

Fostering Accessible Tourism: Stakeholders' Perspective in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim

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Abstract: Nowadays, tourism is considered an important social phenomenon, stimulating the mobility of millions of tourists around the world. Accessible tourism is becoming increasingly visible and is considered a growing market segment. For this, it is essential to adapt infrastructures, making them fully accessible. This research seeks to raise awareness in the tourism sector for the creation of accessibility conditions necessary and aimed at all types of demand. In this way, it is intended to deepen the knowledge about Accessible Tourism, as well as evaluate, on the supply side, the awareness and consciousness of the importance of this segment and ascertain whether Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim, meet all the necessary conditions to receive these tourists. This study adopts a qualitative approach with the application of interviews to seven entities, representative of the supply in the destinations, dealing daily with mobility impaired people. The main results show that, despite Accessible Tourism being an increasingly important market segment for the tourism industry, the existing tourism offer in the cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim (North of Portugal), is not yet fully aware and adapted to receive and serve people with reduced mobility.

Keywords: accessibility, accessible tourism, mobility, Vila do Conde, Póvoa de Varzim

1. Introduction

People with disabilities are part of a relevant population group in the world, growing due to the aging observed in several regions of developed countries and the incidence of diseases (UNWTO & ACS Foundation, 2014). The numerous barriers faced by this group of people in their daily lives or even when they travel outside their usual environment prove to be a significant barrier to their participation in tourism. More serious emphasis should be placed on physical and/or intellectual barriers and impediments in tourism.

There is an emerging need to adapt tourism destinations to the special needs of people with reduced mobility. Tourism, besides being considered a felt need today, is important for human development, and should be seen as a social asset available to all citizens, without exclusion of any group of people, regardless of their personal, economic or any other conditions (Silva, 2017). For this reason, accessible tourism should be committed to providing solutions and answers, assuming the involvement of several entities in different activities, and not only to Tourism.

This research analyses the tourism supply in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim in terms of accessible tourism, aiming to find out if the cities have the necessary conditions for disabled tourists to visit and stay, particularly in hotels, museums, tourist offices, and tourist sites.

2. Literature review

From the perspective of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021) and the World Health Organization (WHO), there are over one billion people worldwide living with some form of disability. In the coming years, disability will increase as chronic diseases and population ageing increase (UNWTO, 2021). From the perspective of Gomes et al. (2017, p.1) disability "is any loss of a psychological, physiological or anatomical structure and/or function that induces incapacity for the performance of activity, within the standard considered normal for

human beings". The incapacity of an individual is the inability to perform certain tasks, temporarily or permanently, resulting from several personal factors, including "disability", which may be temporary or permanent, progressive or regressive (Garcia et al., 2014), resulting from biomedical changes present in the biological structure or functions of the body's organic systems. Garcia et al. (2017) also consider that disability is assessed as a universal human experience, since we all have experiences related to several limitations and restrictions in activities occurring throughout life, featuring different types of disability: Motor disability - which causes the loss or weakening of the limbs, inducing limited mobility; Sensory disability - which causes blindness or impaired vision, deafness, or hearing impairment, or even speech impairment; Intellectual disability - which varies between "severe" and mild, and may cause slow learning or even learning difficulties.

From a strategic perspective for the tourism sector, Duch (2015) believes that the practice of tourism activity still requires interventions at the level of analysis of the social representations of some population segments, since people with different types of disabilities and/or reduced mobility, involving elderly and obese people, tend to be excluded from the strategic planning of economic activity and social integration of tourism (Duch, 2015). Adverse situations are diagnosed regarding people with reduced mobility, due to the impossibility of moving in urban spaces, generating reflections, and reinforcing the idea of indifference towards others (Neto, 2018), also revealing problems of inclusion, discrimination, and violence (Fontes, 2016). According to Campos et al. (2019), people with reduced mobility have special needs in their movement. Every day, these people are faced with physical and structural barriers present in most cities, making it difficult to strengthen the paradigm of social inclusion (Silva & Marques, 2018), being essential that cities adapt to meet all their needs (Campos et al., 2019). In recent years, the concept of accessibility has become more relevant for the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2021). This new concept gives equipment and products/services a probability to guarantee to all potential users an equal opportunity to use with dignity and safety (INR-Instituto Nacional para a Reabilitação, 2020). This evolution reveals an acceleration of changes in this sector, and in tourism destinations where competitiveness and quality have become fundamental guidelines in their tourism policies (UNWTO, 2021), being accessibility an essential factor in the evaluation of quality in tourism (Carrillo & Boujrouf, 2020).

