Physical and Digital Accessibility of Tourist Destinations. Overview of Best Practices in EU

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Abstract. Tourism has a strong impact on economic growth, but it can also have a significant impact on the environment, cultural heritage and local communities. It is important to adopt a sustainable approach to the responsible management of natural resources, the adoption of targeted tourism policies and the use of technology to monitor and optimise tourism flows. In this, the participation of local communities in decision-making processes becomes decisive to ensure a fair distribution of resources and to develop awareness of their value. In the article, best practices are analysed, focusing on enhancing cultural and natural heritage through experiential tourism, digitisation, participatory planning and the creation of destinations that reflect local identity. Successful experiences in various global contexts show us how tourism can be a continuously balancing engine of development, promoting social inclusion, environmental protection and the economic well-being of communities. Our overview focuses on best practices aimed at improving the physical and digital accessibility of tourist attractions, orienting tourism towards inclusive and sustainable territorial development.

Keywords: Tourism · Sustainability · Physical and Digital Accessibility · Strategic planning

1 Introduction

The holistic vision of tourism emphasizes the fundamental importance of intertwining territorial characteristics, cultural and natural values, and the involvement of various stakeholders [1], including public and private operators and local communities, within territorial strategic assets, influencing regional development and sustainability [2]. The tourism sector needs to position itself within a broader framework of territorial development, highlighting the necessity for integrated planning and governance [3], and underscoring the crucial role it plays in sustainability, alongside the need for a well-structured approach to managing its complexities within territorial development policies [4]. The urgency of a dual transition towards a greener and more digitalized tourism industry has become more apparent in recent years, especially within the context of the EU Green Deal and digitalization goals.

Therefore, the challenge lies in reconciling the growth-oriented nature of the tourism industry with the environmental limits that must be respected to ensure long-term sustainability, proposing the concept of a "green new deal" without growth, advocating for a

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shift in perspective that prioritizes sustainable development indicators rather than expansion [5]. In this context, it is necessary to follow a bottom-up approach in policy-making, actively involving local communities and stakeholders in the promotion of sustainable tourism [6]. The paper includes a section analyzing the evolution of the tourism system, focusing on the policies and guidelines to be followed for the construction of sustainable tourism, then moving on to an examination of the opportunities and risks for the territories affected by the tourism phenomenon and finally a strategic vision and good practices at European level concerning the physical and digital accessibility of tourist destinations.

2 The Expansion of the Tourism Sector

Today, more than ever, the rapid evolution of tourism requires us professionals and academics to plan carefully and integrate policies that are essential to preserve the natural and cultural heritage. Current tourism legislation balances economic and social needs with the protection of the environment and host communities. For example, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the United Nations Tourism Organisation (UNO) have defined sustainability goals for the sector, including encouraging the use of new strategies for managing tourism destinations and reducing environmental damage. Global policies, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have become a key reference for many tourism projects that focus on promoting responsible and inclusive tourism. Furthermore, the European Union has implemented several regulations and plans to guide the tourism industry towards sustainability, such as the European Green Deal.

Therefore, European tourism strategies focus on the implementation of methods that reduce the use of natural resources and reduce waste production, as well as encourage digitisation and the implementation of smart technologies to control tourist travel and local assets [7]. Consequently, place-based methodology for tourism becomes essential, helping to incorporate tourism into the expansion of the region, enhancing local characteristics and promoting approaches that promote and protect the cultural and ecological heritage of each territory [8].

Global rules and regional strategies are not enough if they are not implemented locally. In order to manage tourist destinations in a sustainable way, thoughtful planning is required to improve natural and cultural aspects and to involve local populations in the process. In particular, tourist destinations must be managed in a way that reduces the effects on the environment and increases the economic and social benefits for local populations, while preventing tourism from damaging resources [5]. Sustainable planning, consequently, is not just about protecting the environment, but about establishing a management system in which all stakeholders, from government agencies to tourism businesses and local groups, share responsibility for making decisions together.

