

ECUADOR NEWS - TOURISM

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Build it, they will come

Part two in a three-part series on accessible tourism in Ecuador



COURTESY OF FENEDIF



Learn more about accessibility and tourism...

LOCALLY:
FEDERACIONES NACIONALES DE Y PARA LA DISCAPACIDAD (FENEDIF),
www.discapacidadesecuador.org
CONSEJO NACIONAL DE DISCAPACIDADES (CONADIS),
www.conadis.gob.ec

INTERNATIONALLY:
SOCIETY FOR ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY (SAHT),
www.saht.com
EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR ACCESSIBLE TOURISM (ENAT),
www.accessibletourism.org

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TOURISM FOR ALL

When the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences (AAHS) awarded its coveted, Star Diamond Award to Yankee Stadium last year, in recognition of their high level of service, Muhammad Ali, the former boxing champion who battles Parkinson's disease, was on hand to assist in the presentation.

Interestingly, when considering hotels and restaurants for the prestigious Star Diamond plaque, AAHS examines many facets of their operations, but accessibility for disabled persons, like Ali, is absent from the evaluation criteria published on their website.

Karen Dixon, International General Manager of the Star Diamond Program, says that accessibility is considered, though, when evaluating award recipients. She says "it is already something that has been thought through," by their award winners.

However, a recent visit to several Star Diamond award-winning locations in Ecuador showed that their architectural design prohibited wheelchair access.

The luxury tourism business, by nature, is exclusive. Even if the world's top luxury destinations provide accessibility, most do not publicize it, suggesting that service to persons with disabilities is viewed as a niche market and not part of the broader picture of tourism. The tourism landscape in Ecuador would seem to be no different.

Ecuador has luxury destinations (eight hotels and restaurants have been recognized with a Star Diamond Award). Ecuador also has players in the accessible tourism market, most notably, Ecuador For All, a tour agency run by brothers Juan and Pablo Marañon, which specializes in tours for disabled travelers.

The Marañon brothers are helping to define the future of tourism by providing services to a segment that has been overlooked throughout the region.

Nobody in Ecuador does what they have been doing for years - bringing groups of disabled travelers to Ecuador, a country replete with obstacles which exaggerate a person's disability. Their efforts are influencing tourism at the national level.

Sandra Esparza, Director of the National Federation of and for Disabled Persons (FENEDIF, for its Spanish acronym) says, "I learn from the Marañon boys, they are for me an example."

FENEDIF published the first, rudimentary, accessible tourism guide for Quito in 2009 and has a national guide scheduled for publication in September.

In the meantime, Esparza has been visiting the capital city of each province to offer accessibility workshops for hotels, restaurants, and agencies. Unfortunately, she encounters resistance from many operators uninterested in accessibility. "It's shameful to say, but many say the image of the hotel is why they don't receive

ACCESSIBLE BEACH Las Palmas Beach in Esmeraldas provides accessibility, including an amphibious wheelchair.

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them," referring to persons with disabilities.

Shameful as it may be it is an attitude that persists in the industry. Even Dixon admitted, "There are people who are not handicapped who do not necessarily want to be in a hotel with other guests who are disabled. This is a reality."

So how do you reconcile that reality with the needs of disabled travelers? Learn from Esparza. During her visits and workshops she says, "I ask hotel owners to sit in a wheelchair, I cover their eyes, or cover their ears, or I give them a cane. Then I say we're going to move around the hotel." She wants the people who can make the decisions to empathize with disabled persons and understand their constant daily challenges.

Esparza says her method has worked to the point that FENEDIF has signed an agreement to enlist support from the Ecuadorian Hotel Association. Though she says no hotel is yet 100% accessible she assures many are working on it.

CART BEFORE THE HORSE

But even if all the hotels in Ecuador were fully accessible, nobody would travel to Ecuador to merely stay indoors. Esparza insists, "This project cannot be isolated. If I have an accessible hotel, I need to have an accessible city." How does that happen?

In developed countries, accessibility has made great strides because of laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States and the Disability and Equality Act in Great Britain, which paved the way for disabled persons to enjoy the same rights as other persons. Efforts are further strengthened by organizations that promote accessible travel such as the U.S. based Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality (SATH) and the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT).

Historically, in Ecuador, accessibility has not been a priority, but since day one of the Rafael Correa administration, it has received a visibility previously unknown, thanks in no small measure to Vice President, Lenin Moreno, himself confined to a wheelchair.

