestic and foreign disabled tourists travel in Turkey without burdens can be appraised as important footsteps (Official Gazette of the Republic Of Turkey (T.C. Resmi Gazete), 2005; Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB), 2014). However, the question of how sufficient the regulations are with respect to individuals having the necessity of accessibility is a question to be answered. In spite of the present legal regulations, there are still problems about accessibility in archeological sites, museums, city centres, food and beverage businesses, beaches, accommodation businesses and means of transport.

In many countries, travel and accommodation opportunities for people with accessibility needs are highly limited. Such things encountered during travel as lack of sufficient rooms enabling the interpass of wheelchairs or the use of present rooms as “documentation room”, deficiency in the equipment, lack of audio alarm systems in the lifts, selling incorrect or inconvenient tours cause problems for tourists with accessibility necessities. Tourism demand is not a simple action for the individuals with accessibility needs because it involves such services as reservation, accommodation, transfer and transportation. All the individuals have the right to benefit from the services that tourism businesses provide. Besides, it is widely accepted that the travel desire of the individual with disability and the one without is the same (Yau *et al.*, 2004). Despite all the problems about accessibility that they face, they ignore and take the risk of all these problems so as to have a holiday experience, even daily. Thus, the businesses in tourism sector should be able to provide products/services in accordance with this market, have the competitive advantage and be selected by doing the necessary investments. When this situation is evaluated from the point of the individuals with accessibility necessities, it is obvious that to be able to have a travel experience, individuals will prefer specialized agencies. Within this context, specialized agencies, together with the increase in demand to accessible tourism, will appraise the service to be fulfilled as the golden key to be able to have sustainable activity in the future, not as an obligation.

By considering the facts that adjusting accommodation sector for the disabled who personally need special service/product being not sufficient enough to appeal and take a share from the market, which can only be considered as fore steps and the number of the specialized agencies being low meaning deficiency and also being aware of the fact that the disabled have the right of travel/holiday, specialized agencies and accessible tourism are handled in this study. In this context this study aims to contribute to the comprehension of the importance of “Accessible Tourism” for the specialized travel agencies by proposing suggestions and key factors to improve the supply of accessible tourism offers, besides, it contributes to raise awareness about the accessible tourism’s possibly turning into a more comprehensive one in the future.

## Specialized travel agencies vs regular travel agencies

The fastest and the most comprehensive developments in science and technology in the history of mankind have brought together the structural changes in economic, political, social and judicial elements. Also these changes and developments are experienced in tourism. Within the context of these changes, some tendencies which are assumed to be affecting the present structure in the long term have arisen. The fact that the travel motives which belong to the consumers slip towards special fields of interest is among those trends (Tanrısevdi and Çavuş, 2003). A tailor-made type of tourism which is composed of personal touristic products has been in progress instead of traditional travel agencies' serving generally in mass tourism which is confronted as sea, sand and sun (3s). The development of special interest has been investigated in the context of specialization in recreation by Little (1976) and Bryan (1977) in the 1970s. Special interest tourists maintain the passion during holiday while they sustain their own fields of interest as a hobby in the home environment (cited by Trauer, 2006). As the tourists who participate in special interest tourism are the potential customers that can spare time, money and labour so as to reach primarily the passions of their own fields of interest (Küçükaslan, 2006), they are the target market for a specialized travel agency that considers maintaining its activities in tourism sector. Specialized agencies should adapt themselves to the changes in order to have the competitive advantage and, they should follow and investigate all the activities of the sector, determine the market tendency and meet the demands in a proper way.

Together with the holiday tourism in which there is a comprehension of sea, sand, sun, new fields of interest such as hunting tourism, golf tourism and health tourism have arisen. Accordingly, marketing and fulfilling these fields in the best way requires specialization. Instead of functioning in a field of relatively larger target market, specialized travel agencies can function in a field where the target market is smaller. It is a greater probability that a business which manufactures only a red car in one single model rather than manufacturing cars in all colours and models may have a more powerful communication with its customers and may, by finding out the customers' requests, needs and expectations, reply to them more rapidly. In this context, when special and different requests are met, the customer will be ready to pay more for these products/services. By tending towards specialization, specialized travel agencies can organize gastronomic tours for the vacationers who want to have a unique food and beverage experience, instead of marketing a touristic product which is composed of sea-sand-sun. These travel agencies that are specialized for these vacationers usually have valuable information. For a travel agency which is specialized in the field of mountaineering tourism, generating a new walking route and providing the necessary equipment for this walk are among the reasons to be preferred by the tourists.