Continuous investment is needed in the planning, construction, adaptation, and conservation of infrastructures (Carrillo & Boujrouf, 2020), due to the relevance of accessibility conditions in all environments and services associated with tourism activities, ensuring their use by people with disabilities (Carrillo & Boujrouf, 2020), and simultaneously ensuring appropriate tourism experiences. Accessibility will be an essential condition for people's quality of life contributing to greater civic participation and a growing increase in social inclusion and solidarity (INR, 2020). With the elimination of barriers, life becomes a minor obstacle to live regardless of the structure, age, or ability of each one (Garcia et al., 2017).

Urban and architectural barriers are understood as fixed barriers, which are associated with a more in-depth work and a significant financial cost, as they are considered barriers that are difficult to solve (Teles, 2014). The same research considers some types of barriers (Teles, 2014): Poles; Absence of pedestrian crossings; Absence of pavements; Absence of ramps; Commercial obstacles (for example: fruit stores, esplanades); Absence of lowering of pavements; Absence of comfortable and accessible pavements; Garbage containers that condition mobility and that imply the change of "route"; Steps and stairs, instead of ramps at the entrances of all establishments/services. Michopoulou and Buhalis (2013) also highlighted other possible barriers such as: Heavy doors for people with reduced mobility; Inadequate lighting; Lack of adequate tactile guide paths for visually impaired people; Lack of alternative fire alarm for hearing impaired people, such as vibrating pad, and flashing lights.

The concept of accessible tourism is based on a universal principle, ensuring that tourism is a social and fundamental right for all (UNWTO, 2021). Throughout life, all citizens will possess temporary or permanent disability (Carrillo & Boujrouf, 2020). According to UNWTO (2021), people with disabilities still face difficulties and barriers in their travels, such as: inaccessible transport; the existence of physical and communication barriers in museums and accommodation units; the lack of trained professionals in the travel sector; as well as the lack of information for planning a trip. From this perspective, accessible tourism for all is revealed as a need to integrate people with physical, mental or sensory disabilities into tourism infrastructures and services (Carrillo & Boujrouf, 2020), while tourism allows people with disabilities to master their skills and develop their abilities (Mendes & Paula, 2008), since being in contact with different environments and people outside their usual routine will help them to better capture their desires and needs, also increasing their quality of life and greater social interaction.

The promotion of accessible tourism for all involves public authorities and private entities such as travel agencies, tourism entertainment companies, tourist attractions, taking over a better understanding about this segment and develop a competitive advantage for the tourism services provided to customers in the regions they operate (Garcia et al., 2014). The accessibility of goods and services should be a free decision of tourism agents and not just an imposition by public authorities, which on any occasion must ensure the full and effective use and enjoyment of people with disabilities in tourism offers (Carrillo & Boujrourf, 2020). Creating better conditions for all will lead to a greater profitability of existing resources and a growth in national and international tourism demand (Garcia et al, 2014).

3. Methodology

This research focuses on the market of Accessible Tourism, a sector that is constantly changing and requires some attention from authorities and professionals. This study aims to find out if companies in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim have activities and/or services adapted to people with reduced mobility, to understand if there is a clear notion of the importance of this segment and if they are aware and willing to invest in it. To achieve this general objective and in order to make this research feasible, we proceeded to a construction of specific objectives: To define and characterise the type of visitor of the Accessible Tourism segment; To explore and understand tourism accessibility in the cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim; To understand if tourism companies, as well as tourism professionals, are able to receive people with reduced mobility; To identify the main existing barriers that affect tourism demand in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim. In view of the proposed objectives, the research methodology considered most appropriate was the qualitative one. Interviews are an important source of evidence, which with a proper analysis and interpretation, result in a reliable and grounded research (Silva & Russo, 2019). Seven interviews were conducted at various tourist sites in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim. This technique is adequate and relevant, having allowed for the understanding of several perspectives on Accessible Tourism, namely the tourism offer in these two cities, as well as their accessibility. The interview is the most used technique during the empirical qualitative work process (Minayo & Costa, 2018) and the semi-structured interview, applied in this research, consists of combining previously designed questions with open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer greater control over what he/she intends to know. A semi-structured interview with 18 open-ended questions was applied. The questions presented in the interview followed the literature review and the objectives defined in the research (Table 1).

