



So...podcast – Episode 5

Kerry Williams – Accessible Accommodation

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John: Greetings listeners and transcription readers. I'm John McKenna and you're listening to 'So...' podcast. Today's topic is all about – wait for it – travelling. But let me talk a bit further, travelling as a person with a physical disability. My guest is Kerry Williams. G'day Kerry.

Kerry: Hello.

John: Thanks for coming on board.

Kerry: Thank you for having me.

John: That's a bit of a travel saying isn't it, come on board?

Kerry: Yes, exactly.

John: Okay. Kerry, you've been invited onto the 'So...' podcast show because you've got a great story to tell around what started you to create an organisation, a business called Accessible Accommodation. I'll throw it to you right now, tell us why.

Kerry: Yeah. My mum has MS and we were always organising holidays for our family and we had just too many disappointments when we would get to an accommodation that it wasn't, in fact, accessible or what a person without a disability's perception of the place that they have as being what is accessible and what isn't. So we just had too many disappointments and we figured, you know what, there's got to be a better way to do this. So we built a holiday house that was fully compliant for disability and over five years, have learnt that, you know what, everyone wants to travel, especially Australians, and wants to travel all over Australia, not just in our holiday house. So we launched about 10 months ago and we've got about 70 odd properties so far around Australia.

John: So we're talking about a website, so let's tell listeners the name of the website right now.





Kerry: Yeah. It's accessibleaccommodation.com.au.

John: Yep. And I want to go back a step because you were talking about disappointment. That word doesn't fit with the word holiday. Would you agree?

Kerry: Yes, so true, so true.

John: Holidays are to be fun, ...

Kerry: Yes.

John: ... relaxing, chilling, ...

Kerry: Yep.

John: ... having a good time, being with friends. So disappointments are things like, of course, your airline ticket gets cancelled or whatever.

Kerry: Mm hmm.

John: But we're talking about another type of disappointment, aren't we?

Kerry: Yes.

John: Let's unpack that a bit more.

Kerry: Yeah, absolutely. So when you, when someone who doesn't have a disability gets to a holiday accommodation, it might be a hotel or a resort or a holiday house, the chances are what they see on the photos is what they get. People with disabilities, it's a very different kettle of fish because every person who has a disability has a unique need and everyone is very different, and what might suit one person with a disability may not suit the other. And so our focus is on information and that's why there are over 50 questions to, the most pressing answers for people with physical disabilities. And we also have videos and we have a lot of photographs. And our most photographed and most shared pictures are always the bathrooms because logically, if someone can get in and out of the shower, on and off the loo, in and out of the bed, then they're going to have a good holiday.

John: Sure.





Kerry: And that's their primary concern.

John: When you talk about 50 questions, are these questions for the person who's about to go travelling or the operator or both?

Kerry: Well we use that to quiz the operator, to qualify them. It's quite a long process for us to determine, one, is it in fact accessible and two, what degree of accessibility, going back to everyone's different. So it's really focusing on informing, and we're the conduit between the accommodation provider and the person wanting to travel. And so our goal is by the time they've read a listing and they've seen the photos and the videos and all our questions, that they're at a point where they can be confident that when they arrive at that destination, that they are going to be able to do exactly that, in and out of the shower, on and off the loo, in and out of the bed, glide through, is it a rolling shower? All those pressing questions that make or break a holiday.

John: I'm sure some people may know that I'm also a wheelchair user myself and I will add to this and say that so many personal experiences I've had where an operator has said, well actually, we've had someone in a wheelchair yesterday and they had no problems whatsoever. I'm an electrical-chair user, ...

Kerry: Yeah.

John: ... so as you said, everyone's got different abilities.

Kerry: Yes.

John: So it is about making that phone call. This is what's worked for me, is to make the phone call, if you can, to the operator directly and spell it out exactly, is there any step at all in that shower? Can I roll or wheel? You know, because once again, I just shake my head, they say, oh, we've only got a three-inch step, easy to get your wheelchair over.

Kerry: Yeah.

John: No it's not.

Kerry: Yes. Yep.





John: Yeah.

Kerry: I think it's only once you either are a carer or a person with a disability, do you really appreciate and understand the unique needs that require, that go into organising holiday accommodation, or any accommodation for that matter. And so that's, yeah, that's why we went to so much detail, and it also is a very good way for us to qualify the property owner, because their perception of disability and what is accessible is very different to everyone else's perception. Everyone has different views on what they deem accessible.

John: Let's talk about the attitudes of operators. So, first of all, an operator is someone that has accommodation, as in a flat or a holiday house. Any other types of, caravan parks, do you, ...

Kerry: Yes, caravan parks, house boats.

John: House boats.

