

Persons with sensory disabilities as a target group for the tourism industry - exchange of good practices

Desk research, Poland

About the research

- Date of the research - the first half of October 2019.
- The method of selecting companies – from the database of the Polish Chamber of Tourism and rankings of travel agencies (published on the Internet).
- Sample size – 100 companies from the tourism industry from all over Poland
- Research methods:
 - 1st stage - all companies participating in the survey: reviewing the content of websites, sending an e-mail with an enquiry, a telephone conversation asking for information on the availability of the offer for people with disabilities,
 - 2nd stage – companies which declared that they could offer services to people with disabilities: a phone conversation – a request for a specific order - mystery shopper, alternatively sending an e-mail asking about the possibility of organizing a specific tourist service for a group of deaf people (communication in Polish with grammatical errors typical of deaf people).

Research results, preliminary conclusions

1. According to research results, 16% of tourism companies declare that they possess an offer for customers with disabilities (see Figure 1). One company declared that it has a special offer for people with sensory disabilities.

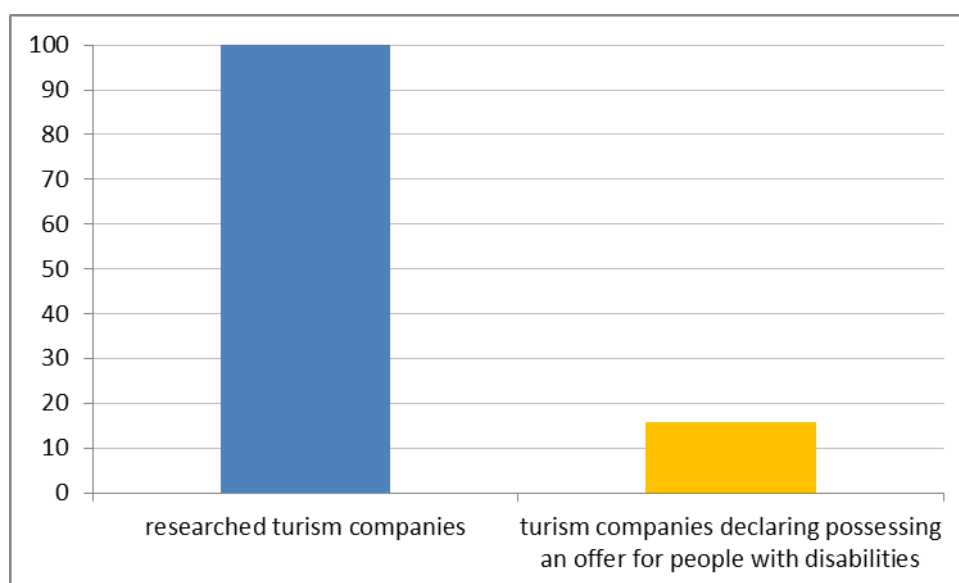


Figure 1. Companies participating in the research, declaring possessing an offer for people with disabilities. Source: Own work.

It is worth noting that in the case of companies declaring having a special offer, it is most often invisible on their website. This is mainly due to the fact that many of them are intermediaries that sell travel agencies' offers or accommodation (just like booking.com) - in our research this was the case in 7 out of 16 companies.

Availability of offers for people with disabilities is limited to checking the "For people with disabilities" box in the search criteria (somewhere between "Swimming pool" and "Animal friendly", and applies only to people with physical disabilities (i.e. wheelchair users). Agents do not seek information about facilities accessible for people with disabilities on their own initiative - if they receive such information, they share it and this is it. Most representatives of tourist agencies claimed that they did not have an appropriate offer since there were no such enquiries, but if there were, they would gladly prepare it. Others simply replied that they had no offer and ended the conversation.

In-depth research (mystery shopper method) provided additional information. The vast majority of companies were not interested in organizing a trip in Poland/abroad for a group of deaf people. All they could do was offer assistance in transfers and reservations. More detailed information is provided in Table 1. There are two praiseworthy exceptions:

- Tourist agency no 1 openly admitted that they had never prepared an offer for deaf people, and that this was something new to them. They suggested that they would check the availability of a sign language interpreter on site (a group of 8-10 deaf and hearing impaired people would go to Prague). The interpreter would be available only during sightseeing time, whereas on the journey and in the hotel they were not able to provide anything else than a standard tour guide service. They promised to send some feedback the following week, but unfortunately did not do so.
- Tourist agency no 2 company made a phone call few hours after sending an enquiry via their online contact form. I asked about the possibility of organizing a 2-day trip to Prague (Romantic Prague - Winter Walk) for the deaf and hearing-impaired. They called us back and stated the group was too small – they could join us to another standard group, but we would have to arrange an interpreter for us on our own (that is, pay for their trip); NOTE: if the group was bigger, around 30 people, they would be able to organize such a trip – provide a sign language interpreter and care (in their database they have a tour operator that has already done it). The company representative was very kind, vividly interested in this topic and willing to help. It is worth noting that she used the expression of "people with disabilities".

Table 1. Detailed results of in-depth research covering selected companies, carried out using the Mystery Shopper method.

