

Tourism and Accessibility

A satisfaction survey on tourists with disabilities in the Island of Crete

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Abstract

Tourism needs and desires for people with disabilities are the same as for other people. However, the context of provision of tourism services and activities is generally not supportive to tourism for people with disabilities. The acknowledgement of the deficiencies associated with accessible tourism development, along with its economic and social importance, has led to significant improvements with respect to tourism and travel for people with disabilities.

The aim of this study is to examine the levels of satisfaction of tourists with disabilities that have visited the island of Crete. More specifically a primary research was conducted at the airport of Heraklion during the 2015 tourist season (April to October) on tourists with disabilities, prior to their departure. The objective was to explore tourists' experiences with respect to the overall tourism infrastructure and the services provided during their stay in the island.

The results present low satisfaction levels, as far as transportation and tourism-related infrastructure in the island is concerned. On the other hand, higher levels of satisfaction have been revealed, with respect to service quality and employees' response to the needs of tourists with disabilities, not only in accommodation outlets but also in transportation, museums, recreation areas, restaurants, etc. The survey results indicate that Crete could become an important accessible tourism destination, if priority was given by state authorities as well as by the private sector towards the development of accessible infrastructure and facilities that would be suitable for tourists with disabilities.

Keywords: Accessible Tourism, Tourists with disabilities, Greece, Crete, Satisfaction survey

JEL classifications: L83, Z32

Introduction to Accessible Tourism

According to the Global code of ethics for tourism, tourism may contribute to the improvement of an individual's physical, psychological and mental health (World Tourism Organization, 1999). This statement it's particularly significant, considering that between 5% and 20% of the global population are disabled (UNESCAP, 2000). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN.DSPD., 2008), signed by 160 countries or regional integration organizations and entered into force on 3 May 2008, recognize the

right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, in recreational, leisure and sporting activities. They for the States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services. Additionally the State Parties shall take appropriate measures, to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues and services (Article 30, of the Convention).

"Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities" (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975). Disability can concern people with impairments, as well the elderly population. The main impaired problems regard the mobility, the vision, the hearing, the speech, the cognitive and the hidden. There are two 'models' of disability which have been defined. The medical model and the social model. **The Medical model** of disability views disability as a 'problem' that belongs to the disabled individual. It is not seen as an issue to concern anyone other than the individual affected. (University of Leicester, 2015). The **Social Model** explains that (people who have impairments) are disabled people because they face barriers, fewer opportunities, discrimination and prejudice in society. Under the Social Model, impairment and disability are not the same. 'Impairment' is when part of a person's body or mind does not work, or works differently to what is considered 'normal' by society. According to the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP, 2013), disability is the barriers, discrimination and prejudice disabled people face. It is disability which makes us disabled people - not our impairments.

In the last 20 years, can be find a large number of publications concerning the tourism for people with disabilities or for people with special needs and also a variety of terms. The same authors use different terms in different publications. For example Bruce Cameron used a variety of terms, such as "Ease access tourism" (Cameron, 2000), "Barrier free tourism" in Cameron et al. (2003) and "Accessible tourism" in Cameron et al. (2010). Other used terms are "Universal Tourism" (Darcy, 2006), "Barrier-free or Inclusive tourism" (Buhalis et al. 2005), "Eibilities" tourism (Ray & Ryder, 2003), Barrier free tourism (UNESCAP, 2000) and many others. "Accessible Tourism" seems to be the more acceptable term (Buhalis & Darcy 2011) and in the last years the more used.

All this terms describes the same substance, especially the ability for people with disabilities (physical or mental) to make tourism in dissent way, without barriers. "Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves collaborative processes between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments." (Buhalis, 2012:3).

Accessible tourism is evolving as a field of academic research and industry practice, set within a dynamic social context. The field is interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary (Michopoulou et al. 2015). At international level can be found a great

number of studies of this issue within the field of tourism and disability, while the majority of the studies are focused on the experiences of people with disabilities while traveling. (Abeyraine, 1995; Richter & Richter, 1999; Burnett & Baker, 2001; Israeli, 2002; Darcy, 2002; Matthew Kwai-sang Yau & Bob McKercher, 2004; Daniels et al 2005, Daniels J. Margaret et al. 2005, Simon Darcy and Tracey J. Dickson, 2009; Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2010; Bong Koo Lee et al. 2012.

Accessible Tourism in Europe and Greece

In Europe, the European Commission promotes the Accessible tourism for social, but also for economic reasons. In 2011, 44 million people in the EU-28 had basic activity difficulties and 35 million people had a disability in employment (Eurostat, 2016). According to the E.U. "Making tourism more accessible is not only a social responsibility - there is also a compelling business case for improving accessibility as it can boost the competitiveness of tourism in Europe." (EC, 2016). Researchers at the University of Surrey have found that the European tourism sector is losing out on as much as €142 billion every year due to poor infrastructure, services and attitudes towards travelers with special access needs. The research project, which was funded by the European Commission, found that traveler within the EU who required special access (whether through disability or age) undertook 783 million trips within the region in 2012, contributing €394 billion and 8.7 million jobs to the European economy. However, if European destinations were fully accessible, this demand could increase by up to 44% a year - producing an additional €142 billion GDP and creating 3.4 million jobs (Surrey, 2014).

