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WORLD WITHOUT LIMITS

Accessible Tourism is good business.

Steve Gillick

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17 OCT 2016: "Ubiquitous Serendipity" is the expectation of many global citizens who view travel as essential to their livelihood. But the phrase is a bit of an oxymoron. If something is ubiquitous, it means that it is ever-present and

can be expected to be seen or experienced all the time. (Mojitos in Cuba are ubiquitous).



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Serendipity refers to a chance happenstance where an unexpected encounter results in surprise, pleasure and ‘wow’. (e.g. a festival, a sighting of the Northern Lights and a cabin upgrade may all be considered to be serendipitous).

What travellers want is the opportunity to travel the world and be pleasantly surprised by events and attractions: the people they meet, the peace of mind they seek, the cultures they encounter, the foods they sample, the beaches they explore, and more. And this “want” is shared by travellers of every physical ability.

Exploring the World without Limits is an ideal that currently is not available to 15% of the estimated one billion travellers who circumnavigate the globe on an annual basis.

These are travellers with disabilities, and the limits

they encounter can include everything from attitude to inconsistent standards, and from inconsiderate treatment to just plain ignorance.

When Keith Rashid, the National Manager of Accessible Travel Services at the March for Dimes office in Toronto mentioned the term “Washington Chair” I asked for clarification. He explained that this is a wheelchair specifically designed to fit in the narrow aisle of an airplane and transport a disabled passenger to his/her seat. ‘But the passenger is supposed to hug their shoulders as they go down the aisle, so they don’t hit anyone with their arms. The problem is that not every person has the ability to cross their arms in such a manner.

A typical airline solution is to carry the passenger to his/her seat. This is not only invasive but also insensitive and embarrassing to the passenger. Writer, activist and Eastern European traveller, Irena Kagansky told me, “I graduated with honours from university. I’m fluent in three languages. I use a pair of forearm crutches to assist with walking. A pair of walking sticks has nothing whatsoever to do with my ability to think for myself”.

And Martyn Sibley, an author and travel adventurer states on his website, “I’m a regular guy who happens to have a disability...I travel, I drive my own car, I’ve scuba-dived, flown a plane and live independently on earth”.

Irena and Martyn are typical travellers with disabilities. They are both mobility-challenged but seek the exact same “ubiquitous serendipity” that able-bodied travellers crave. They look to the day when the world of travel and tourism comes to the

realization that accessibility is a pro-active business plan for the future. Like the proverbial ships in the harbour, the rising tide of accessibility raises all the boats.

And particularly in a world where the baby boomers are now being touted as “junior-seniors”—they are getting older and with age, inevitably, problems arise that affect them mentally and physically. Issues of accessibility start to hit home when it comes to ease of access to museums, hotel rooms, attractions, transportation, proper readable signage, consideration for the height of counters, along with properly trained staff who can offer customer service and communication to those with disabilities.

For a little island in the Caribbean, St. Eustatius has taken a big lead with their Annual Sustainability Conference. This year, tied in with World Tourism Day on September 27th, the Conference theme was “Tourism for All”.

A number of speakers, myself included, led sessions and workshops emphasizing some of the challenges of accessible tourism and also the business case for making travel and tourism professionals aware of the potential monetary benefits.

Instances abound where disabled travellers do their homework and then arrive at a hotel only to find a lip around the shower that prevents their wheelchair from entering, or finding that the hotel has given away the only accessible room to an able-bodied couple who just wanted a larger space for themselves, or taking the promised elevator to the 3rd floor of the museum, only to have the fire-alarm sound, (which shuts down the elevators) and

leaves the mobility-challenged visitor with no exit route, other than being physically carried out of the building.

The issue of accessibility fits the analogy of being pregnant. You are either pregnant or you are not. A hotel or attraction is either accessible or it is not. If you can enter the washroom through the extra-wide door, that is great, but if you can't fit the wheelchair into the stall or there are no grab bars to assist the person, then the good intentions are totally wasted.

It's estimated that in the UK alone, US \$550,000 is left on the table every day of the year, due to insufficient services for disabled travellers—who want to spend the money. Typically a disabled person will travel with at least one companion and many times with friends and family. They will book upgrades to flights, cruises, hotels and resorts—just like able-bodied travellers.

Who better to cater to the needs of disabled travellers than trained travel professionals who make customized travel arrangements all the time? And still there is reluctance in the travel agent community to cater to special needs travellers, primarily due to the three main myths:

1. Disabled travellers have less income. (In the US studies show that disabled travellers have \$220 billion in discretionary income and currently spend nearly 14 billion on annual vacations).
2. They only want a cruise or an all-inclusive (cruises have activities and upgrade opportunities, as do many all-inclusives. But in addition, disabled travellers engage in scuba-diving, parachuting, trekking, mountaineering and safaris. They are

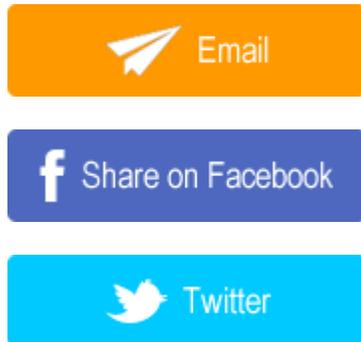
foodies, embrace cultural experiences and want leisure time to relax and reflect—similar to able-bodied travellers.

3. Planning for a disabled traveller is time consuming—time that could be spent servicing the needs of ‘regular’ clients. (in a world of emotive—as opposed to transactional selling—customized travel that connects the traveller with the destination is the norm. Customization relies on the travel advisor’s (or tour operator’s) experience, local contacts, research skills and customer service skills to determine needs. (The golden rule in selling travel to the disabled is “Ask what they need to make it happen”) This is not so different from the value-expectations of all your clients).

And it’s good to know that many of the destinations to which your able-bodied clients travel—destinations in which you may already be specializing—are suited to the needs of the disabled. Lonely Planet’s list of accessible destinations for 2016 includes Chichen Itza, Barcelona, Quito, Sicily, Manchester, Melbourne, Ljubljana, Singapore and most US destinations and territories (due to the Americans with Disabilities Act).

For those looking to enhance their revenue, their interaction with the community, their database, their client referrals and their personal satisfaction, getting involved with disabled travellers is a positive move that makes good business sense.

We all want to experience the joy of ubiquitous serendipity. And now you know that it’s available to all travellers ... without limits.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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