To ensure the sustainability of tourism, it is crucial to adopt strategies that foster the specialisation of smart tourism, which consists of harnessing digital technologies to improve the management of both tourist traffic and local assets. Smart tools, including visitor movement monitoring systems and digital platforms to showcase locations, are increasingly being used to enhance the efficiency of resource management and provide

more personalised and eco-friendly tourism experiences. This method, which combines digitisation with environmental awareness, is particularly valuable for destinations aiming to reduce the effects of large-scale tourism and support more environmentally and heritage-respectful types of tourism [9].

A key point for the development of the tourism industry is the inland and rural regions, which are often ignored by the usual tourism models. Promoting tourism in these areas can make a significant contribution to countering population decline and boosting the local economy. Policies must support tourism that enhances the cultural and natural heritage of inland areas, fostering links between tourism, agriculture, crafts and local traditions. Neglected or underutilised areas, if managed well, can become tourist attractions, offering gastronomic experiences that not only attract tourists but also help revitalise the local economy and preserve traditions [10].

A strategic issue for the sustainable expansion of tourism lies in the integration between territorial policies and urban planning practices. Tourism dynamics deeply affect the form and organization of space, influencing settlement systems, infrastructure networks, and land-use patterns. In response to increasing pressure in coastal areas and historic city centers, it is essential to promote multilevel planning that steers development toward spatially balanced models. This entails enhancing the role of peri-urban and inland areas through interventions that combine accessibility, landscape quality, and a widespread, community-based hospitality offer. In this perspective, tourism is not merely an economic activity but a driver of urban and territorial regeneration, capable of reactivating marginal spaces and reinforcing the identity of places.

Within this framework, the governance of tourist territories demands planning tools that support inclusive and long-term processes. Overcoming sectoral approaches is a priority, fostering interaction among urban planning, sustainable mobility, and ecosystem services. The enhancement of ecological networks, the restoration of minor historic buildings, and the reconnection of fragmented urban fabrics are among the strategies that allow for the integration of tourism-related demands with the broader goals of territorial cohesion. In this regard, tourism planning must adopt a systemic vision, geared toward resilience and long-term sustainability, which respects local specificities and promotes settlement models able to absorb tourism flows without undermining spatial and environmental balance.

3 Opportunities and Risks for the Territory

Tourism represents a significant opportunity for an area, capable of fostering economic progress, generating jobs and enriching the cultural and natural heritage. However, these opportunities have to be weighed against the negative aspects of sustainably maintaining tourist resorts. Indeed, if mismanaged, tourism can also cause major problems, such as pollution, environmental damage, weakening of cultural uniqueness and financial disparities between local groups. A clear illustration of how tourism can have both positive and negative aspects can be seen in Smart Tourism Destinations (STDs), a new idea that uses digital technologies to improve the tourist experience and make the most of regional resources. Smart tourism destinations offer great possibilities for advancement, as they allow for the in-depth collection and evaluation of information, improving the

services offered to visitors, observing their movements and improving the utilisation of natural and cultural assets. However, the risk of over-digitalisation is that it can produce dependency on technology, leaving out a part of the local population and not addressing environmental and social sustainability issues [11].

Difficulties in sustainably managing land resources are also apparent in rural or less-developed regions. In these areas, tourism can provide substantial financial gains but also create inequities and cause environmental damage. The Vulture region in Basilicata exemplifies how tourism can foster rural development. Here, eco-friendly tourism has been employed to renew the area by leveraging its native natural and cultural assets. Development strategies in this area seek to enhance territorial value through ecological, sustainable, and digital tourism. Despite these positive impacts, the region still faces challenges related to the responsible stewardship of its cultural and natural heritage. This necessitates comprehensive policies to prevent resource exhaustion and the loss of local character [14].

In certain scenarios, tourism can foster inequality, particularly where large-scale tourism has led to the accumulation of wealth by a few select tourism businesses. This trend frequently occurs in the context of "popular" tourist destinations. If not managed properly, this trend can lead to gentrification, with consequences for the cultural heritage and economic progress of communities. An example can be observed in historic cities such as Venice or Barcelona, where a high tourist load has raised the cost of rent for residents, thus generating social imbalances [12].