The European Commission is co-funding projects for the promotion of Accessible Tourism, like Accessible Tourism Itineraries, or Networking like the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT). ENAT was established in January 2006 as a project-based initiative of nine sponsoring organizations in six EU Member States (ENAT, 2016). The European Commission, DG Employment and Social Affairs, gave financial support to the Network in its first two years of operations, 2006 to 2007. According to the EC, "Evidence shows that making basic adjustments to a facility, providing accurate information, and understanding the needs of disabled people can result in increased visitor numbers. Improving the accessibility of tourism services increases their quality and the enjoyment of all tourists. It also improves the quality of life in local communities (European Commission, 2015).

Impulse for taking measures for accessible tourism in Greece was the Paralympic Games in the year 2004. During this period has been taken several measures for the improvement of the tourism infrastructure in Greece, as well as improving accessibility, not only in hotels but also in archaeological sites and beaches. Through a project called 'ERMIS' over 1300 businesses were transforming into accessible places. Out of those, 1225 were related to the tourism industry (Buhalis et al. 2005). Especially for the beaches, the initiative was supported by a technical study on accessible standards and guidelines named "Access for all in the sand" (Voulgaropoulos et al., 2012). In the following years they were taken more measures concerning persons with special needs. For example in Article 26 of the New Construction Regulation (Act 4067/2012), entitled "Special arrangements for serving disabled or hindered people", there are many provisions relating to people with

disabilities. This regulation also applies to hotel accommodation. According to the Ministerial Decision 216 on 09.01.2015, in Article 5 are specific measures for people with disabilities or hindered people, according to which the minimum number of rooms for people with disabilities in hotels is set at 5% of the total capacity of the facility. The application of this rate is obligatory until the number five total rooms for disabled persons. But until now there is a lack of mechanism in Greece for certifying, monitoring an evaluating accessibility standards. (Voulgaropoulos et al. 2012).

However many hotels and other tourism enterprises targeting it the market of accessible tourism, advertise either directly through corporate websites, or through specialized websites. For exampleGreece4all (<http://www.greece4all.eu/>) it is a portal through which people with disabilities can find a "map" of accessible tourism infrastructure in Greece, evaluated by the Web-site administrators, who are themselves disabled, and learn about accommodation, nutrition, attractions, transport, care.

Except of the "Accessibility market and Stakeholder analysis" by Buhalis et al. (2005), one of the few studies on accessible tourism in Greece was presented in 2006 at the international Conference IMIC 2006 (Ikkos, 2006). According to the results of a research in Travel agencies specialist in Accessible tourism, Greece was evaluated "In general" with quite good score (4/6). Height numbers was also the evaluation for "Reliability of Information" (4,0) the "Availability of Information" (4,0) and "Assistance during the stay" (3,5). The "Services" (3,2) the "Accommodation" (2.8) the "Environment" (2,7) and Attractions (2,5) have reached average results. On the contrary "Transportation" has taken the lowest evaluation with a value of 2.1.

Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to explore whether Crete as a tourist destination can meet the expectations and cater to the needs of tourists with disabilities. In particular, the study aims at examining the degree of satisfaction of tourists with disabilities from their visit to the island, with respect to the available infrastructure and the services offered during their stay, and thus to identify their perception of Crete as a tourist destination.

More specifically, the following research questions have been addressed:

- (a) Is there adequate infrastructure with respect to transportation and accommodation for tourists with disabilities?
- (b) How satisfied is this target group by the available infrastructure and the respective services offered during their stay in the island?
- (c) Are there any improvements that can be proposed in order for Crete to become a friendlier destination for tourists with disabilities?

The questionnaire consisted of 25 close-ended questions and one open-ended question, where participants were asked to provide any opinion or information they believe would be useful to this study. It was structured in three parts: the first referred to the demographics of the participants, including a question on the reason for needing some sort of assistance during their departure; the second part was seeking information with respect to their trip (means of transportation, duration of the trip, accompanying persons), while the last part included questions on tourists' satisfaction and overall experience

during their stay in Crete. The reason for choosing a quantitative approach instead of using a qualitative approach through the use of in-depth interviews is basically related to the aim of the study, which was just to report tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels, not to identify causal relationships.

The population of the study consists of tourists with any type of impairment or disability that visited the island of Crete during the season 2015. The vast majority of tourists arrive to Crete by air, and more specifically at Heraklion airport. The researcher worked at Heraklion airport's handling services, and was in charge of assisting tourists with disabilities who required any type of assistance throughout their departure procedure, thus providing an opportunity to get in contact with tourists during their waiting time at the departure lounge. The sampling method that has been applied was convenience sampling mainly due to the fact that access was granted to the researcher only during her working days and questionnaires were distributed when workload was lower. However, there has been an effort to include in the sample tourists that faced various types of disabilities, ranging from minor mobility and hearing impairments to more serious mobility or mental disabilities. At this point, it needs to be clarified that the aim of this study is to identify whether Crete can meet the expectations of visitors with disabilities in regard to necessary and specialised infrastructure and services. As a result, the study's sample consisted of people with disabilities that requested assistance at the airport, since the assumption is that people with minor disabilities that do not need particular assistance can use the infrastructure and services offered to any other visitor or tourist. The sample consisted of 150 tourists that visited the island between May and October 2015. The researcher approached each tourist, explained the aim of the research and kindly asked each participant to fill in the questionnaire. She was also available if needed so, to provide further explanations and assist participants, since it some of them did not understand English very well, or needed assistance due to visual impairments. In cases of tourists with mental disabilities, the questionnaire was filled in by the accompanying person. Out of the 150 distributed questionnaires, the researcher was able to collect 120 usable questionnaires, corresponding to a response rate of 80%.

