

# Barrier-free tourism for all: the need for know-how

Vera Berthold

*National Coordination Office for Tourism for All (NatKo), Germany*

*Elderly and disabled people constitute a large, economically significant and steadily growing section of the population. However, the number of accessible travel and tourism facilities available to them is small. As a result, 37 % of people with a disability have, at some time, abandoned the idea of travel (BMWA, 2003).*

*This considerable potential for the tourist industry is far from being exhausted. Training and qualifications for those employed in branches of the industry such as services, planning and marketing are key factors for successful penetration of this market segment. Central training topics here are the needs of guests with disabilities, communication, the market potential, barriers existing along the service chain and how they can be overcome, marketing and programme design. The German National Coordination Office of Tourism for All (NatKo) has produced documentary training material which is being used in training courses in Germany. Elderly and disabled guests rely on the availability of barrier-free tourist facilities, while travellers with heavy luggage or families with children in pushchairs also stand to benefit from better accessibility.*

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The qualifications required of employees in the tourist industry are now very wide-ranging. The economic significance of barrier-free tourism is on the increase. Know-how relating to barrier-free tourism for those working in the various sectors enables them to deal competently with, and hence satisfy the requirements of, elderly and disabled customers. Awareness of the needs of such travellers is frequently lacking and there is sometimes a reluctance to tackle the difficulties involved. The number of those who stand to benefit from the availability of barrier-free tourism is large. Many disabled people rely on the availability of accessible holiday facilities while elderly people, families with children and people with heavy luggage find such facilities a great help and advantage.

The German National Coordination Office for Tourism for All (NatKo) was created in 1999 to combine and coordinate the activities of a variety of self-help organisations working towards this end, to act as their joint spokesman and thus help to improve travel facilities for disabled people. Its members are the various German associations for the disabled. NatKo's tasks are very wide-ranging. It takes part in all the main tourism fairs, organises conferences and workshops, cooperates with the tourist industry and its specialist associations, and does a great deal of consultancy and training work for tour organisers and travel agencies. It is also represented on the relevant policy-making bodies. NatKo is the central representative body for barrier-free tourism in Germany.

The potential market represented by travellers whose mobility is restricted has, in the past, been seriously neglected and little attention has been paid to them in tourist industry market research. We present below a selection of findings of a study to show the importance of training to be able to meet the needs and wishes of this target group.

In 2003 the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour (BMWA) in Germany commissioned a study on *The economic impulses of accessible tourism for all*. The results give food for thought.

Some 20 000 disabled people were asked to complete a questionnaire; over 4 000 were returned for processing. Other material used for the study included a survey, questions posed through the Internet and oral reports from tourists and those providing tourist services in five German holiday resort areas.

These showed the potential market to be considerable. There are 6.7 million people living in Germany who are registered as severely disabled, equivalent to 8.1 % of the population. Half of them are over 65 years of age and the proportion of elderly people is on the rise. In due course, over a third of the German population will be over 60. The overall proportion of people with restricted mobility will become between 30 and 35 %.

The results of the study on travel and tourism showed clearly that what the market is currently offering falls short of meeting the needs and wishes of people whose mobility is restricted:

- (a) the proportion of such people travelling is lower than in the case of those whose mobility is not restricted – 54.3 % against 75.3 %;
- (b) travel is largely undertaken regardless of season;
- (c) the proportion of tours within Germany is high at 41.2 % compared with 30.5 % outside Germany;
- (d) 37 % of those questioned had already abandoned plans to travel because of a lack of barrier-free facilities;
- (e) 48 % would travel more often if the available offers were more plentiful.

Currently, net sales of holidays and short tours amount to EUR 2 500 million and this group of travellers still offers potential for growth of EUR 620 to EUR 1 930 million. This, according to the BMWA, could mean up to 90 000 new full-time jobs (BMWA, 2003).

The conclusion reached by the study is that elderly and disabled people constitute a large and attractive market. The potential number of customers and actual demand is increasing yet there is a shortage of barrier-free facilities throughout the service chain. Quite apart from the requirements for buildings used by disabled people, the service on offer is still inadequately designed for people whose mobility is restricted. Full information on accessibility at a given travel destination is hardly ever available.