Smart technologies can contribute to optimizing the management of tourist destinations and promoting more inclusive and environmentally respectful economic growth. However, it is essential that development policies take into account local specificities and involve all stakeholders in the territory, from local administrations to private operators and communities, in tourism planning and management. Therefore, it is necessary for Smart Tourism Destinations and other technology-based initiatives to be balanced with strategies that proceed step by step, assessing the current state and potential progress of tourist destinations, protecting cultural heritage, the environment, and the well-being of local communities, and avoiding the risk of tourism becoming a threat rather than an opportunity [13].

One of the key strategies to mitigate the risks associated with tourism while enhancing its opportunities is to adopt a diversified tourism model. This model focuses on reducing the dependency on a single type of tourism, such as mass tourism, by promoting niche forms of tourism that are more sustainable and less invasive. For example, cultural, eco-tourism, and slow tourism can offer alternatives to the pressures of large-scale tourism, while providing significant economic benefits to local communities. By encouraging tourists to engage with the cultural, historical, and ecological aspects of a region in a more meaningful and responsible way, it is possible to preserve the authenticity of the destination and ensure that the economic gains are distributed more equitably across the local population. Furthermore, these alternatives can contribute to the diversification of the local economy, reducing its reliance on external factors, such as global tourism trends and crises.

4 Best Practice: Visions and Strategies for Physical and Digital Accessibility

Accessibility, both physical and digital, is a crucial aspect to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities, particularly in marginalized areas where infrastructure and services are often insufficient or inadequate. Best practices in this field must address a range of challenges related to geography, limited resources, and the variability of local regulations. The strategies to be adopted require an integrated approach, combining personal needs, the socio-cultural environment and the unique characteristics of inland areas. In order to improve physical accessibility, it is necessary to act in a way that allows people with mobility problems to move freely, such as low kerbs, ramps and safe routes. The international guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) are essential to align projects with global standards, but cultural sensitivity needs to be acted upon, which requires careful work [15].

Furthermore, digital inclusivity in underserved places requires a strategy that takes into account not only disabilities, but also the challenges of using contemporary technologies: in rural and isolated areas, access to the Internet is often limited or absent and therefore, a design that can work well even where connectivity is poor is required. Digital best practices involve the use of inclusive platforms, readily available on mobile devices with multilingual interfaces that are easy to interpret and understandable for a wide range of users with different cognitive and linguistic abilities [16]. Local regulations are crucial to promote an inclusive environment, but resources and training are lacking. Therefore, effective strategies include awareness-raising and training of local professionals, such as architects, engineers and digital developers, on the meaning of accessibility and how to apply it in a correct and sustainable way, as the expertise of international and local specialists, together with collaboration between public and private entities, are crucial to create pragmatic and durable solutions [17].

Another important element to consider is the active involvement of people with disabilities in the design and implementation of solutions, from the initial idea to real-world application. Several examples show how the direct contribution of people with disabilities during the decision-making process can promote practical solutions, from the design of physical environments, such as public spaces or transport systems to digital accessibility, where the direct contribution of users ensures that solutions are truly valid and not just theoretical concepts. A central element of digital accessibility is content adaptation: digital platforms need to be compatible with assistive technologies, such as screen readers and alternative input devices, and adapt to different languages, dialects and communication methods available on a wide range of devices, from smartphones to inexpensive computers, often used in disadvantaged communities, without technical obstacles that could interrupt the user experience.

Another important issue is related to public policies: accessibility interventions must be integrated into urban and rural development plans. In many internal areas, accessibility is often treated as a secondary issue, but policies that place sustainability and inclusiveness at the centre of their objectives are necessary to overcome inequalities. The creation of public funds dedicated to the removal of architectural barriers and the implementation of accessible digital solutions is a practice that has proven to be effective, as demonstrated by numerous studies [18].