It has to be pointed out that during the data collection procedure several obstacles have been encountered, the most important being that the participants in this study were tourists with impairments, e.g. visual, hearing, mobility difficulties. As a result, contacting them and trying to communicate the aim of the study to them has been a challenging endeavour in several cases, especially when their command in English was medium to low. In addition, the researcher had to ask for permission to conduct the study within the timeframe of her work at the departure gates and as a result it has been difficult to devote time to questionnaire distribution during peak hours, particularly in high season (July-August).

Results of the Study

With respect to the sample's profile, almost half of the participants were male (49%) and the other half female, while almost two-thirds of the sample consisted of people above the age of 50 years (63%) and only 18% of the sample were below the age of 34. There was also a variety of nationalities, including tourists from the UK (one-third of

the sample), France, Russia, The Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Czech Republic. Moreover, the vast majority of the sample (73%) indicated their mobility impairment as the reason for needing assistance during their departure (Figure 2). An interesting point regarding their trip to Crete is that 40% of these tourists had visited the island at least once in the past, and 21% of repeat tourists had visited Crete more than 5 times, indicating a significant percentage of loyal visitors to the island. A final remark regarding sample's demographics and general information is related to the fact that the accompanying person was in most cases a member of the family (78% of the responses).

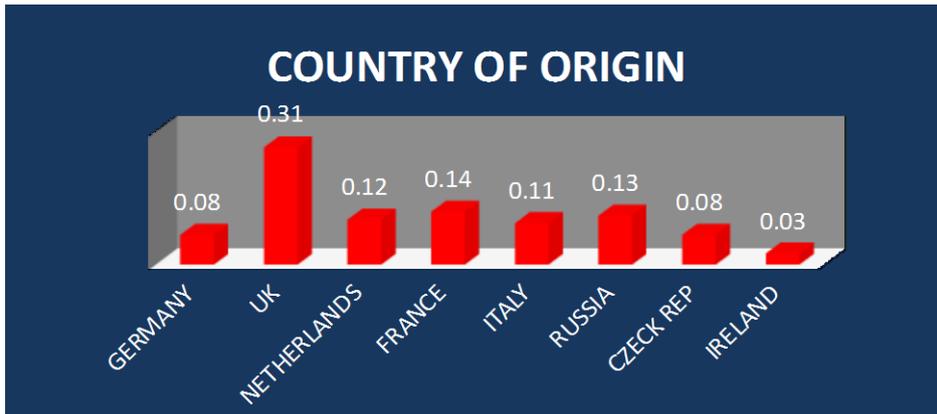


Figure 1: Sample Distribution as per their country of origin

The main body of the questionnaire examined tourists' satisfaction levels from transportation and accommodation facilities and services during their stay in the island. The participants were initially asked to rate how convenient it was to reach Crete from their they place of residence. The vast majority (90%) considered transportation to Crete very easy and convenient, probably due to the fact that most of them came to Crete by air using direct or charter flights that are available throughout the tourist season.

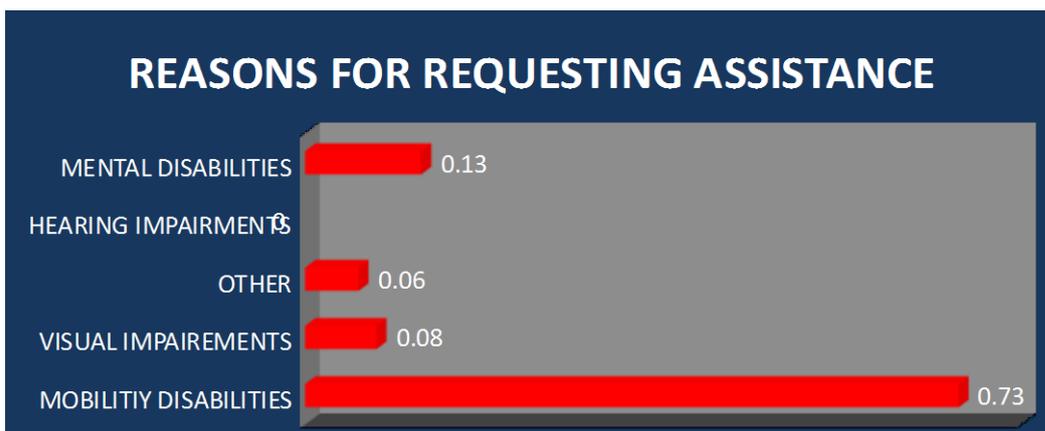


Figure 2: Sample Distribution according to the reason they requested assistance

Regarding the transportation means they used during their stay in Crete, it becomes obvious from their responses that they avoided both public transportation and tourist buses, since half of the respondents

used taxi and another 28% chose rented cars. In addition more than 80% of the participants stated high or very high levels of satisfaction from the available services and from the behavior and assistance provided by the personnel.

