

# Hotel accommodation, accessible tourism and market principles

This article provides an update to the Australian accommodation sector of recent developments regarding people with disabilities and the accessible tourism market.

## Introduction

In 2007 the Australian Government endorsed the new United Nations' (2006) *International Human Rights Convention on the Rights of Disabled People* and the World Health Organization (2007) has released its *Global Age-friendly Cities Guide*. In Australia, under the Building Codes of Australia (BCA) and the referenced Australian Standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia, 2001) there are requirements to provide for people with disabilities and those who are ageing. This is reinforced through the *Disability Discrimination Act, 1992* (DDA) provisions and currently there is a *Draft Disability Standard for Access to Premises* (2004) that seeks to harmonize the BCA and DDA. The Commonwealth government's (2003) *White Paper* identified people with disabilities and seniors as emergent groups who seek niche experiences identified as the *accessible tourism market*. The needs of this market are multidimensional where access encompasses mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions. Through developing marketing responses to incorporate these dimensions the accommodation sector will be well-positioned with a competitive advantage to meet global tourism trends. This paper provides an of the accessible tourism market, review of accommodation information provision, and presents the findings into consumer preferences to accessible accommodation information provision.

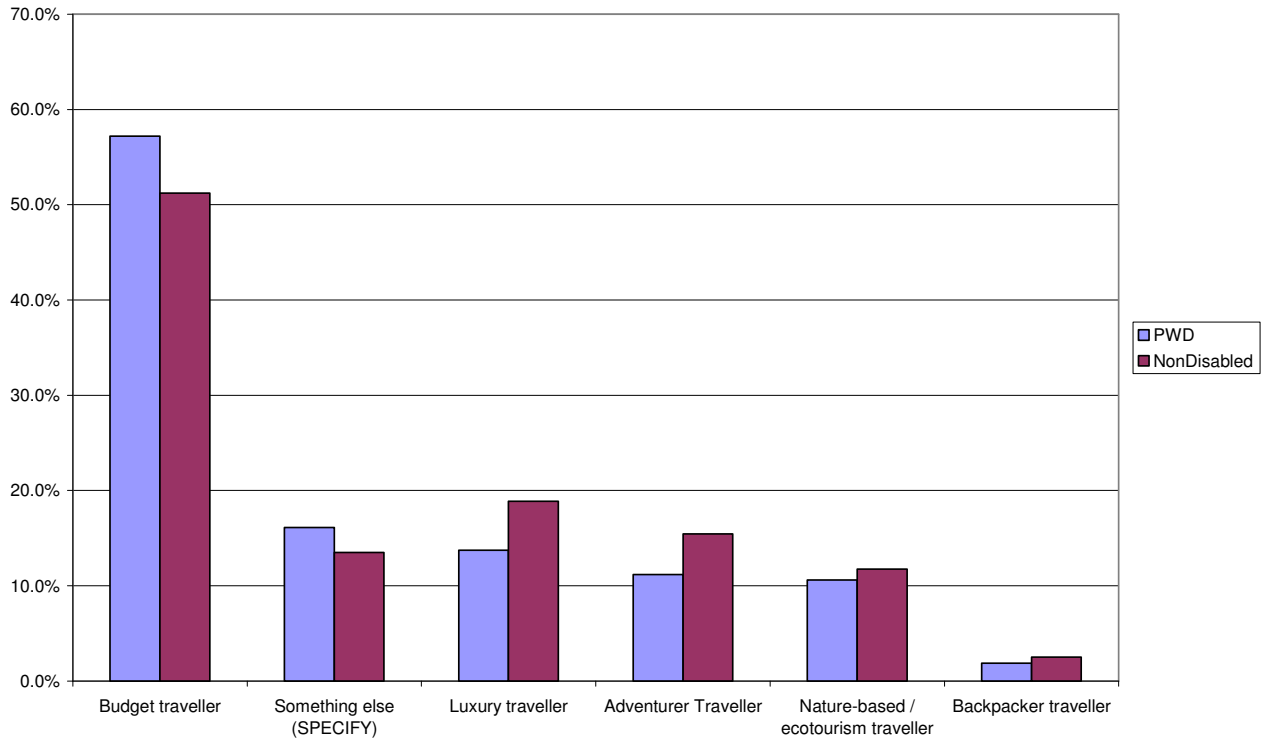
## Market size

Globally there are over 600 million people with disabilities (Fujiura & Rutkowskikmitta, 2001; Mercer & MacDonald, 2007), equating to about 10% of humanity. Approximately 20% of the Australian population, or four million people, identify as having a disability. Of these people 520,000 have a mobility disability, 480,000 are blind or vision impaired, and 1million are deaf or hearing impaired (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). The numbers of people with disabilities are set to increase due to the ageing of the population. WHO (2007) state by 2020 there will be 1.2bn people over 60. The 'greying' of the population has been well documented by the ABS, identified by Tourism Research Australia as an opportunity (2005) and affects all of our major inbound markets. These trends have considerable implications for global tourism (Dwyer, 2005).

The most recent estimates based on National Visitor Survey (Bureau of Tourism Research, 2003) show that 11% of all Australian travelers identified as having a disability. Economic modelling has valued the contribution of tourists with disabilities to overnight domestic tourism at \$(AUD)4.8bn (Darcy & Dwyer 2008 in Darcy et al., 2008). In the US, this market has been estimated to contribute \$(US)127bn to the economy each year with \$US13bn directly attributed to travel (HarrisInteractive Market Research, 2005). Across European Union countries tourists with disabilities have been estimated to contribute €80bn (Buhalis, Michopoulou, Eichhorn, & Miller, 2005). From an inbound perspective, it has been estimated that 7-8% of travelers have a disability and it is this group who directly contribute to increased GDP to the economy (Darcy et al., 2008; HarrisInteractive Market Research, 2005).