With regard to functional classification, splitted up as incoming and outgoing agencies, the activities of agencies are possible to be put in order as tour selling, ticket procedure, car hiring, transferring, reservation, information and organizing tours (Poon, 1993; Hacıoğlu, 2013). Nevertheless, the demand of tourism is complex and depends on the individual so, travelling motivations can change from one to the other. In that sense, instead of presenting all the activities that are suggested above – because the expectations of all touristic demand cannot be fulfilled explicitly specializing in only one area and analysing strengths and weaknesses of the areas to be active in and also characteristics and expectations of the target clients will be beneficial for the specialized agencies. For example, the travelling agency which is on the way of specializing in health tourism should know the various types of travellers. Cohen (2006) classifies the visitors in five fundamental categories in terms of health tourism market; mere tourist, medicated tourist, medical tourist proper, vacationing patient, mere patient. Specialized agencies can provide service evaluating improving countries on factors like transportation fees as Thailand, India and Malaysia (Connell, 2006). On the other hand, an agency specialized in disabled tourists can assist to the target group within the scope of accessible tourism. Notwithstanding the countries foresee regulating in the area of accessible tourism, today, the number of travel agencies which present consultancy is not enough. For example, Italy has been organizing tours and tourism services for individuals with disabilities since 1995 ([www.accessibleitaly.com/](http://www.accessibleitaly.com/), Accessible Italy, 2015). Besides, purveyors (travel agencies, tour operators) and safari tours, cruises they present with which people can

satisfy their needs are gathered together in the internet site [www.disabledtravellers.com](http://www.disabledtravellers.com) on account of accessible travel from different countries/regions.

Besides there is an increase in the number of people who have disabilities because of being too old, any misfortune like natural disaster or an accident and need to travel also, today, accessible tourism can be seen as a niche experience in the literature (Tourism Australia, 2005 cited by Darcy *et al.*, 2010). Although general interest travel agencies are in demand, many touristic consumers tend to prefer specialized travel agencies when they purchase a holiday. General interest agencies who carry on their activities in a broader market and who are able to offer the most convenient and affordable prices may, for sure, be a correct choice for the consumer when there are no special necessities. However, it is a possibility that the specialized travel agencies are preferred when the individual has a necessity of a special holiday. Individuals with diabetes or mobility limitations may prefer specialized travel agencies because the individuals with special needs may feel themselves more comfortable in tourism destinations where these needs are met. For instance, by including a destination or a hotel suitable for tourists with allergic diseases to its tour programme and by serving food special for the individual with allergic disease in the accommodation place, a specialized travel agency can make it possible to be preferred by the individual with special needs.

The specialization of the travel agencies functioning in the field of tourism depends on various factors. A travel agency which is specialized for people who want to visit the same destination for health tourism (kinds of health tourism: medical, thermal-spa and tourism for senior-disabled people, Ministry of Health of Turkey (T.C. Sağlık Bakanlığı), 2011 together with sea-sand-sun, may have the competition advantage by making an agreement with the businesses providing the necessary equipment. However, such factors as having the potential number of tourists, the accessibility of the destination, the development level of the means of transport and political decisions in the country are notably significant. Within this context, travel agencies have to be specialized by evaluating the present situation and analyse the expectancies of the customers. It is a matter of fact that specialized travel agencies serving the most appropriate service/product in accordance with the expectancies of the customers have a greater possibility to provide customer satisfaction. A satisfied tourist, thus, can recommend the specialized travel agency to individuals with similar travel motivations via word of mouth communication.

Considering social network sites' becoming more and more important on account of word of mouth in the future, Marrakech-Morocco, Siem Reap-Cambodia and İstanbul-Turkey are the three most preferred ones among 469 countries which is identified by the users of Trip advisor of 2015. Destinations are ordered according to the evaluation of the amusement and food spots, hotels, historical and cultural resources and the scenery of the places that are in question (*Radikal*, 2015). Of course, the existence of the people who need accessibility should be remembered in that group using that social network site.

### **Yet, focus is accessible tourism**

In modern life in which human rights and travel freedom are supported, it is an inevitable event that businesses operating in tourism industry should think of disabled people in today's conditions. Disabled individuals have equal rights like other individuals in physical environment, transportation, information and communication areas (World Tourism Organization, 2013). Being devoid of this right is against the principle of equality. The lack of basic equipments that disabled people, who are taking part in the demand side of tourism, need has prevented disabled people from making use of tourism mobility (APGEM, 2012). World tourism sector has faced with a tourism demand having expectation of better accessibility features in transportation, accommodation, travel, tours, beaches, restaurants and tour buses. Disabled people and their families have desired to prefer touristic products having these features. For example; in the study that Small *et al.* (2012) have conducted with the people who have visual impairment, they have indicated that the quality of tourist experience is connected with the factors like information accessibility, direction finding experience, travelling with a guide dog and attitudes of others.

