SESSION 2 – DESTINATIONS AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Moderator: Neha Arora

Speakers: Martyn Sibley, Nithi Subhongsang, Martin Heng, Karin Marie Antonsen

The session "Destinations and Business Development" explored how accessibility can drive destination growth, business innovation, and inclusion across different regions of the world. Moderated by **Neha Arora, founder of Planet Abled (India)**, the panel brought together practitioners and thought leaders who demonstrated how accessible tourism has evolved from isolated initiatives to structured business models and policies.

Martyn Sibley, CEO of Purple Goat Agency (UK), reflected on his experience as a traveller and marketer, highlighting the persistent challenges of air travel for wheelchair users and the need for co-creation between destinations and travellers with disabilities. He emphasised that accessible tourism is not a charitable cause but a business opportunity, calling for a shift from compliance to genuine engagement. Sibley illustrated how social media and influencer marketing can amplify authentic narratives of accessibility, positioning inclusion as a strategic advantage. He encouraged destinations to involve content creators with disabilities from the earliest stages of product design to communication, ensuring representation beyond visible disabilities.

Nithi Subhongsang, founder of Thailand Adventures, presented Thailand's journey from pilot projects to a nationwide commitment to accessible tourism. Through partnerships with the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and research institutions, his company has developed tours for blind and wheelchair users, trained more than 100 guides, and launched the Wheel on the Water project for accessible river cruises. Subhongsang described accessibility as a social and economic investment, improving daily life for communities while strengthening the tourism economy.

Martin Heng, former Accessible Travel Manager at Lonely Planet and co-founder of Colourful Earth (Australia), shared the case study of The Ascott Disability Inclusion Playbook, a corporate framework integrating accessibility into governance, training, design, hiring, and digital services across 1,000 hospitality properties worldwide. Heng emphasised the importance of internal leadership, measurable goals, and co-creation with people with disabilities to transform inclusion into long-term business value.

Finally, **Karin Marie Antonsen and Cato Lie from the University of South-Eastern Norway** presented their research project AccessTour, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project investigates how rural destinations can generate value through accessible tourism by involving users in co-design and testing. They outlined five levels of user involvement—from consultation to decision-making—and shared survey results showing that the main barriers to accessible travel in Norway remain information gaps, transport limitations, and negative attitudes. Their findings underscore the need for collaboration between policymakers, academia, and the disability community to translate research into action.

The session concluded that accessibility is both a moral responsibility and an economic drive, requiring innovation, empathy, and cross-sector partnerships to shape destinations that truly welcome everyone.

Watch Session 2 on YouTube. (run time 1:49:01)