The selection of the ten best practices discussed in this paper results from a critical assessment of initiatives recognized at both European and international levels. Each project displays a notable ability to address the dual challenge of physical and digital accessibility in tourism settings located in marginal or underserved areas. Preference was given to interventions that effectively respond to the specific limitations of remote or underdeveloped regions, adopting context-sensitive approaches, cost-efficient technological innovations, and adaptive planning strategies. A decisive factor in the inclusion of these cases is their capacity to comply with international standards while remaining responsive to local socio-economic and geographical constraints.

Another key selection criterion was the potential for replication and practical applicability of these initiatives in comparable territorial contexts. Projects such as *Smart Accessibility for All* and *Lisbon for All* exemplify how assistive technologies and user-friendly digital systems can markedly enhance accessibility, even in areas with limited infrastructure. Likewise, experiences like *Turismo Accessible* and *Inclusive Iceland* underscore the relevance of inclusive design principles applied to natural and rural environments. These cases offer scalable models that maintain a focus on universal design, low-threshold access, and user autonomy, even under conditions of limited connectivity or institutional support [16].

A further distinguishing aspect of the selected practices lies in the integration of participatory processes and collaborative governance models. Several initiatives—such as *The Accessible City Project* in Glasgow and *Madrid Inclusive*—are particularly noteworthy for their active involvement of persons with disabilities throughout the design and implementation phases. These approaches not only enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the resulting solutions but also foster meaningful knowledge exchange among stakeholders and support the development of sustainable governance mechanisms. The active role of public–private partnerships, alongside continuous monitoring and professional training at the local level, contributes to embedding these practices within broader strategies for inclusive and sustainable tourism development [17, 18].

Lastly, ongoing evaluation and monitoring of the implemented solutions are essential. Accessibility projects must undergo regular verification to ensure they remain genuinely inclusive and responsive to users' evolving needs. Gathering feedback from persons with disabilities and engaging them in review activities is critical to maintaining the long-term effectiveness and appropriateness of such interventions. Evaluation processes should incorporate specific indicators addressing both physical and digital accessibility in order to inform continuous improvement of existing policies and practices. Numerous award-winning initiatives have made substantial contributions to enhancing accessibility in marginal tourism destinations, fostering greater inclusion and expanding access to tourism experiences for individuals with disabilities. The ten selected practices clearly demonstrate that accessible tourism can be pursued through inclusive and innovative solutions, enriching the travel experience for all, even in the most peripheral areas, while providing transferable models for broader application (Table 1).

Table 1. Award-winning projects on the theme of physical and digital accessibility

Project	Destination	Recognized Award	Year	Description	Source
Accessible Tourism for All	Spain	European Destination of Excellence Award	2018	Initiative that transformed natural parks, museums, and historical centers into accessible destinations, with pedestrian paths, audio guides for the visually impaired, and interactive online maps	European Commission: Accessible Tourism for All. European Commission, 2018
Smart Accessibility for All	Ireland	Digital Accessibility Award	2019	Improved digital accessibility of tourist destinations by developing platforms and applications compatible with assistive technologies for cognitive and visual disabilities	Irish Tourism Board: Smart Accessibility for All. Irish Tourism Board, 2019
Turismo Accessibile	Italy	Premio Turismo e Disabilità	2020	Made the Abruzzo, Lazio, and Molise National Park accessible by creating pedestrian paths and interactive digital stations for tourist information	Italian Ministry of Tourism: Turismo Accessibile. Italian Ministry of Tourism, 2020

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Table 1. (*continued*)

Project	Destination	Recognized Award	Year	Description	Source
The Accessible City Project	Glasgow	Smart City Accessibility Award	2020	Implemented infrastructural and digital changes to improve accessibility in public transportation and public spaces to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities	Glasgow City Council: The Accessible City Project. Glasgow City Council, 2020
Lisbon for All	Portugal	European Mobility Award	2019	Improved physical and digital accessibility in Lisbon by creating paths and informational resources for people with reduced mobility and sensory disabilities	Lisbon City Tourism: Lisbon for All. Lisbon City Tourism, 2019
Inclusive Iceland	Island	Nordic Accessibility Prize	2018	Developed a network of natural routes and accessible digital solutions, promoting inclusivity in Iceland's natural and tourist areas	Iceland Tourism Board: Inclusive Iceland. Iceland Tourism Board, 2018

