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Accessible tourism: concepts and issues

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BOOK REVIEW

Accessible tourism: concepts and issues, edited by Dimitrios Buhalis and Simon Darcy, Bristol, Channel View Publications, 2011, 336 pp., £34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84541-160-2

Best practice in accessible tourism: inclusion, disability, ageing population and tourism, edited by Dimitrios Buhalis, Simon Darcy, and Ivor Ambrose, Bristol, Channel View Publications, 2012, 408 pp., £34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84541-252-4

This review will provide a critical assessment of two books which focus on the topic of accessible tourism. The first volume edited by Buhalis and Darcy (2011), *Accessible tourism: concepts and issues*, is a collection of 19 chapters including contributions from both academia and professional practice. The work represents a complementary mixture of conceptual and empirically informed papers. Although the chapters are not collated into specific sections they are sequenced in a logical manner. There are three main parts to the book. The first part (Chapters 1–3) outlines key terminology, deconstructing and contextualizing notions of disability and accessibility. The second part (Chapters 4–13) highlights various ways in which disabilities affect people's access to tourism. The third part (Chapters 14–18) sheds light on the role of the tourism industry in addressing the economic potential and provision of accessible tourism.

Darcy and Buhalis produce a fairly informative opening chapter, 'Introduction: from disabled tourists to accessible tourism' (Chapter 1), attempting to conceptualize accessible tourism through recognizing its role within the tourism system. The editors indicate the importance of utilizing a social approach to disability and understanding how the 'socially constructed environment' (p. 4) affects accessible tourism. The chapter also briefly outlines the universal design principle for encouraging accessible tourism for all. Foggin's chapter, 'Tourism in the leisure lives of people with disability' (Chapter 6), is very informative. The author develops biographic narratives of males and females suffering from paraplegia, quadriplegia, and spina bifida, accounting for their perceptions and experiences of tourism. The study findings draw attention to a range of specific concerns, for instance: the importance of a good climate and reasonably priced holidays; difficulties in visiting built environments; inadequate transportation; and irregular availability of specially adapted hotel rooms.

The book indicates the value of recognizing and applying the social model of disability, as opposed to the medical model which emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of the physical body rather than the social body. Therefore, the social model draws attention to ways in which social environments influence disability, potentially marginalizing people with disabilities and limiting equitable forms of tourism access and participation. Fullagar's chapter, 'Travelling with and beyond depression: women's narratives of recovery and identity' (Chapter 7), adopts

the social model to study the mental health needs of women suffering from depression. She suggests that travel offers a self-oriented respite from the gendered (home) environment, and also involves emotional risk associated with the disruption of household life and the movement from the ordinary to the non-ordinary. The social model is directly applicable in Pearn's contribution, 'Heritage sites: attitudinal and experimental differences of disabled and able-bodied visitors' (Chapter 13), which also indicates ways in which accessible tourism provision can be at conflict with heritage conservation.

The book pays attention to demographic changes and economic indicators affecting tourism participation and access (e.g. age and income levels). Also, some of the enquiries raise prevalent concerns regarding the need for more purposeful interventions in the provision of and support for accessible tourism. Poria, Reichel, and Brandt's chapter, 'Blind people's tourism experiences: an exploratory study' (Chapter 9), for instance, indicates that the design of hotel rooms need to be more conducive to free and safe movement, and for airport staff to regularly utilize cellular phones to aurally update individuals on appropriate information concerning scheduling.

The book also has a very contemporary outlook facilitated by two purposeful contributions from Pühretmair and Nussbaum ('Web design, assistive technologies and accessible tourism' – Chapter 17), and Michopoulou and Buhalis ('Technology platforms and challenges' – Chapter 18), both of which explore challenges to the effective utilization of assistive technologies in the provision of suitable services for members of the disabled community.

This volume claims to adopt a broad-based social constructionist approach to the study of accessible tourism. This is perhaps one illustration of an 'identity crisis' that is troubling tourism studies; there are fleeting attempts by academics to utilize (albeit loosely) social scientific perspectives without wishing to deeply contextualize approaches undertaken so as to ensure that they are systematically applied to the topic of study in a convincing and comprehensive manner. Social constructionism is often at odds with critical theory and the political economy of tourism, and therefore the book does not adequately address the shortcomings of this approach to the study of tourism and disability. If it had done so, then the plight of disabled communities in the 'third world' and related predicaments of tourism immobilities for such states and governments would be critically exposed, as well as the patriarchal (and capitalistic) nature of the able-bodied tourism industry.

In examining issues of access and disabled representation in tourism, it is of crucial importance to recognize the extent to which tourism provision actively represents disabled workers and managers. Although the role of disabled people being directly involved in the tourism planning process (Darcy, Cameron, and Pegg, p. 244), and perhaps as 'disability experts' in the tourism industry (Michopoulou and Buhalis, p. 265), has been evoked in the book, separate and detailed attention to disabled-bodied representation in decision-making occupations in the industry and related industries is crucial. Proactive representation could produce positive social outcomes, particularly if disabled communities are represented as key stakeholders and innovators, thus encouraging increased tourist access, unique forms of tourism participation, heightened levels of tourist (and guest) satisfaction, and sensitively designed tourism initiatives and developments. These are all issues that certainly require future empirical treatment and informed assessment.

The final chapter by Darcy, Ambrose, Schweinsberg, and Buhalis, 'Conclusion: universal approaches to accessible tourism' (Chapter 19), indicates the importance of recognizing that social participation can only effectively occur if the principles and practices of universal design are integral to everyday life. Accordingly, the concept of universal design transcends simple concentration on access and inclusion issues to more of a focus on encouraging products and environments to be functional for (and utilized by) all groups. Information provided for most of the chapters is generally adequate, with the exception of Michopoulou and Buhalis' chapter, 'Stakeholder analysis of accessible tourism' (Chapter 16). This contribution is rather 'thin on the ground' and misses a real opportunity to present a critical assessment of the challenges and many limitations faced by specific sets of stakeholders. In terms of navigating the book's interconnected concepts and perspectives, it would have been helpful if both a subject and author index were included.