No	Results of in-depth research
1	They do not organise holidays – this is only an agency (e.g. booking.com). In the search criteria one can check the “for the disabled” box, and see offers for people with physical disabilities.
2	<p>Making a phone call in order to ask about an offer: To Prague: they could only book a hotel, and we would have to arrange transport on our own. After changing the selection criteria and choosing a flight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - we would have to have our own tour guide; - they could help us make a reservation or arrange a transfer; - their tour representative is available 24h, so they could solve any problems on site (but they do not know a sign language). <p>Nothing but standard services.</p>
3	<p>Nothing but standard services. We would have to have our own sign language interpreter. Information from the e-mail: <i>“Well, we might have some difficulties finding a proper guide for you. Unless you have your own sign language interpreter. When sightseeing, group members receive headsets, and the guide has their own microphone which they talk to”</i> A headset for a deaf person? What a great idea☺</p>
4	An agency, not a tour operator. They sell holiday packages of German and Austrian travel agencies in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Searching for an offer for people with disabilities, one needs to check the “for the disabled” box. The offer is only meant for people with physical disabilities.
5	An agency selling holiday packages. They are not interested in tailoring their offers to customers’ needs.
6	A travel agency selling holiday packages (similar to booking.com).
7	A Czech travel agency offering stays in Italy (similar to booking.com but meant for Italy). They do not organise holidays, but only accommodation and insurance.
8	An agency, not a tour operator. They sell holidays organised by other travel offices. In search criteria, they have a “for the disabled” option but it only concerns facilities adapted to tourists with physical disabilities (and there are not many of them. Moreover, they do not enquire about their availability – if someone reports that, they simply post such information on their website).
9	This is an agency, not a tour operator.
10	They treated this enquiry very seriously. The representative responsible for organising group trips promised to find out whether they were able to find a sign language interpreter available in Prague. They were not able to provide any additional support on the journey (unless the group was bigger e.g. occupying the entire coach).
11	<p>An enquiry sent by e-mail which was answered the same day: <i>“Good afternoon, Unfortunately, we do not have such services in our offer.</i></p>

	<i>Best Regards”</i>
12	An enquiry sent by e-mail which was answered the same day: <i>“Dear Sir/Madam, Thank you for your interest in our offer and sending an enquiry. We do have a tour operator specialising in organising trips with a guide using a sign language. Please find the link below to the current offer for summer 2020: https://deaftravelmartins.pl/oferta-2020-2 Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me. Best Regards.”</i>
13	An e-mail sent 23.10.2019 – unanswered.
14	A phone call with an enquiry about organising a trip to Prague for a group of deaf people. I got through to the office after several attempts (an office employee was abroad). Our request was treated individually and the offer was supposed to be tailored to the group’s needs. The company representative needed detailed information in order to prepare an offer, including its terms and conditions. She had Polish interpreters in Prague but she did not know whether they knew a sign language. If not, we would have to find a sign language interpreter on our own. Generally, the company does not have such customers (that is, deaf and hearing-impaired) but since they received such an enquiry from us, the representative noticed a gap in her offer and stated she must think about introducing such an option.
15	Despite many attempts, it was impossible to reach that company.
16	A company representative called us several hours after filling in a contact form on the company’s website. I asked about the possibility of organising a 2-day trip to Prague (Romantic Prague – Winter Walk) for a group of deaf and hearing-impaired tourists. Unfortunately, I heard the group was too small and we would have to join a standard group, bearing in mind we needed to hire a sign-language interpreter on our own (and to pay for his/her trip). NOTE: if the group was bigger (that is, around 30 people), they would be able to organise such a trip, provide a sign language translator and care (they do have a tour operator in their database that has already done something like this). The person I spoke to was very friendly, interested in my enquiry and willing to help. It is worth noting that she used the expression of “people with disabilities”.

Source: own work.

2. Out of sixteen companies which declared that they could offer services to people with disabilities, three theoretically have links to websites with such offers. A deeper analysis, however, shows that:
 - the offer for people with disabilities applies mainly to wheelchair users and architectural solutions in facilities;
 - people who suffer from sensory disabilities should inform the company about that only for the sake of communication;
 - **there is no information about an offer tailored to such a group, no information about being aware of their needs or preparing something suitable for them.**

It seems that most information concerning the specificity of people with disabilities can be found on the website of one of the agencies, in the form of FAQ. This information, however, concerns the need to inform the travel agency about types of disabilities in order to ensure proper communication.

Additionally, the only travel office, which declared that it had an offer for deaf people (Accessible) on their website, used the expression “deaf without speech”! This proves the lack of awareness of the environment of deaf people, lack of knowledge about their culture and different needs of this group of potential customers.

Moreover, one of the companies which declared directly on their website that they had an offer for people with disabilities was “X”. According to the own experience of the Polish project team, this is only a declaration that has little to do with reality (a specific example of using services of this company by a person with a broken leg shows that company representatives, who are directly in touch with customers and who should provide them with care and safety, know nothing about providing support to people with disabilities). As a result, it is difficult to suspect them of any signs of empathy or assistance.

Summary

After carrying out the research, preliminary suspicions were confirmed as to the lack of an offer dedicated to people with disabilities based on a thorough analysis of the needs of this target group. Only a small percentage of companies declared that they could tailor their offer to the needs of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, this declaration concerns only architectural adaptation enabling accessibility for people with physical disabilities. Representatives of the vast majority of travel companies do not have any knowledge about the specific needs of people with disabilities, in particular people with sensory disabilities.

It seems that in Poland, the use of tourism services by people with disabilities is, on the one hand, a taboo subject, and on the other hand – a ticking bomb which the vast majority of companies do not want to deal with. People with disabilities are still perceived as a threat rather than a chance to expand a target group.