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The Accessibility Requiring Market in Europe: Socially and Economically Important

This paper estimates the general demand for accessibility in Europe and highlights its social as well as economic potential. It outlines that for people with accessibility requirements, such as individuals living with a disability and the elderly population, the provision of information about accessible destinations determines whether or not they are able to engage in tourism opportunities. The OSSATE-project (One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe) is used as an example to demonstrate how to capture this market effectively by addressing the specific requirements of these market segments using Information Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Key words: Tourism, Accessibility, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), OSSATE

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With the establishment of the OSSATE-project (One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe), important steps have been initiated to create a new pan-European e-service which will allow disabled citizens, their families and others with accessibility needs to find information about existing and new tourism products and services throughout Europe that are accessible for them.

The OSSATE service will implement a multi-platform, multi-lingual, digital information service providing national and regional content on accessible tourist venues, sites and accommodation. The service will deliver information via an accessible (WAI-compliant) Web portal and mobile phone platforms. The business identifies and employs a common set of protocols and standards to enable search and retrieval of standardised data on accessibility of the physical environment, facilities and services offered by providers. Tourist organisations and individual providers are invited to input their own data directly to the system.

The underlying reason for the establishment of this innovative e-service is the growing demand for accessible tourism products and services. Making tourist destinations accessible for all visitors is not a ‘minority issue’ as persons with impairments, having varying levels of accessibility requirements, represent a significant part of the population. It has been estimated that between 600 and 900 million citizens worldwide have at least one impairment that affect their travel patterns. Considering the ageing population in the world and the strong and positive correlation between ageing and disablement, this figure will continue to rise substantially over the next 30 years. Given that the elderly population shares many of the

access barriers faced by people with impairments, the accessibility requiring market represents an enormous segment.

Market research for the OSSATE- project has shown that in Europe alone there are more than 127 million European citizens have explicit accessibility requirements. This includes the disabled market as well as the elderly population. For estimating the impact of the accessibility requiring market, it is also important to realise that persons with access needs seldom travel alone. Thus, by ignoring the needs of the accessibility requiring population, tourism suppliers are very likely to loose the business of their friends and family members as well. Consequently, the tourism industry in general looses a potential benefit of more than 80 billion Pounds in revenues.

It will depend on the tourism industry to respond to this potential with the development of a coherent inclusive strategy to adequately target this market. While the removal of environmental barriers represents the greatest challenge to society, information dissemination about currently accessible destinations appears to be the most effective immediate solution for opening tourism opportunities to impaired people and to contribute to the aim of social tourism that all disadvantaged people can fulfil their right of travel.

For more information see <http://www.ossate.org/> or contact Dr. Dimitrios Buhalis, School of Management, University of Surrey, Guildford, GU2 7XH, UK, EMAIL: d.buhalis@surrey.ac.uk