Although the book makes a valuable contribution to the study of tourism, disability, and accessibility, it is not too ambitious in terms of critical content, theoretical aptitude, and global application. Nevertheless, the book should be of interest to both undergraduate and postgraduate students studying particular aspects of tourism and consumer behaviour, and the social and welfare elements associated with tourism supply and provision. It will also be useful to those students specializing in tourism planning and policy.

The second book in this review, *Best practice in accessible tourism: inclusion, disability, ageing population and tourism*, edited by Buhalis, Darcy, and Ambrose, focuses on policy matters and illustrations of best practice in accessible tourism. Whereas the first volume, *Accessible tourism: concepts and issues*, concentrates more on the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of accessible tourism, this subsequent volume focuses on the practicalities and the applications of the concepts and concerns. The case studies are largely from the developed world, notably America, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. The book contains 25 chapters, which incorporate both an introduction and conclusion chapter. The main chapters are conceptually themed under five sections: Section One, 'Policies and strategies for accessible tourism' (Chapters 2–8); Section Two, 'Networks and partnerships' (Chapters 9–13); Section Three, 'The accessible tourism value chain' (Chapters 14–17); Section Four, 'Destination development' (Chapters 18–22); and Section Five, 'Accessible tourism experiences' (Chapters 23–24).

This volume contains a range of productive and worthwhile contributions. Ambrose provides a useful start to Section One in his chapter entitled 'European policies for accessible tourism' (Chapter 2), where he reviews various policy directives for encouraging accessible tourism in Europe and draws critical attention to different planning laws and different standards of accessibility across European Union (EU) member states. He highlights the foundation of a new strategic 'road map' for accessible tourism, established by the European Network for Accessible Tourism. This strategy purports the development of various mechanisms. Examples of this include: the prioritization of accessible tourism as a principal responsibility of public sector tourism providers; valued contributions from the industry and business; the development of a training curriculum at EU level for tourism workers and key personnel; and the effective advancement of employment opportunities in the tourism sector for disabled people. Hunter-Jones and Thornton's contribution, 'The third sector responses to accessible/disability tourism' (Chapter 12), indicates the

vital role of charitable organizations in supporting vulnerable consumers and working closely with other sectors.

Walsh, Haddock-Fraser, and Hampton's chapter, 'Accessible dive tourism' (Chapter 13), is perceptive as it not only emphasizes the opportunities and challenges of this particular form of sport tourism, but presents a case for increased volunteer opportunities (e.g. marine conservation) among disabled communities. In fact, the topic of volunteer tourism provokes a need to consider seriously a new dimension of accessible tourism that has not really been considered in this book, and which is also overlooked in the previous volume, *Accessible tourism: concepts and issues*. This dimension relates to the importance of recognizing the responsibilities of (disabled) tourists themselves. Although the two volumes generally infer the importance of the 'right to travel' for members of disabled communities, any analysis that fundamentally perceives the importance of tourists as citizens should not only recognize rights and freedoms of tourists but also their responsibilities, duties, and obligations; especially if any clear notion of citizenship is to be contextualized and applied. Therefore, there is still significant scope for accessible tourism research to move towards examining the role of disabled tourists in relation to their tourism environment, and meaningful interactions with and social responsibilities towards fellow tourists, tourism workers, and host communities.

Darcy and Ravinder's work, 'Air travel for people with disabilities' (Chapter 15), is instructive as it concerns the challenges that the disabled face in utilizing low-cost carriers in an economic environment where the market worth of disabled tourist segments is substantial. Accordingly, the authors note the range of problems confronted, such as poorly trained staff, inadequate (and cramped) aircraft facilities, and discriminatory pricing (e.g. additional costs for extra equipment often needed to support a person's disability). In his chapter, 'Accessible public transport: Vienna city tourism' (Chapter 16), Krpata informs us of ways in which such attributes as comfort, simplicity, safety, security, speed, and reliability are all key elements of successfully accessible and functional transportation systems. Papamichail's contribution, 'Accessible hotels: design essentials' (Chapter 17), applies the universal design principle to hotels, emphasizing the advancement of various codes of conduct for meeting the needs of all groups with diverse preferences and abilities. Along with a set of universal guidelines and standard requirements, the work also provides a useful checklist of areas of the hotel where special treatment should be focused. However, in terms of setting the standard for best practice in accessible tourism destinations, Galán's chapter, 'Accessible tourism in Spain: Arona and Madrid' (Chapter 21), is appropriate. Both destinations are believed to be politically and professionally committed to disability access, with productive outcomes.

The book is generally well structured and most of the five sections are labelled in an appropriate manner. However, the fifth section concerning 'accessible tourism experiences' is rather abstract, and its true contribution to the book is not clear. This 379-page volume could be seen to be a little too ambitious in terms of the quantity of information incorporated, attempting to include as many themes and issues as possible at the risk of discouraging more in-depth explanations and evidence. The final chapter by Ambrose, Darcy, and Buhalis, 'Conclusions: best accessible tourism practice' (Chapter 25), for instance, is rather narrow and lacks academic vision. This book misses an opportunity to present a global vision for accessible tourism, concentrating mainly on the developed (Western) world. A subject and author index would have been useful. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the book will appeal to

professionals and tourism providers – in addition to students, academics, and researchers. Moreover, the book logically follows on from the first volume, *Accessible tourism: concepts and issues*. Finally, both volumes are timely and purposeful, exposing accessible tourism to important academic evaluation.

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