The Commonwealth Government's *White Paper* identified accessible tourism as part of its niche experiences. What has become apparent from the National Visitor Survey statistics is that accessible tourism is part of every market segment. Figure 1 shows that people with disabilities constituted part of each of the major market segments identified by the National Visitor Survey with variation between the segments. Moreover, when a person with a disability travels on an overnight trip, they are in a group of 3.8 people. Not to accommodate the person with a disability means that you are missing out on the business of the group and not just that of the individual.

**Figure 1: Market segment Comparison - Disability & Non Disabled**



Source: NVS 2003 (n=20080)

**Accommodation and Disability in Australia**

In Australia it has been well-documented that people with disabilities have had ongoing problems with tourism accommodation. These included stories in the mainstream press, letters to the editor of the travel sections of major newspapers, complaint cases lodged with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission and stories in the disability press. Further, these issues are not confined to just Australia but are a universal barrier constraining people with disabilities wanting to travel. While a great deal has become known about the constraints to travel, there has not been corresponding research focused on the way that information about the rooms should be presented so that they can make an informed decision.

**Lessons from the US**

The approach taken by the major US lodging chains to the provision of information for people requiring accessible rooms is radically different to the Australian situation. This is because the *Americans with Disabilities Act* 1990 has a more developed case law precedent and is compliance-based legislation with timeframes and performance based standards. This approach saw many major chain hotels adopt a strategic approach to 'best

practice' room requirements and information provision (Worcester, 2000). This involves each property auditing their accessible rooms, documenting key measurements and having this available for consumers upon request. This has become a critical component in each hotel's information provision. Further, as with FODOR's (1996) *Great American Vacations For Travelers with Disabilities* this information includes information for people with vision and hearing impairments. This strategic compliance approach is vastly different to the Australia complaint-based legislation, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, which rarely has a common law basis. While this approach has its merits, the inherent weakness means that unless a case is taken to the Federal Court which is a cost jurisdiction, then no precedent is set. The outcome means that the same circumstances could exist in the same suburb literally across the street and the complainants would have no knowledge of the other cases. The US has a similar system of building standards governed by the Access Board which stipulates the standard requirements which must be met within its building regulatory system. Yet, no system is perfect and problems will always arise (US Dept Justice, 2007 ).