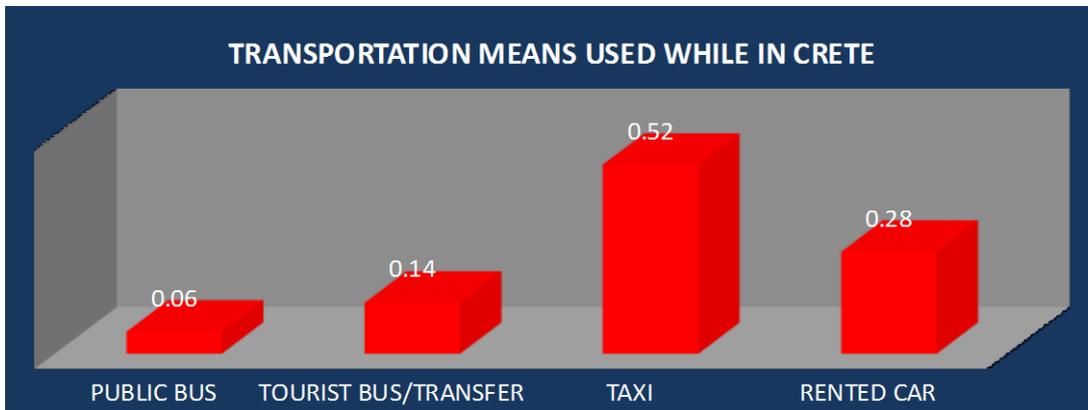


Figure 3: Transportation means used by tourists with disabilities during their stay in Crete

The subsequent section of the questionnaire examined tourists' perceptions regarding infrastructure and services provided at the various transportation terminals, i.e. port, airport, bus and taxi stations. As one would expect, the results with respect to infrastructure and accessibility are quite positive when it comes to using a taxi. On the other hand though, the respondents rated as very low / unacceptable the infrastructure in public bus stations and at the airport terminals. Only one-third of the respondents considered infrastructure at the airport satisfactory, an issue that needs to be addressed by the authorities, since the vast majority of tourists arrive at the island by air. However, although infrastructure at the airport does not meet the standards of tourists with disabilities, the services and degree to which airport staff responds to travelers' needs has been rated quite positively, since almost 70% of the respondents rated the service at the airport as high or very high. The following figure (Figure 4) presents tourists' responses as to the areas that need improvement in the various transportation terminals. It becomes apparent from this figure that tourists are satisfied by the services provided and personnel's attention to their needs, while they stated that infrastructure needs considerable improvement. This applies not only to airport terminals but also to bus, port and taxi stations. At this point it needs to be stressed that, according to participants view, employees at the various terminals/stations were very caring and thoughtful, and in a way helped them overcome all the obstacles caused by the lack of suitable infrastructure.