Early in the Correa government

Ecuador signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons, incorporated accessibility into their new constitution, and ratified accessibility norms. The government then began the arduous process of adapting public spaces to be wheelchair accessible through a pilot program executed in most of the 224 cantons, or local governments, of Ecuador.

Initial efforts to create accessibility, though, were frustrated by lax oversight and a lack of sensitivity by the able-bodied project managers required to implement change. Cristina Gutierrez, technical architect for the National Council on Disabilities (CONADIS) says that half of all accessibility projects in the first year of the pilot program were implemented so poorly that they had to be redone.

She also says local project directors initially denied the existence of disabled persons in their communities. But once projects were completed, the communities changed their attitude when disabled persons "appeared" and began to use the new urban spaces and facilities.

THE HOME FRONT

One can find a number of accessible tourism initiatives in the public and private sector of Ecuador.

Las Palmas beach, in Esmeraldas, is the first beach to become accessible for physically disabled persons. A boardwalk connects the street to a shaded shelter in the middle of the sand. From there, disabled persons can transfer to an amphibious wheelchair, which allows them to enter the ocean.

The Ecuadorean train and railway system (FEEP) established "Conciencia Social Sobre Rieles" (Social Conscience on Rails) which aims to give more than 9,000 participants, half of them disabled, the opportunity to experience a train ride. FEEP assures that the stations are accessible and personnel receive continuing education in servicing persons with disabilities.

And in the private sector, Hacienda Caballo Campana, an international equestrian destination, has been providing "hipoterapia," or equestrian therapy, for years to persons with disabilities such as autism, Down Syndrome, and paralysis. Owner Lina Torres says the therapy is well-recognized because it "connects the emotions of one person with that of the horse."

What organizations like Ecuador For All, FENEDIF, Caballo Campana, and the government of Ecuador have learned is that if they create accessibility, visitors will come.

The CONADIS office in Quito has a sign posted that reads, "universal design," a concept that considers the capacities of all persons in creating architectural spaces. A person's disability is, after all, proportional to the environment in which he/she operates. Creating programs and urban spaces where people with different levels of functioning can interact restores dignity and creates independent travelers. In the words of Margaret Morrison, a recent disabled traveler from Britain, "We don't need help, we just need accessibility."

Tourism Guide of Ecuador

<p>COAST</p> <p>HOTEL PALMAZUL (San Clemente) Av. Quito via Punta Bikini 500mts, 05-261-5018 / 098-247454 info@palmazulhotel.com www.palmazulhotel.com</p>	<p>SIERRA</p> <p>Boutique Hotel Mansion Alcazar (Cuenca) Bolívar 12-55 y Tarqui Tel: 07-282-3889 www.mansionalcazar.com info@mansionalcazar.com</p>	<p>HOTEL CAFÉ CULTURA (Quito) Robles & Reina Victoria (corner) 02-222-4271 / 02-250-4078 www.cafecultura.com info@cafecultura.com</p>	<p>HACIENDA ABRASPUNGO (Riobamba) Km 3.5 via Riobamba - Guano 03-236-4274 / 03-236-4275 www.haciendaabraspungo.com info@haciendaabraspungo.com</p>	<p>GALAPAGOS</p> <p>HOTEL SOLYMAR (Santa Cruz Island) 05-252-4418/4415 www.hotelsolymar.com.ec info@hotelsolymar.com.ec</p>
<p>AMAZON</p> <p>CASA CEIBO (Bahía de Caráquez) Km. 5, Ave. Sixto Durán Ballén (05) 239-9399 / (02) 224-2913 www.casaceibo.com info@casaceibo.com</p>	<p>EL SEPTIMO PARAISO (Mindo) 2Km from the "Y" towards Mindo 02-289-3160 / 093-684-420 www.septimoparaiso.com info@septimoparaiso.com</p>	<p>HACIENDA UMBRIA (Machachi) Panamerican Hwy South 8km 094-666-725 / 02-603-4151 www.haciendaumbria.com info@haciendaumbria.com</p>	<p>HACIENDA MANTELES (Patate-Baños) 02-223-3484 / 09-461-4275 www.haciendamanteles.com info@haciendamanteles.com</p>	<p>TOUR OPERATORS</p> <p>Exclusive Hotels & Haciendas Ecuador</p> <p>EXCLUSIVE HOTELS & HACIENDAS ECUADOR Av. 12 de Octubre, Edf Lincon, Ofc 202 / 02-254-4719 www.ehhec.com info@ehhec.com</p>
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Next Week Part Three:

Ecuador For All & Huasquila Lodge, the leaders in accessible tourism in Ecuador