Table 1: Theoretical framework of the interview script

| Interview questions | Theoretical Foundation |
|--|--|
| <i>Objective 1: To define and characterise the type of visitor to the Accessible Tourism segment</i> | |
| What type of visitor does the accessible tourism segment encompass? | Garcia et al. (2014); Campos et al. (2019); Carrillo & Boujrourf (2020); Ferreira & Nunes (2021); Fontes (2016). |
| Characterise this segment, regarding your destination: Age group; Nationality; Academic qualifications; Socio-economic level; Typology of reduced mobility; Level of satisfaction with the services provided/activities made available | |
| Do tourists with reduced mobility represent an interesting market segment? Why? | |
| <i>Objective 2: To understand if tourism enterprises as well as tourism professionals are able to welcome people with reduced mobility</i> | |
| Tourist activities and products available consider people with reduced mobility? | Garcia et al. (2017); Righetto et al. (2018); Carrillo & Boujrourf (2020); Lopes (2015); Martins (2008). |
| Do you have statistical data on the numbers of tourists with reduced mobility visiting this place? | |
| Do you consider this place, a building adapted for people with disabilities? If yes, which activities/services are adapted and how? (In the case of hotels, the following subparagraphs have been added: Existence of lifts; Existence of access ramps; Places reserved for people with reduced mobility; Continuous path from the car park to the hotel; Accessible entrance; Adapted reception desk; Adapted furniture adjusted to the circulation inside the unit and the room; Appropriate emergency signage; Access to TV and telephone controls; Access and stay of guide dogs; Visual and/or auditory direction signs; Adapted lighting of common areas; Exterior and interior circulation space; Accessibility to the various equipment and services of the hotel unit (common areas and room); Adapted room service; Signage/tactile identification of the hotel unit facilities; Adapted bathrooms (washbasin, | Carrillo & Boujrourf (2020); Garcia et al. (2017); Henriques (2015); Lopes (2015); Righetto et al. (2018). |

| Interview questions | Theoretical Foundation |
|---|---|
| countertop, bath chair, support bars, non-slip/anti-slip floor, access to the tap levers, alarms, ...) | |
| Are there adequate information about accessible activities and services in Vila do Conde/Póvoa de Varzim? | Righetto et al. (2018); Carrillo & Bourjourn (2020); Lopes (2015); Garcia et al. (2017). |
| Are there any concerns in the training of your human resources, regarding this segment of Accessible Tourism? | Carrillo & Bourjourn (2020); Garcia et al. (2017); Ferreira & Nunes (2021). |
| Is there any employee trained in this area? | |
| Do you have partnerships with institutions for the reception of citizens with disabilities? If yes, which entities? | |
| Are tourism professionals prepared to serve people with disabilities? | |
| <i>Objective 3: To identify the main existing barriers affecting tourism demand in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim</i> | |
| Which are the main types of barriers that might affect a visit to this site? | Vaz (2013); Teles (2014); Silva (2018); Silva & Marques (2018); Henriques (2015); Garcia et al. (2014); Garcia et al. (2017); Michopoulou e Buhalis (2013). |
| Over time, with the implementation of accessible activities and services, has there been an increase in visits? | Lopes (2015); Lamônica et al. (2008); Carrillo & Bourjourn (2020); Garcia et al. (2014); Duch (2015); Silva (2018). |
| <i>Objective 4: To explore and understand tourism accessibility in the cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim</i> | |
| What are the appropriate means of promotion that could contribute to a greater demand for tourism associated with special needs? | Garcia et al. (2017); INR (2020); Garcia et al. (2014); Gonçalves et al. (2015); Tino (2018); Ferreira & Nunes (2021); ENAT (2021). |
| Are there any funding programmes for tourism businesses that want to target this audience? | |
| Are businesses in Vila do Conde/Póvoa de Varzim able to receive tourists with reduced mobility? What is missing to make them completely accessible? | Campos et al. (2019); Calhoa (2017); Lopes (2015); Garcia et al. (2014); Ferreira & Nunes (2021); Carrillo & Bourjourn (2020). |
| If the city of Vila do Conde/Póvoa de Varzim, invested more in accessibility, would an increase in tourist demand occur? Which would be the main touristic points targeted by this investment, and what specific measures would be considered? Access ramps to public spaces/tourist resources, reserved seats, low furniture, accessible entrances, visual and/or auditory signs, guide dogs allowed, existence of tactile identification, specific language for accessible tourism, sign language, Braille information, relief images (Other suggestions?) | Henriques (2015); Carrillo & Bourjourn (2020); Duch (2015); Calhoa (2017); Lopes (2015); Shakira & Marcelo (2019); Sousa (2012); Marques (2016); Ferreira & Nunes (2021). |
| Do you intend to invest in infrastructures aimed at this market segment (physical accessibility, diversity of means of information, diversity of tourist products)? | |