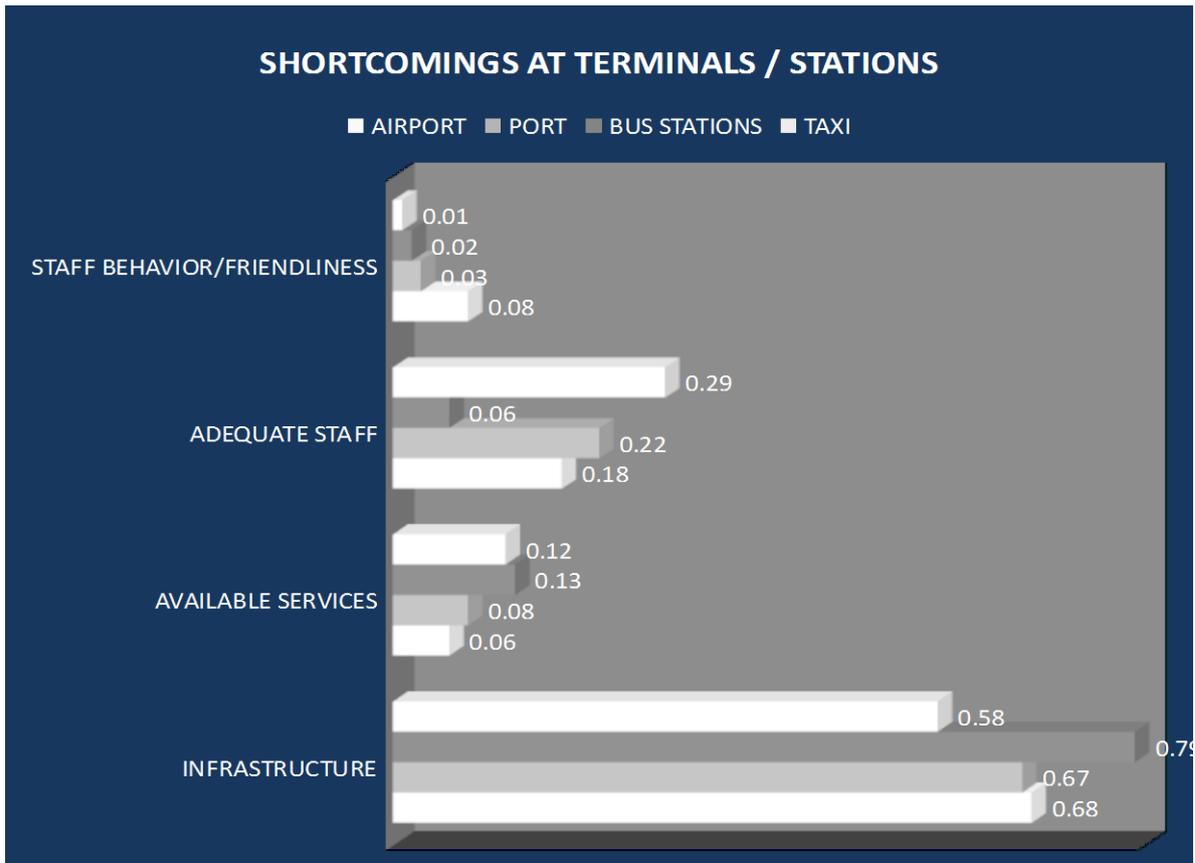


Figure 4: Shortcomings and issues faced at the various terminals/stations

The next section of the questionnaire focused on accommodation facilities. Figure 5 presents the type of accommodation that were chosen by the participants; it seems that the majority of tourists with disabilities has a preference for hotels (2* to 5* hotels) as opposed to private villas and self-catering apartments, most probably due to the lack of services provided by the latter.

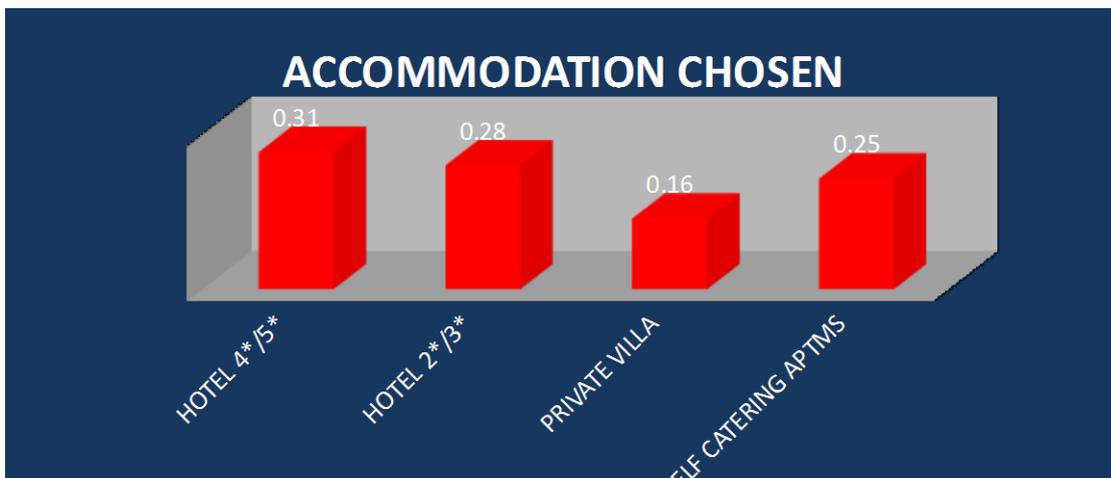


Figure 5: Type of accommodation chosen by tourists with disabilities

Participants were thereafter asked to rate their stay in the accommodation facilities, with respect to infrastructure, available services and overall attendance to the needs of tourists with disabilities. The results, which are presented in the figure 6 were disappointing when it comes to facilities and infrastructure for guests with disabilities. More specifically, only 16% of the sample rated the accommodation facilities as good/very good, while half of them stated that their accommodation offered only minimum facilities and 12% considered that such facilities were non-existent. However, almost all of them (92%) seemed to be satisfied with the effort and attendance given by the staff in order to accommodate their needs and special requests.

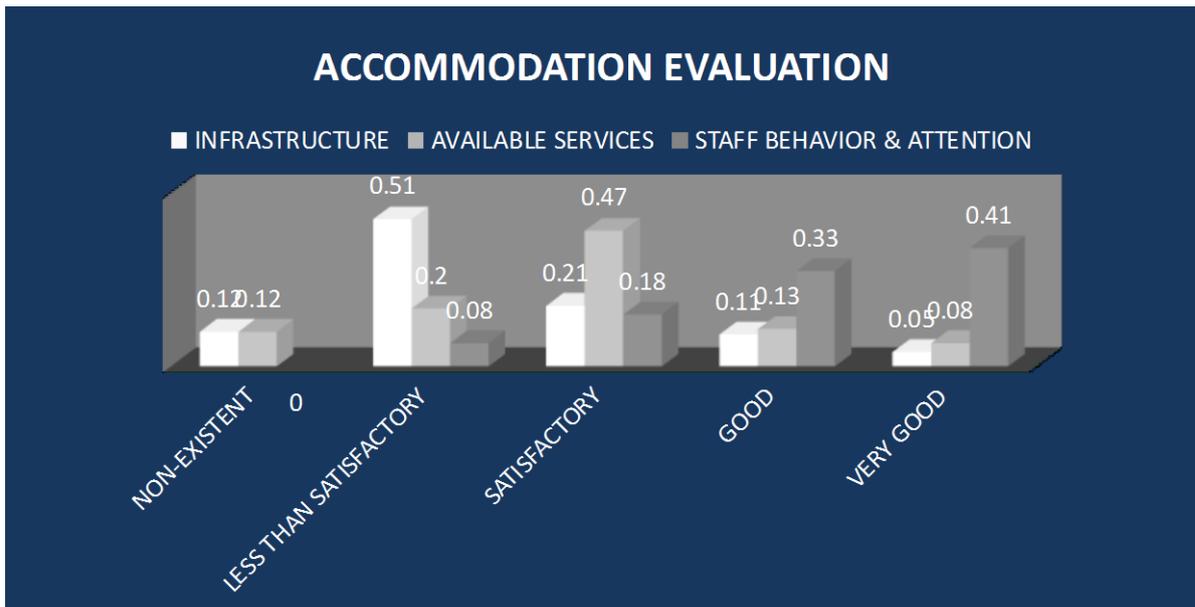


Figure 6: Evaluation of tourists' accommodation

The next set of questions examined accessibility issues at the various points of interest in the city of Heraklion, as well as convenience during city sightseeing.

