

Accessible Tourism in Practice CED

Accessibility Ecosystem: An SME-NGO Collaboration Model

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This session introduces accessible tourism in practice through the CED Accessibility Ecosystem an innovative SME-NGO collaboration model from Romania. Cristina Căluianu and Irina Schvab (Accessible Romania by Sano Touring) explore the diversity of disability types and their practical implications for tourism design, then present five complementary tools: Audara (digital accessibility auditing), ArtEcho (multisensory cultural interpretation), Feel the City (tactile exhibitions), Accesibilitate 360 (sheltered employment), and Romania-Accesibila.ro (national resource hub). One message to retain: accessibility, co-created with persons with disabilities, is a concrete driver of quality, inclusion, and market growth.

Presentation script (introduction, objectives...conclusion)

Cristina Căluianu is founder and CEO of Accessible Romania by Sano Touring, co-founder and board member of CED Romania Association (NGO), National Expert for Romania at the European Commission's AccessibleEU initiative, and evaluator for the European Capital of Smart Tourism competition.

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2. Disability as Human Diversity

The foundational premise of this session: **disability is diversity**. Visitors come in all shapes, needs, and abilities. Designing only for the "average" tourist means excluding millions of potential travellers. The right mindset shift is: design for diversity, not for a fictional norm. Accessibility must cover four dimensions — **physical, sensory, informational, and experiential** — and must be consistent across the entire journey. As the session puts it: *people can handle imperfections, not surprises*. One unexpected obstacle — a broken lift, a missing ramp, a confusing sign — can stop an entire trip. Barriers come from poor design, not from the visitors themselves.

3. Not All Disabilities Are Visible

A critical reminder: many access needs are invisible. Relying on assumptions ("they don't look disabled") is both inaccurate and harmful. Clear, honest, and reliable accessibility information builds trust and enables people to plan with confidence. The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower scheme is a well-known example of how invisible conditions can be acknowledged without assumptions.

Key message: Visibility doesn't determine validity.

4. Disability Types — What Each Requires

Physical/Mobility Disabilities Main barriers: steps, slopes, narrow spaces, unpredictable surfaces. Solutions: continuous step-free routes, accessible toilets and rest areas, clear and consistent surface conditions.

If a route isn't continuous, it isn't accessible.

Visual Disabilities Need non-visual information: tactile guidance, audio descriptions, clear colour contrasts, predictable layouts. Good descriptions are not a luxury — they open culture to people who cannot see it.

Information that can be touched or heard opens culture.

Hearing Disabilities Need visual communication: clear signage, subtitles, sign language interpretation, written alternatives to any audio information. If sound carries meaning, it must also be available visually.

If sound carries meaning, offer it visually.

Cognitive/Intellectual Disabilities Need simple, structured, easy-to-read information. Pictograms, reduced sensory overwhelm, and logical layout significantly improve comprehension and comfort.

Clear is kind.

Ageing and Temporary Disabilities Pregnancy, injury, or age-related sensory and mobility changes affect millions of people at some point in their lives. Universal design — built to serve the full range of human diversity — benefits everyone, not just people with permanent disabilities.

Accessible tourism is universal tourism.

5. The Tourism Chain

Accessibility must be guaranteed at every stage of the tourism chain, not just at a single point of contact. The ADAC Tourism Chain model (2003) identifies the full sequence: Organisation of the trip → Reminder & Confirmation → Arrival & Moving Around → Accommodation & Lodging → Food & Beverage → Activities & Sports → Services on Location → Entertainment & Culture → Excursions & Shopping → Travel & Departure. If accessibility fails at any one of these links, the whole experience breaks down.

Key message: Consistency is everything.

6. Accessible Romania by Sano Touring

Operational since 2015 and an ENAT member since 2016, Accessible Romania by Sano Touring is a specialised accessible tour operator offering: accessible travel programmes across Romania, accessible transportation, and affiliation with national, European and international accessible tourism networks. It is the commercial SME at the heart of the CED ecosystem.