The participants of the study sample are stakeholders of the destination. The sampling technique used in this research is the non-probabilistic sampling and by convenience, which consists in choosing people who share characteristics related to the research question, prioritizing those subjects that have information and experiences, deepening the analysis to solve the research question.

4. Results and discussion

According to Garcia et al. (2014) there are different types of disability: motor, sensory and intellectual. According to the interviewees, the predominant visitor type in these destinations has mostly motor disability, in similar values to visitors with visual and hearing disabilities. However, in the interview with the Póvoa de Varzim Tourism Office, it was observed that there is no type of visitor associated with this segment "because they register a negligible annual percentage". Regarding the characterization of the visitors of this segment, it is verified that in the tourist sites interviewed, most tourists prevail in the age group between 50-65 years old, except for Azurara Parque Aventura, with a younger disabled population between 15-30 years old. The disabled population visiting this place, are mostly from schools, to participate in outdoor activities. Mostly Portuguese, with high school education and an average standard of living. The typology of reduced mobility that prevails in these destinations is motor disability. The visitors present a medium/high level of satisfaction. Regarding the importance of the Accessible Tourism segment, all the destinations interviewed consider this segment to be important, even though it is a segment that has been little studied and with a low percentage of visits. It was noted that the Accessible Tourism segment must be constantly developing and changing so that nothing fails. The interviewees stressed that it should be seen and respected by all *stakeholders* in the sector.

Table 2: The Accessible Tourism segment and its importance

| Subcategories | Interview Evidence |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Accessible tourism segment | "They mostly present only physical disability" (E1). "It is a small significant annual percentage" (E2). "Visitors with physical, visual and hearing disabilities" (E3). "People with motor disabilities"(E4). |
| Characterisation of the visitor | "In my opinion, it is a relevant segment" (E2). "Secondary education and aged between 50-60 years. Average level of satisfaction" (E4). "Young population, between 15-30 years old and with high-school. Average level of satisfaction" (E6). "Between 50-65 years old and with completed high-school. High level of satisfaction." |
| Importance of Accessible Tourism | "An important market segment because it allows reaching a wider public segment" (E1). "People who need and deserve double the attention and have to be received in a special way. It is a segment that has to be in constant development so that nothing fails" (E3). "Accessible tourism is a segment that should be more analysed and appreciated by everyone" (E4). "An important segment. I have always seen and see this type of tourists differently." (E6). "It's a very interesting segment. I think this market segment should be studied more" (E5). |