### **Contemporary Approaches to Accessible Accommodation Information Provision**

There have been a multitude of accessible accommodation information systems with the outcome less than satisfactory for consumers (Buhalis, Michopoulou, Michailidis, & Ambrose, 2006). In the Australian context there have been three main attempts at information provision all based on an assessment of the Australian Standards. First, the Australian Automobile Association (AAA), *AAA Tourism* accreditation accredited 'disabled' accommodation with a dual icon rating system of 'wheelchair independent access' or 'wheelchair with assistance access'. This system was recently withdrawn pending the criteria being reviewed (AAA Tourism, 2006). Second, involved textual presentation of key aspects (Australian Quadriplegic Association, 2002; NICAN, 2005). Third, a textual and spatial presentation which added a floorplan of the room showing key measurements (Cameron, 2000; City of Melbourne, 2006). All focused on mobility access.

In the past two years in Australia, there are a number of initiatives involving accessible accommodation information. These include:

- The Hotel Motel Accommodation Association have a voluntary code of practice with the Deafness Forum of Australia (2005) over an agreed set of standards for people who are Deaf or have hearing impairments. Motels that adopt the code are given a free listing on the Deafness Forum motel database.
- The Automobile Association of Australia's Tourism (2007) arm have introduced a new access information system. The system is an extended checklist based on the Australian Standards. No listing of accommodation has been released.
- Australia for All (2006) is a community advocacy database approach to developing a classification system for accessible accommodation information. There have been significant issues with classification systems in Australia and overseas. The database has limited entries.

The remainder of the paper reviews a recent research project that sought to provide a sound research base on which to found a valid and reliable accessible information system and determine the consumer's preferred format of information provision.

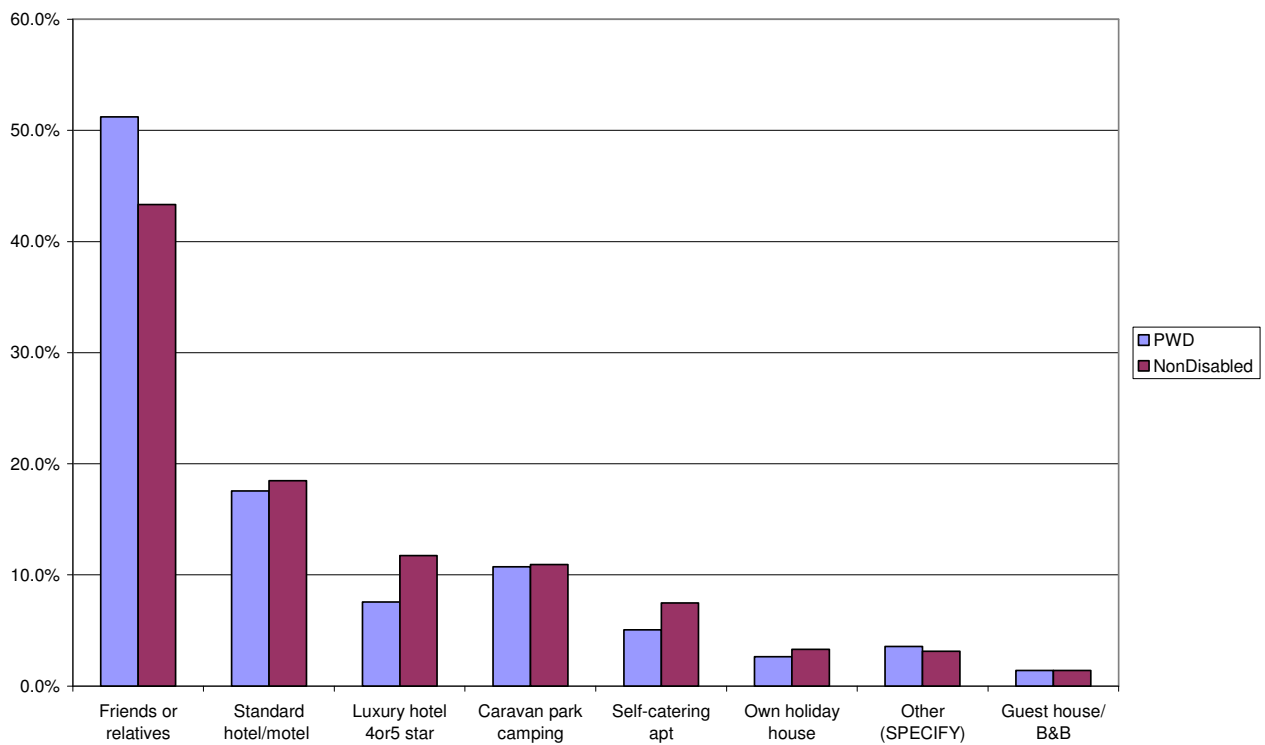
### **Servicing the accessible tourism market**

