Braille House

Making Tourism Accessible for Visitors who are Blind or have Low Vision

COMMUNICATION & MARKETING

Know your Potential Patrons: Personal Stories of Travellers / Visitors Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision

Have you ever considered the profile of a tourist or visitor to your destination who is blind or has low vision? Like all guests, each visitor in some ways, is like all others, like some others and like no others!

Venue and destination operators are wise to have an understanding of the clients and potential clients they serve. To assist with this, a number of personal profiles are provided below for consideration. They are provided in ascending order of age.

Tanya

Tanya is a 21 your old student studying linguistics at university (being fluent in English, Spanish and Italian). She has been blind since birth and enjoys eating out and travelling.

As well as family holidays, Tanya enjoys travelling with a support worker, and at times other blind companions of a similar age. Tanya's travel group is similar if she is dining out.

Tanya researches dining out and travel destinations online before she books her café / restaurant experiences and trips. She appreciates destination websites that advise of public transport options, as this is enormously important to her when seeking destinations that are accessible. If visiting a restaurant, Tanya likes to access the facility's menu online if it is accessible, or if not call and ask if the menu can be accessed through a QR code. When staying at a hotel / motel, Tanya says that she would absolutely love it if hotel management could have their Wi-Fi set up guide accessible via an online platform or in Braille.

Santi

Santi is 28 years old, and he is studying electrical engineering. He likes technology, music, food, history, new cultures, meeting new people, traveling and pushing the boundaries, and experiencing new things. Santi has around 2% of vision, which means that he reads braille, his computer and other electronic devices talk to him, and he is always accompanied by his Guide Dog.

When travelling, Santi mixes it up. He travels by himself, with his partner, family, or with friends, dependent on the situation. For work Santi travels mainly by himself and for leisure he travels with his partner, family, or friends. Santi enjoys all forms of travel and loves experiencing new things; everything from food trips, adventure trips, work trips and everything in between.

For domestic trips, planning is mainly around the location of Santi's accommodation in relation to public transport, his meetings, or the places he wants to visit. In addition, checking the local weather to make sure he has the appropriate gear for his Guide Dog (e.g. boots for the hot concrete, or jumper for really cold places) is important. Santi also looks for places that have a place for him to take his Guide Dog to the bathroom. It can be something as small as a 1 by 1 patch of dirt, but it is useful when

it is close to where he is staying. Internationally, the same applies, plus there is the paperwork and vet locations to consider, for his Guide Dog to be able to travel into and out from Australia.
Prior to travelling, Santi always calls his accommodation facility and mentions that he is travelling with his Guide Dog, asking that they make a written note of this in the booking. This helps both Santi and his Guide Dog, as well as the hotel and in case there are any issues. Santi likes when the accommodation has lifts that announce the floor they stop at. He appreciates the ability to control room features with physical buttons rather than touch displays. Santi wishes that any documents he needs to sign at a hotel, or similar, were available in advance for him to review. It is appreciated when a restaurant has a digital menu that is not a PDF, so it is accessible for him to read.

Santi believes that travelling should be less time consuming. From finding where the accessible parking bays are in a city when travelling with family, to finding locations for him to work while he waits for his next meeting, to moving around in a new public transport system, that is the ultimate dream.

Anna

Anna is in her thirties and is a professional within the public sector. Anna has been blind since birth.

In the past, Anna has often travelled with friends, however these days she is seeking to travel more independently, and perhaps at times go solo.

When looking to see if a venue or destination is accessible for her, Anna says that she is a bit old school. She finds it easier, if possible, to ring up the destination and ask questions about the venue. Alternatively, if accessing information via the web or a particular destination's website, Anna looks prominently for contact information, for example a Chat function or a Contact Request Form. Anna wants to know, for example, if information is available in Braille, and if the destination has Way Finding. Potentially she wants to get around independently. Anna also likes to know if she can visit the destination (for example an accommodation facility) prior to booking / before she commitments. Typically, she searches for a venue and then looks for accessibility.

Anna says that she would particularly find it helpful if venues publicised that they are open to accessibility inquiries and were willing to have the discussion about how accessible their facilities are for her.

Ben

Ben is 45 years old and is currently working two jobs, one as a researcher at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the other for an international development organisation that runs disability advocacy programs in the Pacific region on behalf of the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT.) Ben also engages in direct consulting for DFAT on their overseas aid program. He is an active member of Blind Citizens Australia, the World Blind Union and sits on several consultative committees and boards including Australian Volunteers International and the Canberra Business Chamber.