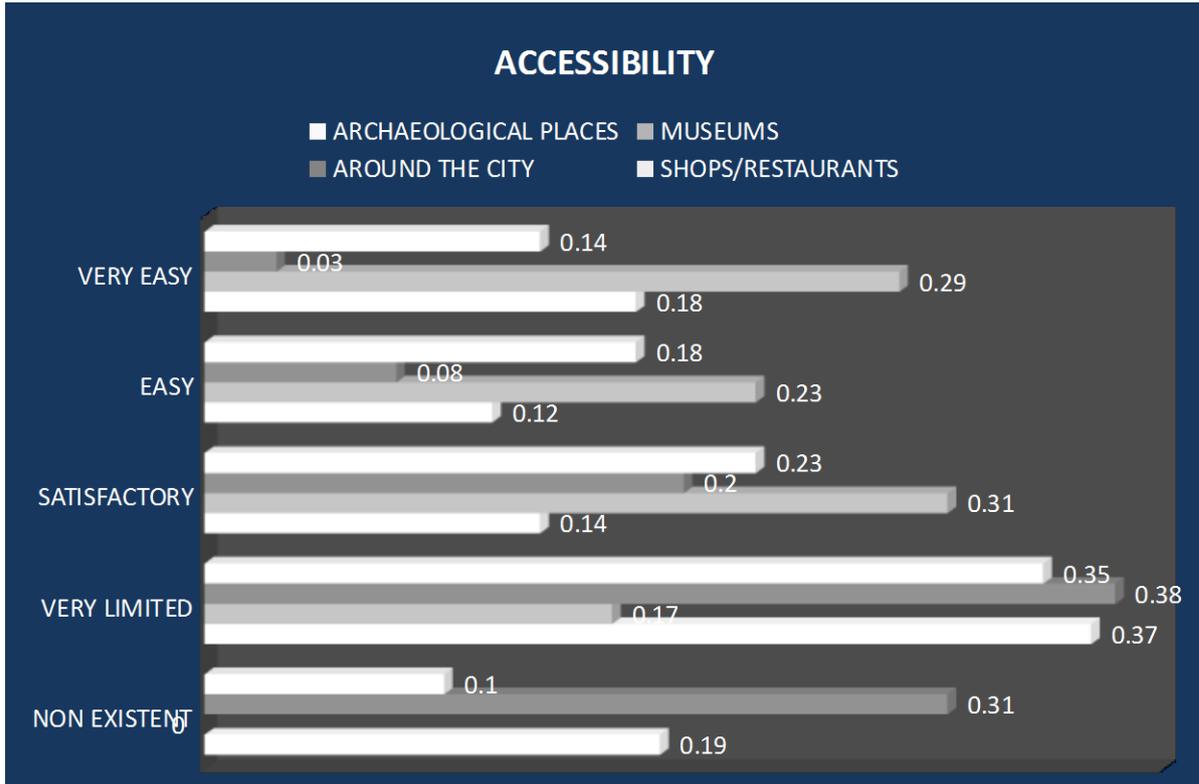


Figure 7: Accessibility around the city, at museums, places of interest & shops/ restaurants

Unfortunately 7 out of 10 respondents stated that accessibility throughout the city was nonexistent or very limited and only 10% of the sample found it easy to walk around the city. The same was true with respect to their visit to archaeological places and shops/restaurants, since only 30% of the sample did not face difficulties in visiting such places. The situation is slightly better in regard to museums, where access is considered to be easy by half of the study's participants. Tourists were also asked to state whether they consider that the staff in the above points of interest is well-trained to deal successfully with the various needs and special requests posed by visitors with disabilities (Fig. 8). The results failed to meet one's expectations, since only 30% of the respondents consider that personnel in the various archaeological places could provide adequately assistance. The percentage was even lower when it comes to personnel in shops and restaurants. 1 out of 4 participants stated that the staff in such outlets has adequate training to cater to needs of customers with any type of impairments. This is a disappointing result, considering that the city's shops and restaurants/cafes are targeting not only tourists but residents as well. Their opinion was better with respect to museums' personnel for which half of the participants considered to have a moderate training, while 23% of the sample felt that they were well-trained to deal with visitors' special requests for assistance.

