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Road to nowhere



Information is the key to planning a dream holiday. But many travel websites are still failing disabled travellers, says accessibility expert Julie Howell

In *The Art of Travel*, popular philosopher Alain De Botton suggests that if you're really looking forward to a holiday it might actually be better to stay at home! He famously took a long-desired cruise only to stay aboard ship when it reached the destination for fear that the country he'd so longed to visit would disappoint him. De Botton believes that it's sometimes better to dream than to do!

At least he has the choice. For many disabled people, dreams of a romantic tour of the capital cities of Scandinavia, a safari tour of an African reserve or extreme sports in a remote part of Australia never progress beyond daydreams because every aspect of planning an exciting or leisurely holiday is hampered by lack of access to information.

Travel agents and tour operators have for years provided essential travel and holiday information through their websites. It's a quicker, cheaper way of communicating with customers en masse. In recent times they've moved things up a gear. Having realised that the holiday experience starts in the mind you can now find an incredible amount of information on the web to help you plan your dream holiday a long time in advance of booking it. A holiday is probably the most expensive gift you buy yourself each year. You want to know, well in advance of the trip, that every aspect will be accessible, effortless and enjoyable. After all, holidays are supposed to provide a break from the stresses of everyday life.

So you would expect that travel websites would be a huge boon for the disabled traveller.

I'm director of accessibility at web design agency Fortune Cookie. My colleague, Fortune Cookie accessibility specialist Rune Leth Andersen, and I decided to research the accessibility of eight of the most popular travel websites. What we found was very disappointing.

We looked at:

- Hilton (www.hilton.co.uk)
- Malmaison (www.malmaison.com)
- Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com)
- STA Travel (www.statravel.co.uk)
- Travel Supermarket (www.travelsupermarket.com)
- Expedia (www.expedia.co.uk)
- Cruise Critic (www.cruisecritic.com)
- Trip Advisor (www.tripadvisor.co.uk)

Basic design errors made most of the sites difficult to use if you have impairments such as blindness or partial sight. Many contained rich, inspirational imagery that lacked any text description, leaving blind travellers with only bland, uninspiring information. Some sites have inaccessible booking processes, so even if you manage to choose a holiday your efforts to make a booking would be frustrated.

On some sites, text sizes and screen colours are fixed. This needlessly excludes colour-blind people from reading the screen.

The fact that travel companies have had a legal duty to make their sites accessible since 1999 seems to have had little impact. So what can we do to encourage travel agents and tour operators to do better? Well, that's simple. Tell them about the problem. Write to them. Email them (if you can find out a way to do that on an inaccessible site). Tell them about Abilitynet, the disability technology charity that has a website packed with useful information about accessible web design (www.abilitynet.org.uk).

Everyone deserve a stress-free holiday at least once a year. The web should make it even easier to make your dream a reality. If it doesn't, complain!

• Julie Howell is director of accessibility at Fortune Cookie. Visit www.fortunecookie.co.uk or email julie.howell@fortunecookie.co.uk for more information