Kerry: We've got quite a few really amazing house boats. Resorts, hotels, farm stays. Pretty much anywhere where you can holiday, we cover those areas. And, yes, it's been a very interesting learning experience over the last 10 or 11 months, since we've launched, on the attitude of accommodation providers.

John: Positive or negative?

Kerry: Nearly all positive. I'd say about 99% positive.

John: Yeah.

Kerry: And I think that's what surprised me the most. One, the love the fact that, you know how you mentioned you call up and you need to know specifics, well, so does every other person with a disability. So if you can imagine the receptionist are having to go upstairs, go and measure the width of the door, and they do that multiple times. Well, we make it easier because we've already, we've covered every single possible question that they could possibly ask, and that you could possibly ask. So that's one benefit that they love.

Again, feedback over the last 10 months, the two biggest points that we've noticed with accommodation providers feedback is that they are staying longer, people with disabilities





stay longer. And it's only logical because the amount of planning and logistics that goes into, ...

John: Exactly.

Kerry: ... getting in a car, even hiring a car, all the equipment etcetera. So once people with disabilities are there, they tend to want to stay longer.

John: Exactly.

Kerry: And, ...

John: I think it's a really important point you raise.

Kerry: Yeah. Yeah.

John: And they bring their family too, don't they?

Kerry: Absolutely. So, yes. So you might travel with a carer or two carers, those carers need somewhere to sleep. And so multiple people are generally booking when someone with a disability stays. So again, that's a financial benefit. And then the other thing that surprised, probably one of the most surprising things is how many hotels, you know, if their occupancy rate is about 30 or 40%, you know, that's pretty good. But when it comes to the rooms for disabilities, the disabled designated rooms, they're often left vacant and they're not generating an income.

So I started out, going back to what you said about being surprised, I started out trying to convince them of the benefits, financially. What surprised me is how, not just financially did they approach it, they approached it from a, well, let's do it, why not.

John: Sure.

Kerry: So they're very, very, they've been very, very enthusiastic and often it comes from, if someone has or knows a cousin or an uncle with a disability, because that level of understanding is stronger as well. Yeah, it has been a big surprise.

John: I think it's, a lot of it comes back, tell me if I'm right or wrong, but around the language we're using, so we're using the 'D' word a lot right now, ...





Kerry: Yeah.

John: ... but as you know, there are many people who travel who have had a hip replacement or stroke, they still want to travel. And as soon as you say the word disability to any business owner, they say, no, sorry, can't help.

Kerry: Yes.

John: But we're just talking about a person who has different physical needs, ...

Kerry: Yes.

John: ... whether it be short statured, tall, short, fat, skinny, it all fits into that, doesn't it?

Kerry: Nailed it, yep.

John: And the aged market, of course, all seniors.

Kerry: Correct. And going to, I mean the reason why we started this, going to my mum, when she first got diagnosed with MS, she did not want to consider herself disabled, purely because she's such an active person, you could never stop her, she was always moving. So that perception of disability, I pretty much try and wipe that and I just look at it as mobility challenges because some people's mobility challenges might be, they can manage one step but they can't do other things, and others simply have to have it all completely level. Yeah.

John: So, for those operators that way, hmm, yes, well I do get the odd enquiry about doing something but the cost is involved, so much money I need to spend. We were talking before the interview that there's actually a magazine who spoke about the market share on how the, ...

Kerry: Yes.

John: What's the name of the magazine?

Kerry: So Forbes magazine, it's sort of similar to TIME magazine but it's more of a, focusing on financials and business, and they published an article in the middle of last year that stated that the disability market globally is equal to that of the total Chinese tourist





market. So if we think about how many millions and millions of dollars Australian government, tourism operators, spend trying to attract the Chinese market, well, sitting in their backyard is an audience of people who want to travel and are, they stay longer, they spend more because they stay longer. And the other thing is that they're risk adverse. So if you've had a great experience, there's a higher probability that you're going to want to go back to that place, because you know it, you don't have to go through the risk.

So, this market is massive and tourism operators are cottoning on to this. Yeah, it's, yeah, it's really exciting.

John: I'll once again share my own experience as I've travelled a bit where I've got to a beach town or a town and you'll get the retailers shops to say, oh, you must be staying at this place because every time we see people with disabilities, that's where they stay. And we forget about the ripple effect on how positive it is, the people with disability are taken out of their normal location, placed on the other side of the world or another part of Australia, ...

Kerry: Yes.

John: ... and are seen and get to experience the overall community, love that.

