SESSION 21 – ACCESSIBLE TOURISM BUSINESS

Moderator: Bill Forrester

Speakers: Laurel Van Horn, Susanne Gäumann, Gianmaria Patti, Marina Snellenberg

The closing session of the Summit, "Accessible Tourism Business", brought together international experts and leading tour operators to discuss the evolution of accessibility from a social responsibility to a core component of tourism business strategy.

Moderated by **Bill Forrester, founder of TravAbility (Australia)**, the session focused on market data, operational practises, and innovation within global travel companies.

Laurel Van Horn, Vice President of Open Doors Organization (United States), presented the latest results of a nationwide study on the American accessible travel market. The survey, conducted among more than 1,000 adults with disabilities, revealed that 63% had travelled in the past two years, generating over 10 billion dollars in direct spending. Although travel frequency remains slightly below pre-pandemic levels, the use of digital tools for travel planning and booking has reached record highs, with 80% of respondents relying on websites and mobile apps. Van Horn emphasised the need for tourism businesses to collect accurate accessibility data, update online information, and treat travellers with disabilities as a key customer segment rather than a niche.

Susanne Gäumann, founder of the Claire & George Foundation (Switzerland), shared the ten-year experience of developing the Accessible Tour of Switzerland, a cooperative project involving 13 destinations. She described how accessibility, healthcare, and hospitality were integrated through a one-stop-shop model combining accessible hotels, transport, and care services. Gäumann's approach, rooted in "simplicity and partnership," demonstrates how a small foundation can influence national tourism policy and design standards.

Gianmaria Patti, from the Alpitour Group (Italy), introduced the Senza Barriere (Without Barriers) initiative, developed in collaboration with Handy Superabile. The programme involves accessibility assessments of 53 hotels across ten destinations, producing over 3,500 pages of technical documentation and 9,000 photos to guide travelers' choices. Patti highlighted the importance of continuous training and cross-sector partnerships to improve quality and trust in large-scale tour operations.

Finally, **Marina Snellenberg, Accessibility Manager at TUI Group**, described how one of the world's largest tour operators is embedding accessibility within its mainstream business model. TUI's approach combines verified access guides, neuroinclusive programmes, and strong collaboration with the disability community to create an "information-based" travel experience. Snellenberg emphasised that accessibility is not a compliance issue but a commercial opportunity, noting that customers with access needs book earlier, stay longer, and are more loyal than others.

The session concluded with a shared reflection: the future of accessible tourism lies in data-driven innovation, corporate accountability, and a human-centred commitment to making travel a universal right.

Watch Session 21 on YouTube. (run time 1:22:15)