A recent Australian study has sought to remedy the situation (Darcy, 2007). As background, only one in three respondents was satisfied with their current level of travel. Over the 52 percent stated the lack of suitable accommodation as the reason behind not travelling as frequently as they'd like. This was compounded with 63 percent noted finding out about accommodation as a significant constraint to their travel planning and 46 percent found the information they received as was not accurate. In summary, the major issues identified about accessible tourism accommodation were that:

- room access falls below the accepted Australian Standards;
- information is poorly documented;
- the information presented is not detailed enough;
- not specific to each room;
- rooms do not have an equal amenity to nondisabled rooms (“aesthetic” attributes, vista and room location);
- properties do not identify that they have accessible rooms;
- properties do not market or promote the rooms that they have available.

As Figure 2 shows this situation has led to lower participation levels at hotels from 2 to 5 stars. What is surprising is that this even though most of the accessible accommodation stock occurs in 4 to 5 star properties as most of the stock was built after the introduction of the Australian Standards for access and mobility. From a supply perspective, accommodation managers report low occupancy of these rooms yet most have done nothing to document, market and promote the features of their accessible accommodation (Darcy, 2000; O'Neill & Ali Knight, 2000). What can be done to redress the situation?

**Figure 2: Accommodation Comparison - Disability & Non Disabled**



Source: NVS 2003 (n=20080)

The researchers undertook access audits of ten accommodation providers reflecting the criteria identified under the Building Code of Australia. The audits were then translated into four information formats (Darcy, 2007). These included: AAA access icons; textual; textual and floorplan; and digital photos, textual and floorplan. That information was presented to people with disabilities to determine their perception of whether the information met their access needs and, which format was their preferred system. The findings showed that 72% of people with disabilities preferred format was digital photography with textual and floorplan. This option comprised digital images combining key text and space elements such as bathroom dimensions which reveal circulation space (see Appendix 1 for an example).

Interestingly, as well as the inclusions of the Building Code of Australia and the Australian Standards, people with disabilities value a 'can-do' customer service attitude. This involves not only training staff in disability awareness but management adopting a frankness and accuracy of identifying and documenting the access features of their properties. This has been described as part of the expectation management process. Most people with disabilities realize that there may be barriers that they must overcome during the travel process. If properties accurately document their access features, then individuals can make an informed decision about the appropriateness of the property for their access needs. A great number of HREOC complaint cases and Federal Court actions involve properties that held themselves out to be accessible but did not in practice meet the access needs of the individual when they arrived at the property. In some cases this was as basic as the room having steps.

#### **Tips for developing the accessible tourism market**

- first, second and last, discuss the individual's needs with them;
- document the access features of all aspects of the property through undertaking an access audit;
- access involves mobility, hearing, vision and cognitive dimensions;
- pay detailed attention to the accessible rooms;
- document the number of accessible rooms as many disability groups require multiple rooms (sporting groups, conferences etc.);
- present the information in a way that consumers prefer;
- market and promote the access information in generic documents, website and develop an accessible tourism marketing plan;
- undertake disability awareness training of staff so that an access culture is established throughout the entire organization;
- engage an experienced access auditor and/or disability awareness trainer (see Association of Consultants in Access, Australia Inc <http://www.access.asn.au/>);
- Lastly, it is better to have realistic, accurate and detailed access information about your property so that consumers can make an informed choice for their access needs rather than to have them arrive and have their expectations shattered.