According to Campos et al. (2019), people with reduced mobility have special needs in their movement. Every day, these people are faced with physical and structural barriers present in most cities, hindering the social inclusion process (Silva & Marques, 2018). After conducting the interviews, it was observed that, in general, tourism activities and products in both cities are not fully accessible. There are adapted services, but not all places have this advantage. The tourism offices in Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim, are accessible at the main entrance, due to the existence of access ramps. However, there may be some difficulty on the part of tourists with reduced mobility to manoeuvre throughout the visit, since the spaces, despite being wide, have furniture that makes it difficult to perform the manoeuvres, also are not adapted for tourists with hearing impairment and blindness, since they do not have Braille, nor auditory/visual signage. Regarding the professionals training, only Póvoa de Varzim Tourist Office has a professional trained in sign language. In Vila do Conde Tourist Office, despite the concerns expressed, there is no professional with any training related to accessible tourism. These two tourist sites stressed that the products and services provided in the cities are accessible, giving the example of the recent initiative of accessible beaches in Póvoa de Varzim and the accessible events created in Vila do Conde, always considering this public, which does not apply to the whole city.

According to Vaz (2013), barriers are considered as obstacles and/or impediments that limit or make it impossible to access any space, equipment, or service. The interviewed entities in the hotel sector showed that there is accessibility in their access. Hotel buildings are partially adapted to receive this type of tourists. The three hotels highlighted the presence of access ramps to the interior, as well as the existence of rooms/services adapted for tourists with reduced mobility. However, they do not have conditions to receive tourists who wish to stay with guide dogs, nor have tactile signs for visually impaired people. Regarding the lifts, ramps for access to hotel services, reception desks, room furniture and accessibility in general, it can be concluded that all entities show a high degree of accessibility. It is observed the absence of Braille, as well as the absence of professionals able to receive and assist tourists with reduced mobility, due to the lack of training adapted to Accessible Tourism (sign language).

After the interviews to Nau Quinhentista and Azurara Parque Aventura in Vila do Conde, it was found that the tourism destinations discussed in this research are not adapted to receive tourists with reduced mobility. According to Henriques (2015), a museum should contain a communicational, physical, and cognitive accessibility so that no visitor feels excluded, ensuring comfort and integration in it. The Nau Quinhentista, is only accessible at the main entrance due to the existence of a ramp for these tourists to access the Nau. After climbing the ramp, there is no type of accessible manoeuvre since the access is processed by steps. In addition, this tourist site does not have information in Braille and, if necessary, tourists will have to go to the Alfândega Régia (located right in front of the Nau). Even considering communication as an integrated process in tourism resources provides quick and safe learning and greater integration, the Nau's tour guides have no training in Accessible Tourism. Azurara Adventure Park also has accessibility in the main entrance that, despite being a ramp, the floor makes the access a little difficult. For people with visual and motor disability, this park can only offer tours and picnics, but for people with hearing disability they can offer all the activities in the park, except the tree climbing, because it is an activity that needs headphones. The lack of these accessible equipment components reports to the lack of interest by the City Hall of Vila do Conde, due to not putting as a priority its improvement.

The communication inherent to the human being is fundamental for human relationships to develop and for the maintenance of well-being and learning (Ferreira & Nunes, 2021). Although, in most of the entities interviewed, there are no professionals with training directed towards the segment of Accessible Tourism, it can be concluded that there is a lot of concern about this issue. However, no opportunities have been observed yet, created by the entities, to enable professionals to be more integrated in this segment. It is essential to recognize the several forms of communication and language, allowing human beings to express themselves and participate fully in everything that is within their reach within the community (Ferreira & Nunes, 2021).

Regarding the increase in stays/visits of tourist sites, these destinations have not undergone major changes or implementation of accessible activities and services. Meanwhile, the hotel sector, since the implementation of adapted services and rooms, has seen an increased interest from tourists with reduced mobility. Tabota et al. (2013) state that the elimination of architectural barriers and the availability of information, communication, and physical access, as well as the existence of adequate equipment and programs are essential.

The promotion of accessible tourism for all involves public authorities and private entities to ensure a better understanding about this segment and develop a competitive advantage for the tourism services they offer to customers in the regions they operate (Garcia et al., 2014). Betting on more accessible information about the products and services made available within the cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim was one of the means of promotion that the tourism sites highlighted. Websites allow all visitors, regardless of whether they have any functional limitation or not, to interact in a simple and fast way, making it possible to enjoy all the resources that are offered (Gonçalves et al., 2015). It would be important to improve social networks, the accessibility of cities and attract more tourists with reduced mobility, presenting more information throughout the city territory, to support these tourists in their itineraries.