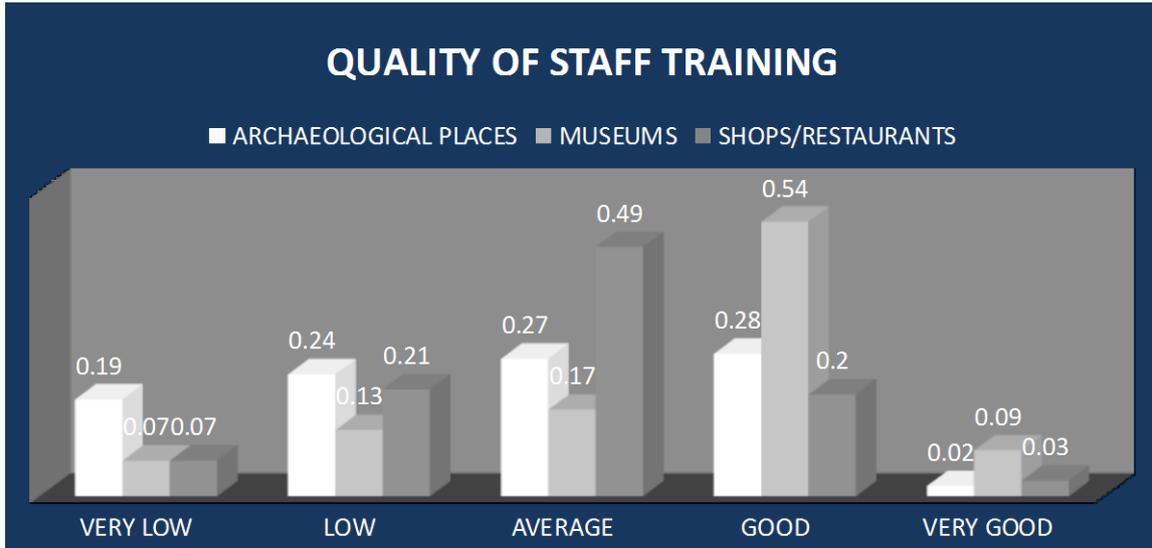


Figure 8: Quality of staff training in museums, shops and archaeological places, as perceived by tourists with disabilities

The last set of questions aim at providing a broader idea of how tourists with disabilities perceive Crete as a destination. First they were asked to identify the most important impediment during their stay. Three out of four participants stated they found it hard to move from one place to the other, while another 12% indicated significant difficulties with respect to accommodation, since chosen outlet did not offer facilities suitable for guests with disabilities (Fig. 9).

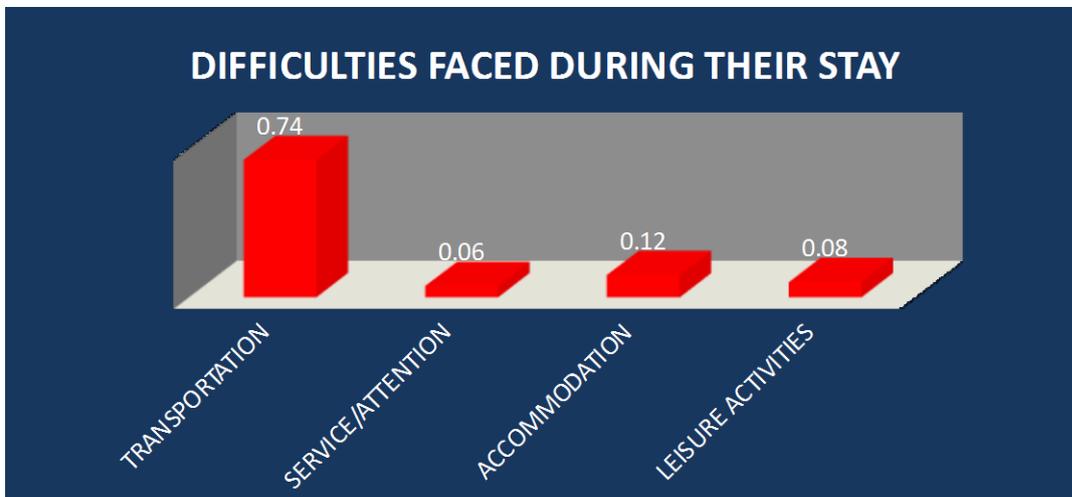


Figure 9: Main difficulty faced during their stay in Crete

Another interesting finding is related to how tourists with disabilities rate Crete as a destination in comparison to other similar European destinations. In a scale from 1 to 5, Crete takes a grade of 3.03 (moderate) compared to other European tourist destinations for tourists with disabilities. In particular, around 35% of the sample believes that Crete lacks in suitable infrastructure and services for tourists with disabilities, while 36% perceived Crete to be better compared to other destinations.