Kerry: Yes, definitely. Like with any tourism market, they're reliant on people, their discretionary spending, apart from just accommodation, they're going to want to go to a restaurant so if there's a ramp at the restaurant nearby, that's another thing we do with the website is we provide links to all the accessible areas that they can go to whilst they're staying. So our goal is to try and promote those, you know, there might be a long boardwalk of five kilometres along the beach or it might be a really great restaurant that has full disabled access, those are the things that we also try and promote. So basically, by the time they've booked the place, they also know exactly where they're going to go and what they're going to do.

John: So Kerry, a part of your website, which sounds extremely resourceful, some basic tips for a son or daughter, husband or wife, or even the person with the disability themselves, what are they looking out for? And I know it depends, are you a wheelchair user, are you blind, do you have other challenges, ...

Kerry: Yeah.





John: ... but are there any common things that you think it's your right to ask?

Kerry: Okay. So some tips would be, don't be afraid to ask questions, and be specific on the type of question you're asking. So if you say, look, is it step free access, be specific and walk them through. Because not only are you now receiving correct and accurate information, but you're also educating that accommodation provider so they have a better understanding of what a person with a mobility challenge has.

John: I like when you say 'walk through' because quite often tourism operators have pictures of their bedroom, bathroom, but they're not showing the stuff that people with disabilities need to see.

Kerry: Yes.

John: Can I access the mirror in the bathroom?

Kerry: Correct.

John: Is there a step? Show me the shower.

Kerry: Yes.

John: It's all about that shower and the toilet.

Kerry: It is, it is. And nearly all our photographs of the bathrooms are usually the grabbing the iPhone and taking a photo because they don't, when they have professional shots done, they don't actually think about the fact that they need to have lots of bathroom shots. And I know, the way I explain to our accommodation providers, if I post a photograph on Instagram of an accessible bathroom, I get four times as much reach as I do a beautiful sunset along Margaret River.

John: I love that.

Kerry: Because, you know, getting on and off the dunny and in and out of the shower, that's critical, ...

John: That's right.





Kerry: ... and so that's the first thing people with mobility challenges look for.

John: That's right, it's all about the toilet.

Kerry: Yes.

John: We need that toilet.

Kerry: Yes.

John: It's not legal to go and poo on the beach, is it?

Kerry: Yep. They don't give a rats about the beautiful views. The first thing they do is, can I feel comfortable in this environment and can I do what everyone else should be able to do in this environment.

John: And people have options if they don't want to necessarily take their shower chair and all their own gear?

Kerry: Yeah. So going back to what you said on tips, we also, at the end of, with one of the 50 odd frequently asked questions, one of the key ones that people don't realise is how easy it is to hire equipment in a destination that you go to. And, so, we always put the address and contact details. But as a general tip, forget about accessible accommodation for a moment, and that is, you'd be surprised at the fact that there are equipment hire places very close to wherever you're staying, and they deliver. And you just say, okay, this is what I need. They then ring the tourism operator, so the hotel and say, look, I'm dropping around between 11 and 12, here's my equipment, and off they go. After your stay, they pick it up. So you don't have to go and pack, you know, not only a large vehicle but also a trailer with all your equipment, you can just simply hire it, so that's another tip.

John: Can I ask a question, sorry to interrupt.

Kerry: Yeah.

John: Do you think there's a bit of a fear with operators to say, well, we welcome anybody with a disability, physical disability that's going to be able to be independent. We also acknowledge we're not fully compliant. So is there the element of fear there where we





think our bed's a bit low but we have bed blocks that can raise the bed higher. Are you hearing much of that from operators?

Kerry: Yeah. Actually, you raise a really good point. What the government deem compliant is not necessarily, ...

John: As in the government in Australia?

Kerry: Yes. So, whether it's the US or Australia, there are rules and requirements about how high the grab rails are, what sort of grab rails, or the heights of toilets and all that, those are all important but they don't make up a comfortable stay. It's the other bits of information that make the comfortable stay. Does that make sense?

John: It is does indeed.

Kerry: Yeah.

John: Yeah, that's good. Well, Kerry, I hope that we're going to inspire people to say, it's not all that hard to go on a holiday.

Kerry: Yeah.

John: Of course costs come into it but I think what you've done is a fantastic resource. So, thank you very much for closing. And once again, you did say it was your mother that made all this happen, is that right?

Kerry: Yeah, she has MS and I'm a part time carer, mostly for holidays for her and, ...

John: That's a good gig, a really good gig.

Kerry: It is now, yeah.

John: Very good. And the name of your website again?

Kerry: Accessibleaccommodation.com.au. And we also have Facebook, and that's just another thing to utilise other people's experiences, and so we also have Facebook as well where people do share information as well, not just with us.





John: Thank you, Kerry, for coming on to the ‘So...’ podcast.

Kerry: Thank you.

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