Ben is totally blind and has been since he was born. He is a Braille reader and writer and is also familiar with mainstream and vision specific assistive technology (which he often shares with and teaches to people with vision impairment internationally). Ben does not have a guide dog at this time, owing to a sometimes-hectic international travel schedule where guide dogs are generally not allowed to come along.

Of interest to Ben is disability advocacy, domestic and international travel, experiencing diverse cultures, swimming, riding on amusement rides and roller coasters, listening to music, reading and general socialising.

When travelling for work purposes, Ben generally travels solo. His travel involves flying to various locales where disability awareness is not as advanced as in countries like Australia. He utilises relatively budget accommodation options (dependent on what has been booked by his workplace), local restaurants and sometimes tourist attractions where time permits.

Being totally blind and not necessarily in locations that lend themselves to easy navigation, challenges are numerous for Ben, but being able to cope with situations as they arise and respect for local people who can be very helpful is the key to having an enjoyable experience. Potentially, challenges begin on arrival at the origin airport; while airlines are generally trained to work with travellers with disability, understaffing often means one could encounter staff who have not received any training at all. Ben says that usually, a quick explanation and friendly word gets things moving in the right direction and adequate help is given to enable a smooth moving forward of the experience. As the trip goes on, simply being ready to expect the unexpected, having a sense of humour and giving yourself plenty of time all make for an overall positive experience is helpful to Ben. Generally, he believes, people understand you, that you may require restaurant menus to be read, need orientation from the lobby to the hotel room and assistance to book taxis. Again, for Ben a quick explanation generally does the job if something is less obvious.

Ben has been fortunate to experience travel to various challenging destinations and while travelling with a companion would enable Ben and his buddy to share experiences, it is definitely possible for someone who is blind to travel alone, whether by necessity or by choice.

While Ben's work generally governs where he travels to, what hotel he stays in and its location, once he is aware of where he travelling to, he undertakes some online research. This includes on the accommodation, reading the in-house restaurant menu if available, checking out local tourist attractions, and the in-hotel facilities. This means that Ben is as aware as possible prior to his arrival. Also, when booking airline tickets, Ben always asks his work to inform the airline that he is a vision impaired solo traveller, to minimise potential issues at the airport.

As mentioned, Ben does try to research relevant information before he arrives, and he believes that this does help a lot and even starts conversations with hotel staff who are usually impressed that he knows so much about the place and how prepared he is; this generally works in restaurants too. Hotel staff who are willing to listen and who are helpful from the beginning are of course very important to a good experience moving forward. Ben says that he honestly doesn't know whether they are aware of his vision impairment prior to arrival - probably not but his experiences have just about always been fantastic. As for events, this can be a little harder, depending on who may be available to assist; He generally attend events with work colleagues, commonly from the local area and who have local insights to share.

Wendy

Wendy works part-time as a transcriber and production assistant. When she was about 30 her low vision deteriorated, resulting in the loss of all usable vision and now she is totally blind. Wendy enjoys getting out and about.

Often Wendy joins her friends or is accompanied by a support worker for visits to the likes of museums, art galleries, live performances, coffee shops and restaurants. Travel is important to Wendy, and she has visited quite a few destinations in Queensland.

For Wendy, when staying at accommodation venues, it is more about what happens when she arrives. Her focus is on getting in her room and understanding the set up (for example the emergency evacuation plan). Ideally, when Wendy arrives at her room, she would like someone from the hotel / motel be physically in the room to describe it to her. Super helpful is having explained how to use the remote controls for tv and air conditioning, where the power points are and where various things are found in the bathroom. Wendy really appreciates this kind of orientation to the room. Beyond her room, Wendy finds it super helpful if she knows that the Concierge or other staff members have any training in meeting and guiding a person who is blind.

If accommodation facilities are looking to go that little bit extra, Wendy says that it would be valuable to know if airport transfers are available, and for this to be advised at the time of inquiry or booking. Further, is there the possibility of someone meeting her on arrival from her transport (for example bus or train station or airport)? Wendy also would appreciate a list of local support workers to access. If the accommodation venue has information available on local hospitality facilities, tourist destinations and guided tours, Wendy would welcome inclusive access to this information (for example in Braille, large print and / or audio). She also values knowing which of these opportunities are accessible for those who are blind or have low vision.