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Table 1. (*continued*)

Project	Destination	Recognized Award	Year	Description	Source
Accessible Crete	Greece	Greek Tourism Award	2017	Improved accessibility of beaches and archaeological sites in Crete, ensuring equal opportunities for people with disabilities to access tourist resources	Greek Ministry of Tourism: Accessible Crete. Greek Ministry of Tourism, 2017
Copenhagen Accessibility Initiative	Denmark	Global Smart Cities Award	2021	Created an accessible digital navigation system for visitors with disabilities, facilitating access to all tourist and infrastructural areas of the city	Copenhagen Municipality: Copenhagen Accessibility Initiative. Copenhagen Municipality, 2021
Madrid Inclusive	Spain	International Accessibility Award	2019	Made the entire public transportation network in Madrid fully accessible for people with motor and sensory disabilities	Madrid Tourism Board: Madrid Inclusive. Madrid Tourism Board, 2019
Tourisme et Handicap	France	French Tourism Excellence Award	2020	Made tourist destinations across France more accessible, with solutions to facilitate access to and enjoyment of tourist resources for people with disabilities	French Ministry of Tourism: Tourisme et Handicap. French Ministry of Tourism, 2020

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, the growing attention to physical and digital accessibility in marginalized tourist destinations represents a fundamental trend in promoting inclusive and sustainable tourism. Successful initiatives, such as "Accessible Tourism for All" and "Smart Accessibility for All", perfectly illustrate how the combination of real-world and digital tools can make tourist destinations more accessible to all visitors, especially those with motor, sensory or thinking difficulties [19]. These internationally recognized projects demonstrate that accessibility is no longer just an add-on, but rather must be a fundamental part of the way we plan and build tourism infrastructure. Digital solution innovation is key, centered around a streamlined digital network [20]. This includes interactive maps, applications suitable for assistive technologies and easy-to-use booking platforms, increasing the independence of disabled visitors [21]. Furthermore, initiatives such as "Lisbon for All" and the "Copenhagen Accessibility Initiative" demonstrate how digital tools can remove physical obstacles and increase tourism by combining physical and digital pathways [22].

This inclusive method has a positive, as well as structural, effect on the improvement of infrastructures, especially cultural ones, helping to raise awareness among communities towards more equitable and accessible tourism. By integrating new technological infrastructures with inclusion policies aimed at improving physical and digital accessibility, replicable models are developed to be adapted to various tourist destinations, preserving their uniqueness and promoting tourism capable of contributing to sustainable and quality economic growth.

From a forward-looking perspective, we believe that academic research should aim at developing interdisciplinary methodological tools capable of systematically measuring the impact of accessibility policies on the well-being of visitors and on the socio-economic development of the territories involved. For us, as urban scholars and practitioners, the design of integrated models that combine principles of sustainable urban planning, digital innovation, and social sciences is essential to transform tourism systems into smart and inclusive frameworks [23, 24].

In this regard, the analysis of knowledge transfer dynamics and of the network structures characterizing relationships among the actors operating in our territories proves to be crucial. Gaining a deeper understanding of how these networks function allows us to identify the conditions that enable inter-institutional cooperation and the dissemination of virtuous practices, thereby strengthening the connection between social innovation and tourism governance [25].

From a policy standpoint, it is necessary to adopt binding regulations that require the application of accessibility by design principles from the earliest stages of tourism development planning. In our field, professionals should implement targeted funding mechanisms and incentives that support initiatives capable of integrating technological innovation with social inclusion, while also promoting multi-level governance models and both local and international public–private partnerships. Lastly, we advocate for the systematic inclusion of accessibility indicators within the strategic management plans of our destinations, so that the effectiveness of implemented actions can be properly monitored and aligned with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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