While the concept of disabled indicates variety of individuals who have different needs and level of competence towards travel, the accessibility is related to the absence of obstacles to the use

of the tourist product. Darcy and Dickson (2009, p. 34) have described the accessible tourism as follows:

Accessible tourism enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments. This definition is inclusive of all people including those travelling with children in prams, people with disabilities and seniors.

Accessibility indicates that hotel entrance can provide individuals that have mobility limitation with the ease of transition and also there should be a lift accessibility for baby carriages or strollers of the families with children. Thus, accessible tourism is not only providing wheelchair to individuals who have the mobility limitation but also making embossed signs that signalize the directions for sight disabled people, purveying subtitle system on TV for hearing-impaired people and also forming menus intended for diabetic patients.

Physical accessibility is certainly the basic condition of offering accessibility to those who have special needs. The decision of buying holiday of individuals having special needs contains process in tourism sector. Tourism destinations, hotels, means of transport, searching information for tours and booking or buying tickets require accessibility. In the study, Darcy pointed out that 45 per cent of the participants remarked that the information about accessibility is not true or detailed. For example, accessibility of information is significant for them because while planning their travel, disabled individuals question in detail more than individuals who are not disabled. Disabled people inquire about their travel by taking their special needs into consideration. Requirement for more accessibility means more information which meets these customers' needs (Buhalis *et al.*, 2005).

On the other hand, it is possible to liken chain rings to the transfer of the tourist having special requirements to the hotel, being welcomed by hotel employees (the employees should be well-educated in the matter of welcoming the guests and communicating with them), accommodation, attending tours, shopping during tours (souvenirs, food-drinks, etc.) and return of the tourists to their countries. Thus, accessibility is not just related to a ring of chain but it is related to all. In the study, Albayrak (2014) specified the ergonomic problems that people with physical disability have at the restaurants in tourism industry, she discovered that disabled individuals do not only face with problems related to physical structure but also they have problems like being ashamed of being helped while eating, being uncomfortable with glances of others, insensible and unhelpful behaviours of employees. So, the understanding of "Tourism for all" should be adopted in order to meet expectations of accessibility in destination management with travel and tourism industry (Darcy and Dickson, 2009).

WHO (2011) estimates that 15 per cent of the world population has lived with a disability and 110 million people among them have had difficulties in functioning. More or less everybody can face with requirement of accessibility in some stages of life (Darcy and Dickson, 2009). The number of individuals having special accessibility requirement has been increasing because of aging of population, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, wars, traffic accidents and natural disasters. Especially with the increase of disabled people rate in developed countries and obtaining more information about the concepts of disabled, accessible tourism has led to perform successful applications.

Many successful applications have been found in this issue in England, the USA and countries that are member to the European Union. Pistoia in Italy, Morvan Regional Nature Park in France and Lasko in Slovenia can be given as examples to accessible destinations. On the other hand, as 2008 Olympic Games and Paralympics were held in China more importance had been given to form an accessible environment before that date. Designing of pedestrian ways, buildings, junctions and public toilets for the disabled (APGEM, 2012) can be given as examples to the changing understanding. In the competition with the theme of Accessible Tourism organized by European Commission in 2013, 19 destinations from European Union countries were declared as European Outstanding Destination (EDEN) as a result of committed research and evaluation. Additionally, declaration of the district of Taraklı in Sakarya, Turkey as 2013 European Outstanding Destination of Turkey (The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı), 2014) and building "Accessible Tourism Abled Istanbul" project, which aims at providing disabled individuals

to participate in tourism activities without help and creating awareness in culture institutions for accessibility requirements of the disabled people, become more of an issue in accessible tourism for Turkey.

In fact Bizjak *et al.* (2011) states that the disabled market segment has been incorporated in a special area, a new niche market appeared for the specialized travel agencies. Provided that the old and disabled are paid to more attention in the future, but not as a niche market, rather as an integrated part of tourism offerings based on elements of quality and environmental sustainability can be seen (Alén *et al.*, 2012). Performing enough applications and regulations in this area will be able to yield much for the specialized travel agencies. Among all European Union countries, Germany, England and France are fine source markets for accessible tourism both in domestic and European Union. European Commission, DG Enterprise and Industry (2013) indicated that travels, more than half of the disabled individual performed in Europe, reached the number of 170 million daily travels for 2012-2013 period, which is also similar to the number of overnight trips. It is indicated that the number of daily travels performed by tourists who are over 65 has reached to 225 million while the number of overnight trips has reached to 217 million. Also, travels performed by individuals who have special accessibility requirements in European Union have reached to 783 million. Additionally, it is indicated in the same study that the demand for accessible tourism within the European Union countries may reach to 862 million in 2020. These numbers have shown that the market of accessible tourism has a great potential. On the other hand, if it is considered that the disabled individuals are accompanied by at least one person (a family member, friend, etc.) when travelling, the increase in tourism incomes will be inevitable.