#### **Preferred Format**

An extract from the preferred outcome is shown:

## Appendix 1: Extract from Digital Images combined with Text and Space Presentation

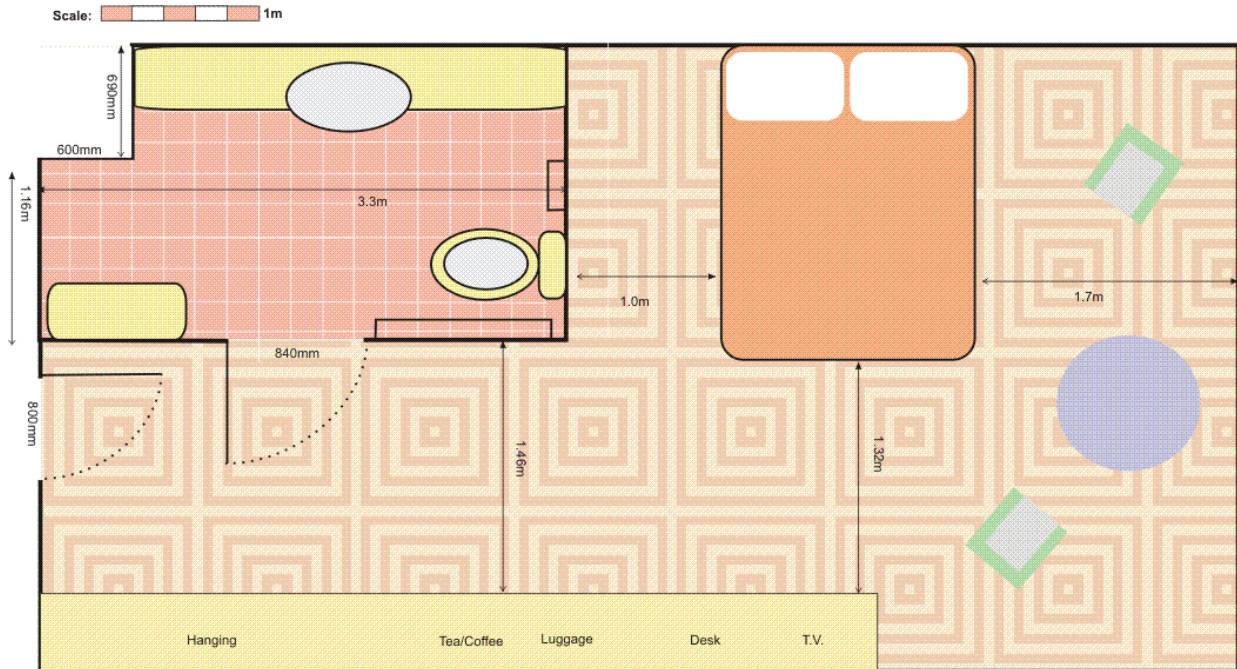
### Bathroom:

Bathroom door width	866mm
Lever handle	1m from floor
Wheel-in shower	Hand held rose and lever tap
Shower grab rails	Height 788mm and 950mm
Fold down shower seat	Height 480mm Shower screen, limits sideways access to the shower seat.
Toilet	Height 430mm, centre to side 460mm, front of bowl to rear wall 780mm,
Toilet grab rail	Height 790mm
Basin	Height 780mm
Basin taps	Lever
Light switches	Quad style 950mm

### Digital Photography



### Full Floorplan



## Further information

For further information about the approach contact  
Associate Professor Simon Darcy  
University of Technology, Sydney  
P: 9514-5100 Email: [simon.darcy@uts.edu.au](mailto:simon.darcy@uts.edu.au)

The research report will be available February 2008.

