

CHAPTER TWO: WHAT IS REQUIRED AND HOW IS IT DONE?

This manual serves to elaborate on the Tourism Grading Council guidelines; as such, these guidelines have not been reproduced here, and can be retrieved electronically.

Persons with disabilities have the right, and do want to, enjoy travel and leisure experiences. Like the societal 'norm' tourists with disabilities want to visit places with which they can identify, places consistent with their lifestyle, where they can find pleasure, safety and comfort. They also seek friendly, inhabited places.

Places of accommodation and restaurants are frequently ill equipped to meet the needs of tourists with disabilities. The lack of suitable accommodation will often limit persons to up-scale hotels, which are often the only establishments that are accessible e.g. very few hotels offer accessible rooms with wide entrances or low switches, hand dryers, towel racks and beds. Of the rooms available, very few are on the ground floor.

Access into and out of hotels is also problematic. Few hotels have elevators to all floors, access to reception, pool or bar areas, clear signage, visual alarms, and complete access through the entire building. While the majority of hotels provide special parking areas, these are often uncovered and quite distant from the main hotel entrances, often requiring that steps be negotiated in order to enter or exit buildings.

Many travellers with disabilities have difficulty accessing restaurant establishments within some tourist destination areas. Others encounter problems after making hotel reservations. In some instances, rooms that were promoted as accessible where actually inaccessible to persons with forms of e.g. severe functional mobility limitations (showers with handrails may accommodate some people, but for many wheelchair users bathtubs present a major barrier).

Major barriers for travellers with disabilities involve physical obstacles that limit access to tourism sites and attractions, the very elements that underlie, or enhance a journey. Such attractions may include leisure-based activities (e.g. visiting a theme park or participating in sports events); nature or historical-based activities (e.g. visiting museums or a patrimonial site), and socio-cultural activities (e.g. festivals or exhibitions). In these activities, most of the constraints encountered by tourists with disabilities involve site inaccessibility e.g. beaches are often not equipped to accommodate wheelchair users; poor access to museums, historical monuments or shopping areas restrict persons with functional limitations from participation in these activities.

When starting from scratch, all new hotels and visitor accommodation must comply with the requirements of the Building Regulations. Over and above this, the South Africa Bureau of Standards have devised two codes of practice - S.A.B.S. 0246:1993, and Section SS of the S.A.B.S. 0400:1990 (please note that the SABS 0400 is currently being rewritten as the S.A.N.S. 10400¹). These codes establish the minimum design requirements for access to and circulation in buildings and related facilities, to permit general use by disabled persons. However, these codes do not and cannot purport to include all the specialized requirements that are needed to ensure Universal Accessibility in the Built Environment.

Some providers of accommodation display the 'International Wheelchair Symbol' and it is used widely in many publications and guides. The criteria for the use of the symbol has been undefined to date; however with the development of T.C.G.S.A. guidelines a clear understanding of what one can expect as a traveller will be possible.

¹ I.D.C. is currently contracted to re-write the relevant disability sections of these and of the N.B.R. This work is expected to be completed in November 2006.

Many older buildings, which account for a high proportion of tourist accommodation in South Africa, are difficult to adapt to be completely accessible for visitors with disabilities. Many small, not necessarily structural, improvements can however be made which will benefit all visitors and widen the market for the accommodation operation. To address this problem, T.G.C.S.A. have, in conjunction with I.D.C. drawn up a series of standards and requirements, which, using T.G.C.S.A's grading system, hopes to ensure a wide range of accessible accommodation. The use of such a system is in keeping with International Standards, and the use of such a grading system will allow accommodation vendors to market themselves as accessible.

Would-be customers need to receive reliable information regarding accommodation which is suitable for their needs; the purpose of introducing the grading scheme is to ensure that visitors with ranging forms of impairment can:

1. Obtain reliable and consistent information about accessibility.
2. Have confidence in Accessible Tourism symbols. The standard is intended to apply to all accommodation and restaurants. Establishments, which meet the standard will cater for all.

Where proprietors seek to display and use the Accessible Tourism symbols they will be obliged to ensure that their premises meet the grading criteria. Upon applying to display and use the symbol(s), compliance with these criteria will be verified by the T.G.C.S.A.

Chapter three to follow presents a guideline as to the nuts and bolts of designing and re-fitting structures to improve accessibility.