Under the light of all this information, it is possible to pronounce these below about the future of the tourism:

- seen as a niche market in literature, tourism will have an increase around the world with the increase in the population which need accessibility and will get out of being a niche market;
- the activities of the agencies which provide dynamic packaging, accessible information and service rather than traditional services will develop;
- required legitimate regulations on account of accessible tourism and tourism for disabled will be condensed by the developing countries within tourism strategies;
- thanks to the realization of the essential regulations, the number of accessible tourism destinations will increase; and
- the number of academic studies and projects on accessible tourism will increase (they provide a vast research area for the future researches intended for intercountry comparisons as part of accessible tourism and designate the behaviours, motivations and expectations of the individual who needs accessibility).

In short, the specialized travel agencies should have vast knowledge of product/service and customer in accessible tourism. Thus, the travel agencies which provide the most suitable product/service will ensure customer satisfaction by analysing the expectations of customers. That's why, if the agencies apprehend the importance of accessible tourism and can build a new market segment by performing a new relevant regulations, accessible tourism will be the golden key of future not only for making profit but also for sustainable competition advantage.

### **What should the specialized travel agencies do for accessible tourism in the future?**

World Tourism Organization (2014) has indicated that the number of international tourist arrivals reached to 1,087 million in 2013 and has estimated that this number will reach to 1.8 billion in 2030. Turkey takes its place in the top ten among the top tourism destinations in the world. In 2013, Turkey attracted 37.8 million tourists, ranking as the 6th most popular tourist destination in the world. Indeed, for Turkey, by creating required opportunities for this segment that is already a potential market in tourism sector, developing policies, performing incentive regulations for businesses that may have source problems, it is possible to support individuals having special needs to travel more, to ensure that Turkey will take its place on the top of the

tourism destinations and to be a preferable country for those having special needs. At this point, it is necessary to make the required regulations for accessible tourism understandable with reference to the approach of "Tourism for all":

- Regulations for very tall or very short people (It is possible that specialized travel agencies can make a deal with accommodation businesses and transportation companies. The seat pitch or the absence of the suitable bed in accommodation businesses, etc. may discomfort the tourists).
- Regulations for patients with MS, diabetes, cancer, skin diseases and nephropathy.
- Providing different options for families with children (preference of accommodation businesses providing special dish alternatives, sleeping rooms and buffets for babies and children).
- Building a website for disabled individuals.
- Designing tour buses suitable for individuals who have special requirements.
- Using demonstration CDs with subtitles for people having impaired hearing in tour buses.
- Making organizations like wedding ceremonies, dives, rituals, etc. within accessible tourism.
- Providing equipments for individuals having accessibility requirement (e.g. renting wheelchair, strollers for families with children and having walking sticks for the elderly).
- Accompanying the tour for individuals having impaired hearing by the specialists.
- Using demonstrative brochures consisting of Braille and Cartouche for visually impaired individuals.
- Training of personnel about how to behave to individuals having special requirement and about communication process.
- Making arrangements for overweight tourists (during the tour, special diet and sports programme can be provided).
- Accompanying in specific places and activities if needed by special volunteers.
- Keeping introductory kits about museums, ruins and their contents (by loading these kits on the websites, different language options can be provided or codes can be given to the parts about which tourists want to get information, tourists can also get information via mobile phones by using these codes).
- Making improvements by the specialized agencies by cooperating with stakeholders on providing access point to toilet, shower and sea.
- Adaptation of service or product that will be commercialized in relevant country/region by searching "fine applications" for individuals having special requirements in the world and in Turkey.
- Using environment – friendly products (wheelchairs working with solar energy and recyclable brochures and carryalls) for tourists having special requirements by agencies which are in the regions/ countries whose climatic conditions are convenient.

Despite increasing number of the disabled people, factors like insufficient legal regulations in many countries, insufficient substructure, uneducated personnel and compassion to the disabled individuals are just a few of the obstacles in accessible tourism. In addition to supplying the needs of the individuals having accessibility requirements first, it is necessary to create awareness that they demand to spend their time ideally. In this sense, specifying the requirements and making arrangements are of importance for the future of accessible tourism.

Although it is considered that these arrangements will be costly, it is clear that accessible tourism will have a transformation in the future. It is probable that these arrangements will contribute to increase the level of development of Turkey. Also, it will be possible to create tourism employment at accommodation businesses, restaurants and travel agencies by making arrangements to this new market. Most importantly, it is necessary to provide the right of holiday experience to the individuals having accessibility requirement.

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