

State Secretary Christine Marek

ENAT Congress

"Trends and Prospects of Accessible Tourism"

Austria Center Vienna

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I'm very glad to **welcome you** - ladies and gentlemen from more than 25 countries from all over the world - in Vienna to this congress of the **European Network for Accessible Tourism** (ENAT) on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth. I'm **very proud** that **Austria has been selected** to host the ENAT-congress "Trends and Prospects of Accessible Tourism".

Before I will talk about **barrier-free tourism**, let me first say a few words about the **importance of tourism in Austria**. Austria has experienced a **record year** in terms of tourism in **2008** with over 32 million arrivals (+4.7%) and 126 million overnight stays (+4.3%). The **winter season** 2008/2009 has shown **the second best result in Austrian history** with only a slight decrease in arrivals and overnight stays compared to 2008. In this slight decrease, however, we already note the impact of the current **global financial and economic crisis** and forecasts are not too optimistic for the years 2009 and 2010. Especially **city tourism and business travel** will be affected by these developments.

If we look at the economic impact of the tourism industry we see that it contributes to Austria's GDP (gross domestic product) with about 8 % and around 16 % if leisure industry is included. And if you consider that almost **1.6 million Austrians**, that is about **20 % of the total population**, are **disabled, handicapped or limited in movement**, then the tourism industry is asked to offer more suitable packages and offerings for these groups.

In **Austria's constitution** we find **Article 7** that says that in the Republic of Austria **no one must be discriminated against just because of a disability**. The **Disability Equality Act** (Bundesbehindertengleichstellungsgesetz) is a federal law that covers all conflicts regarding consumer contracts. This act is **very important for the tourism and leisure industry**. If a **consumer feels**

being discriminated he or she can ask for **mediation** within the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection.

Besides these laws and regulations, travel and leisure activities must also be seen as a **substantial part of the social life**. However, in many cases there are still **barriers** not only for **disabled people** but also for **handicapped** and other groups like **elderly persons, pregnant women, mothers or fathers with baby buggies**. This limits or even hinders them from travelling and using leisure facilities. One of the objectives of our tourism policy must be to set the **framework for achieving the goal of "Tourism for All"** - in particular barrier-free tourism.

This matter has been a great concern of our Federal Ministry in the last years. Unfortunately, in the public's opinion the expression '**barrier-free tourism**' has been very **often limited to the needs of handicapped and disabled people**. But this is **short-sighted**. Just think about families with children and babies, the increasing number of elderly people and people who are reduced in mobility in general or temporarily due to an injury. These groups all have special needs that must be fulfilled by the tourism and leisure industry. And we, as the Federal Ministry, can help preparing the way to ensure tourism for all.

The tourism industry has to be aware of the **potential of barrier-free tourism** and competitive advantages of offerings for these target groups. According to different studies these groups have a **higher length of stay** and **spend more compared to the average**. And please do not forget when for example a group of friends decide where to go and where to spend the holiday, they **mostly follow the member(s) with the highest needs**. In consequence of not offering suitable conditions for these groups, it means losing a number of overnights.

A lot of things have still to be done in Austria and worldwide, there are **several challenges for barrier-free tourism**. The following **questions** should show what still can be improved when **planning and booking a trip and staying at a hotel**:

- 1) During the **information search process**: Do the **websites** of destinations, travel agents or hotels offer **adequate information for this target group**? How should the information be optimally presented?
- 2) When **booking the travel package**: Are the **employees of the travel agency aware of the travellers' problems** and what they need (e.g. people with hearing difficulties might not be aware of the alarm)?
- 3) When **going to the destination and to hotel**: Is it **easy to reach** the destination and the hotel?
- 4) When **staying at the hotel**: Will there be **enough room in the bathroom**? Are the employees friendly and well-trained?
- 5) When **doing other leisure activities**: Are the **facilities barrier-free**? Is the mountain cable-car easy accessible for wheelchair users?

These examples show the need to raise the **awareness at all stages of a holiday**.

As a result, the Federal Ministry has set up an initiative called "**Barrier-free Travel for All**". Therefore a **workshop series** has been organized in cooperation with the Federal Chamber of Commerce that represents the interests of the tourism and leisure industry. Experts from different working areas have been invited to improve the tourism supply chain regarding barrier-free offerings.

As a result, a **platform for cooperation has been established**, where representatives from the tourism and leisure industry work together with respective interest groups. The objective of a national tourism authority must be to **enforce cooperation between the different interest groups** in tourism and to set initiatives and measures together/jointly. A first outcome of these workshops was a **publication** called "**Tourism for all - Barrierfree-Planning and Building in tourism and leisure industry**". Its objective is to raise awareness and to provide useful information to the stakeholders including possibilities for funding, subsidies and grants.

Summing up, our Federal Ministry supports a number of initiatives and projects for setting the framework conditions. Among these initiatives are **special subsidies for hotels or similar establishments**, financial contributions to the online platform on barrier-free travel, the publication of brochures, the organisation of information events and the **award "Friend of Fairness"**. However, many further steps still have to be taken.

What has to be done in the near future? From my perspective, as a representative of the national tourism authority, we have to work harder on establishing **higher awareness and sensibility** in the public and among the different tourism stake holders for this topic. This will be the right way to set the framework for better and more tourism offerings that consider the special needs of all these people.

Austria is a quality-oriented and sustainability-focussed tourism destination in the middle of Europe and we are aware of the growing **importance of barrier-free tourism**. And we want to take a **leading role** in setting a framework for new tourism offerings in this field and to raise the awareness among the decision-makers in tourism and in the public.

Assuring all of you will hear a lot about existing initiatives and ideas for a further development of barrier-free tourism I wish you **fruitful discussions**, and of course, we **look forward to welcome you soon in Austria again!**