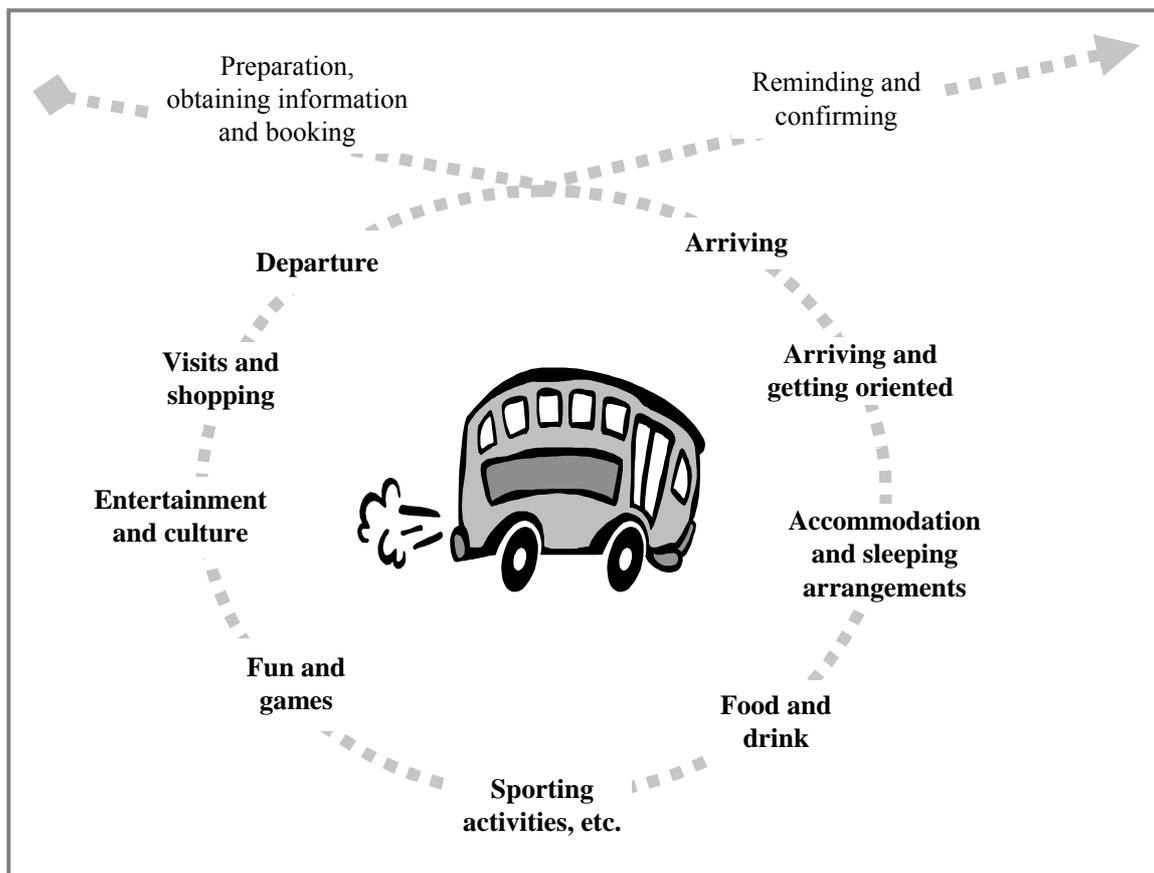
The study made various recommendations for establishing barrier-free tourism in Germany. One important recommendation was the creation of a nation-wide training programme for those working in travel and tourism.

Ensuring that employees in a barrier-free tourism industry are professionally qualified is one of NatKo's chief areas of activity. It has designed a training programme for barrier-free tourism with training material prepared during workshops by those actually working in tourism in collaboration with representatives of organisations of disabled people.

The material includes sections on the following subjects:

- (a) basic information concerning disabled travellers and their needs;
- (b) contact and communication between people with and without disabilities;
- (c) data concerning the barrier-free tourism market;
- (d) barriers existing along the tourism service chain and how they can be overcome;
- (e) marketing barrier-free programmes;
- (f) sources and addresses;
- (g) a comprehensive appendix of checklists, practical tips and relevant legal points.

Figure 1: The tourism service chain



Source: NatKo 2002, p. 47.

All the material is highly practice-related with no essential aspects omitted; a large number of practical examples make for easy understanding. The section *Barriers along the tourism service chain and ways of overcoming them* deserves particular mention. A holiday is made up of a variety of tourist offerings and services and a number of obstacles lie in wait for the disabled holidaymaker (Figure 1). They begin with the information available concerning the holiday. All too often it is impossible to discover anything about accessibility from travel brochures and other material and a would-be traveller frequently has to go to a great deal of trouble to discover, for example, whether they can use the means of transport provided, whether the hotel has suitable provision, and whether the leisure activities on offer have been designed with disabled people in mind. Some difficulties are easily solved but, in the long run, the aim should be for all travel on offer to be barrier-free.

The training material focuses on four groups of people with restricted mobility:

- (a) people with walking difficulties and those who are confined to wheelchairs;
- (b) the blind and visually handicapped;
- (c) the deaf and those with impaired hearing;
- (d) people with understanding difficulties.

Elderly people often come into these categories with difficulties in walking, seeing, hearing or understanding and therefore also need the benefits of barrier-free tourism.

Training can be provided on a modular basis. Seminars can be designed for people in specific occupations, such as those whose work brings them into direct contact with guests; this includes service personnel in hotels and restaurants and the like. Here the topic *Disabled people's needs and communication* is of particular importance. Those responsible for planning travel and tours have to receive information on *Barrier-free building and planning* and *Programme design and marketing*.

Seminars can also deal with particular aspects of a given tourist region.

We always recommend that the panel of speakers for every seminar includes a person who is disabled since they can state the message more effectively, speaking from their own experience. This brings life to the seminar.

We also recommend that seminars for all occupational groups should include the actual experience of using a wheelchair and/or blindness simulation glasses. Participants are then able to understand their customers' needs far better than when explanations are purely theoretical.

The training material described is being used with success throughout Germany. NatKo organises seminars, provides trainers and makes the training material available.

A considerable amount of training on barrier-free tourism is being carried out in Germany. The German Railways trains its employees to deal with disabled people. A number of tourism organisations run training courses: Lower Saxony has run a whole series in its various

regions, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has made the subject part of a training campaign and Rhine Hesse, which is actively working towards barrier-free tourism, offers training to all those employed in tourism in the region. The State of Brandenburg has a comprehensive programme of training, consultancy and coaching as part of its campaign for qualifications in tourism which is part of the Innopunkt 6 project.

All those taking part have understood that know-how is one key to success in barrier-free tourism for all.

## **References**

BMWA – Federal Ministry of Economics and Work. *The economic impulses of accessible tourism for all*. Berlin: BMWA 2003 (Documentation No 526).

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