## References

- AAA Tourism. (2006). Withdrawal of accessibility rating icons. Retrieved 8 August, 2006
- AAA Tourism. (2007). Access Information Program. Retrieved 17 Nov, 2007, from <http://www.aatourism.com.au/AAATDefault.aspx?sit=1&pid=398>
- Australia for All. (2006). Australia for All - One Stop Shop for Accessible Tourism in Australia. from <http://www.australiaforall.com.au/>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2003). *Disability, aging and carers, Australia: summary of findings (Catalogue No.4430.0)* (AuStats No. Catalogue No.4430.0). Canberra: ABS. Document Number)
- Australian Quadriplegic Association. (2002). *Access Sydney: the Easy Guide to Easy Access* (1st ed.). Sydney: Australian Quadriplegic Association.
- Buhalis, D., Michopoulou, E., Eichhorn, V., & Miller, G. (2005). *Accessibility market and stakeholder analysis - One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism in Europe (OSSATE)*. Surrey, United Kingdom: University of Surrey. Document Number)
- Buhalis, D., Michopoulou, E., Michailidis, S., & Ambrose, I. (2006, 6-9 February). *An eTourism Portal for the Disabled Tourism Market in Europe: The OSSATE Portal Design [One-Stop-Shop for Accessible Tourism]*. Paper presented at the Council for Australian University Tourism and Hospitality Education Incorporated 16th annual conference - To the City and Beyond, Melbourne.
- Bureau of Tourism Research. (2003). National visitor survey: travel by Australians. Retrieved 10 September, 2007, from [www.btr.gov.au](http://www.btr.gov.au)
- Cameron, B. (2000). *Easy Access Australia* (2nd ed.). Kew, Vic: Kew Publishing.
- City of Melbourne. (2006). *Accessing Melbourne*. Melbourne: City of Melbourne.
- Commonwealth Attorney General's Dept. (2004). Draft Disability Standards for Access to Premises (Buildings) 200X. Canberra: AGPS.
- Commonwealth Department of Industry Tourism and Resources. (2003). *Tourism White Paper - The Medium to Long-Term strategy for tourism*. Canberra: CDITR.
- Darcy, S. (2000). *Tourism Industry Supply Side Perceptions of Providing Goods and Services for People with Disabilities*. Sydney: report to New South Wales Ageing and Disability Department. Document Number)
- Darcy, S. (2007, 11-14 February). *A methodology for assessing class three accessible accommodation information provision*. Paper presented at the Tourism - Past Achievements, Future Challenges, Manly - Sydney Australia.
- Darcy, S., Cameron, B., Dwyer, L., Taylor, T., Wong, E., & Thomson, A. (2008). *Visitor accessibility in urban centres: Technical Report 90040*. Gold Coast: Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre. Document Number)
- Deafness Forum, & HMAA. (2005). *Accommodation Industry Voluntary Code of Practice for the Provision of Facilities for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired* Sydney: HMAAo. Document Number)

- Dwyer, L. (2005). Trends underpinning global tourism in the coming decade. In W. Theobald (Ed.), *Global Tourism* (pp. 529-545). Burlington, MA: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Fodor's. (1996). *Fodor's Great American Vacations for Travelers with Disabilities* (2nd ed.). New York: Fodor's Travel Publications Inc.
- Fujiura, G. L., & Rutkowskikmitta, V. (2001). Counting Disability. In G. L. Albrecht, K. D. Seelman & M. Bury (Eds.), *Handbook of Disability Studies* (pp. 69-96). Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications.
- HarrisInteractive Market Research. (2005). *Research among adults with disabilities - travel and hospitality*. Chicago: Open Doors Organizationo. Document Number)
- Mercer, S. W., & MacDonald, R. (2007). Disability and human rights. *The Lancet*, 370(9587), 548-549.
- NICAN. (2005). National Information Communication Awareness Network Website. Retrieved 16 Sept, 2005, from [www.nican.com.au/NICAN.html](http://www.nican.com.au/NICAN.html)
- O'Neill, M., & Ali Knight, J. (2000). Disability tourism dollars in Western Australia hotels. *FIU Hospitality Review*, 18(2), 72-88.
- Standards Australia. (2001). *AS 1428.1 Design for access and mobility - General requirements for access - New building work*. Homebush, NSW: Standards Australia.
- Tourism Australia. (2005). Mature-Aged Travellers in Australia: Snapshot. Retrieved 26 September, 2006, from <http://www.tourism.australia.com/Research.asp?lang=EN&sub=0361>
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/convtexte.htm>: United Nations General Assembly A/61/611 - 6 December 2006.
- US Dept Justice. (2007 ). *Common ADA Problems at Newly Constructed Lodging Facilities*. Washington, DC: Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Sectiono. Document Number)
- Worcester, B. A. (2000). Day Inns settles: helps simplify ADA. *Hotel & Motel Management*, 215(1), 1,78.
- World Health Organization. (2007). Global Age-friendly Cities Guide from [http://www.who.int/ageing/age\\_friendly\\_cities/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities/en/index.html)