7. The CED Accessibility Ecosystem

CED Romania (Centre of Excellence through Diversity) is the NGO pillar of the model. Together with Accessible Romania, it has built a complementary ecosystem of tools and initiatives that translate accessibility from principle into practice. Three defining characteristics of the ecosystem:

- Tools co-created **with** persons with disabilities
- Solutions delivered by an **inclusive employment structure**
- **Cross-sector** accessibility expertise spanning tourism, culture, digital, and built environments

The ecosystem includes five interconnected initiatives:

7a. AUDARA — Digital Accessibility Audit Tool

AUDARA (AUDit Accesibilitate România) is a digital tool for assessing the accessibility of built environments — hotels, restaurants, cultural venues — developed by CED Romania.

How it works:

- On-site inspection and physical measurements
- Staff interviews and documentation review
- Photo-based evidence collection
- Data input into the application
- Automated, structured accessibility report

What it evaluates: Over 350 accessibility parameters, based on legislation and best practices, covering four disability categories (mobility, visual, hearing, cognitive) plus subcategories (crutches, pushchair/stroller, families with children). Each criterion is evaluated on two axes: appropriate/inappropriate, and positive impact / negative impact / not applicable.

Real-world example: The Novotel Bucharest City Centre report demonstrates the level of detail — each space (lobby, bar, rooms) is assessed parameter by parameter, generating a comprehensive report that identifies what works, what doesn't, and what requires investment.

Value for tourism SMEs: Identifies concrete improvement actions, helps prioritise investments, enhances service quality, creates competitive advantage, and opens access to new market segments.

Value for visitors: Provides reliable, standardised accessibility information to support better travel planning decisions and reduce uncertainty.

Broader impact: Audara feeds into a growing national accessibility database, supports transparency, and drives continuous improvement across the sector. 16% of the global population lives with a disability (WHO), the ageing population is growing, and the tourism sector currently lacks reliable accessibility data — Audara directly addresses this gap.

7b. ArtEcho — Multisensory Cultural Interpretation

ArtEcho is a digital platform providing multisensory interpretation of cultural heritage — paintings, sculptures, archaeological objects, architectural heritage, citadels, and heritage routes. It works on visitors' own smartphones with no additional hardware required. Content formats available: text, audio, easy-to-read, and sign language. It is flexible enough for both permanent and temporary exhibitions, and can be deployed in museums, heritage sites, and along cultural itineraries.

7c. Feel the City — Tactile Exhibition Concept

A pilot concept developed with the blind and low-vision community, Feel the City creates tactile 3D models and boards of urban heritage. Co-designed with the community it serves, it produces contemporary tactile artwork that is engaging for all visitors — with and without disabilities, domestic and international alike.

7d. Accesibilitate 360 — Sheltered Employment Unit

A social economy structure that creates skilled, meaningful jobs for persons with disabilities. Staff deliver the ecosystem's services: running Audara audits, deploying ArtEcho tools, producing Feel the City installations, providing digital accessibility services and training, and 3D printing.

This model closes the loop: accessibility solutions are built and delivered **by** the people they are designed to serve.

7e. Romania-Accesibila.ro — National Accessibility Resource Hub

An online platform connecting knowledge and practice around accessibility in Romania. It brings together good practices, guidelines and tools, training resources, accessible experiences, inclusive events, and a directory of accessibility-related service providers.

8. Accessible and Sustainable Tourism

Accessibility and sustainability are not separate agendas — they reinforce each other. Awareness transforms service quality; co-creation makes solutions real and lasting. Initiatives such as **#Edu4Access** and the EU-funded **WeNaTour** project are actively advancing accessibility in tourism education across Europe, with Accessible Romania as a key partner.

CED Romania has also led major national awareness efforts, including the "**A Family of Millions**" campaign (2025) and a national study on social attitudes and barriers affecting persons with disabilities (2024), conducted in partnership with Accenture and AccessibleEU.

Key message: Learn. Include. Sustain.