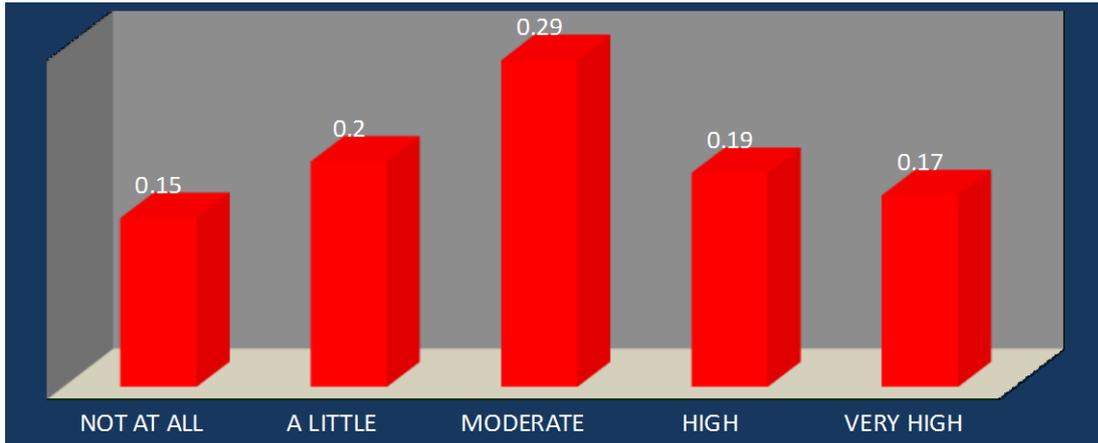


Figure 10: Lack of infrastructure and services for tourists with disabilities in Crete, compared to other similar European destinations

At the end of the questionnaire there was an open-ended question where participants were asked to propose the areas for improvement that would facilitate tourists' stay in Crete. The vast majority indicated the need to place more ramps to facilitate access to various places of interest, but also ramps in shops, restaurants and public beaches. A significant number of responses proposed the installation of ramps in public buses, while two out of the three participants suggested there should be more space available for people with mobility impairments in airport lounges and hotel communal areas.

Conclusions

Accessible tourism is evolving as a field of academic research and industry practice, set within a dynamic social context. There are several studies that examine the prerequisites for the successful development of accessible tourists, while other studies focus on the examination of the expectations and/or the degree of satisfaction that accompanies the experiences of tourists with disabilities.

Accessible tourism is not as developed in Greece as one would expect from a west-European country with a significant presence in the tourism industry. Tourists with disabilities have not yet been identified as a target group for Greece and thus no particular provision has been made with respect to infrastructure and services for them, despite the fact that several European studies have revealed significant growth prospects for this niche market. Besides the potential economic benefits for destinations that cater for tourists with disabilities, there have also been identified significant social effects in regards to the overall wellbeing of this particular tourist group as well as the wellbeing of the local population. As explained by Cavinato and Cuckovich (1992), in reference to travellers with disabilities, 'Enhanced development and dissemination of specific and useful information would perhaps provide the most effective means for increasing opportunities for both the traveller and the service provider' (p. 53).

The current study aims at identifying how accessible Crete is as a tourist destination, by examining the level of satisfaction of tourists with disabilities that visit the island. A first objective of the study was to identify if there are adequate infrastructure with

respect to transportation and accommodation in the island. A second issue that has been examined was the level of satisfaction of tourists that used this infrastructure during their stay in the island and their overall perception of Crete as a suitable destination for tourists with disabilities. The final objective was to propose improvement initiatives that would render Crete a more "friendly" destination for this particular target group.

According to the results of the study, although tourists with disabilities find it quite easy to reach Crete, they face serious obstacles when it comes to transportation within the island, the reason being that public transportation infrastructure is not suitable for travellers with disabilities, especially mobility impairments. Thus, they seem to rely mostly on taxi and car rentals for their transportation within Crete. Despite the infrastructure shortcomings, tourists with disabilities seem to recognise the attention and effort made by the staff to satisfy their needs and facilitate their transportation.

Accessibility to various places of interest (e.g. archaeological sites) has also created additional burden to visitors with disabilities, the exception being the museums that have taken serious steps towards the facilitation of accessibility over the last decade. The results also led to the conclusion that tourists with disabilities do not always find it easy to move around in the city centres they have visited. Regarding their accommodation, tourists have stated a preference for hotels over private villas and self-catering apartments and although tourists have indicated moderate satisfaction with respect to infrastructure and available facilities, the majority of them agreed that the behaviour and attention they got by the staff during their stay signified a well-trained personnel. Finally, it is quite disappointing the fact the accessibility to shops, restaurants and coffee places, i.e. places that target not only tourists but residents as well, has been rated very low.

Despite the problems and shortcomings identified regarding the available facilities and infrastructure, tourists with disabilities expressed an overall satisfaction with their holidays in Crete and consider the island as an attractive destination: the majority of the sample stated that they have visited Crete more than 3 times in the past. Their suggestions for improvement are focusing mainly on infrastructure (e.g. ramps installation in terminals, public buses, around the cities and in popular beaches) and less on service improvement.

Implications - Suggestions

The main implication of this study is that Crete could become a highly competitive destination for tourists with disabilities if attention and priority were given to the improvement of infrastructure that would facilitate accessibility not only in streets and transportation means, but also in hotels, museums, shops, archaeological and other points of interest. This effort should be initiated by the state and local authorities but should be accompanied and supported by private companies as well. Facilities improvement would enhance satisfaction not only by tourists but also by the local population. Furthermore, the private and public sectors alike should pay more attention with respect to employees' training that would add value to the services offer to tourists with disabilities. There are opportunities that

could be exploited to secure funding for such initiatives. For instance, there are occasionally funding opportunities through the available European framework programme that supports such actions, or through national development programs, where tourism organizations/companies could apply for relevant funding.

In conclusion, what is of utmost importance is that local population and authorities become more conscious with respect to the importance of supporting any initiative that improves quality of life for people with impairments. Infrastructure development is definitely a prerequisite but would not be a sufficient condition for accommodating visitors with disabilities.

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