In the hotel sector, entities consider the hotels' websites as the main means of promotion. It will be important to improve the digital media, to ensure accessibility outside and inside the hotel, promoting the services and products available inside these hotels and the accesses to the buildings. It was also considered important to reinforce accessibility in the areas around the hotel, such as restaurants, pharmacies, access ramps, among others.

All the interviewed destinations consider that accessible tourism businesses can receive tourists with reduced mobility. However, some are more suitable than others, thus making it essential to adapt them in terms of accessibility, providing better conditions and a greater profitability and growth of tourism demand (Garcia et al, 2014). The Vila do Conde Tourism Office mentioned the absence of investments in access infrastructures, which is determinant in the growth of accessibility. It would also be important for tourist sites to have a larger number of tour guides with specialized training, targeted at this type of public. It was highlighted that Braille, the existence of auditory and visual signage, and access ramps would be fundamental in all tourist businesses in the cities, to prevent tourists with reduced mobility from being marginalised.

Overall, the interviewees consider the cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim to be accessible and easy to get around. But not completely. As it is a market segment in constant change and growth, its valorisation should be gradual. In order to provide an increase in tourism demand, the tourist places consider it necessary to invest in the beaches, making them accessible, to invest in more car parks directed towards this type of tourists; the placement of access ramps at the entrances of all tourist establishments; to remove the containers from the pavements, making it easier for tourists to manoeuvre; to invest in an office/support post in both cities, to provide support to all types of disabilities that tourists may present; Invest in the accessibility of the Nau Quinhentista, placing more ramps inside the equipment and training the tour guides so that they can assist tourists with special needs - sign language training; provide information in Braille and auditory and visual signage in all tourist establishments and hotels; invest in supporting accessible adventure tourism activities; invest in digital media, in order to promote the cities and their accessibility.

All investments that meet people's needs are targeted improvements and needs diagnosed by everyone. Cities need to ensure accessibility, both physical and digital, to all contexts of life, recognizing the various forms of communication and language, order to allow human beings to express themselves and participate fully in community (Ferreira & Nunes, 2021).

5. Conclusions

Recognizing a tourism destination as being accessible implies that anyone, regardless of physical condition, can access the existing offer, namely products and services, as well as infrastructure without barriers, because tourism is a right of all and for all. Tourism services are a very important differentiator of success in terms of competitive advantages. Regarding the profile of the population under analysis, it was found that the tourists involved in the visits to the entities are mostly people with motor disabilities and in an age range of 50-65 years. The cities of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim are still in a development process, with a view to becoming accessible destinations. The specialization of human resources, being a factor highly valued by those who need special care, determined to be an evident barrier to participation in tourism by the segment under study, except for Póvoa de Varzim Tourism Office that has in its staff a person able to respond to visually impaired visitors. The tourism offices do not have, in their information provision policy, contents that meet the needs of visitors with reduced mobility, to ensure a safe tourist experience adjusted to their specific needs. The Hotel Industry is still characterized by the existence of many physical barriers that hinder the full enjoyment of tourism products. The policies adopted only aim at what is stipulated by legislation and the care in applying additional measures is not yet on the strategic agenda of the sector in the region. Additionally, the lack of civility and knowledge of society, as well as the lack of specialized training by professionals, are still the main problems that prevent tourists from visiting these cities. The availability of correct, precise, and updated information is a very important component for a visitor with reduced mobility, both when preparing the whole trip and during the experience at the destination. Through the data collected, the set of information provided by the interviewed entities does not fully meet the special needs of people with reduced mobility by the lack of updating and/or absence of relevant images that complement the written information. The research reinforced the growing importance of the accessible tourism market segment for the tourism industry; it showed that the tourism offer of Vila do Conde and Póvoa de Varzim cities is still not fully aware and adapted to receive people with special needs; the policies adopted do not consider or value this type of visitors; and, the information made available, as well as the training of the different collaborators, is not suitable for the needs of the target market.

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