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Accessible tourism in Cappadocia: a qualitative study from the perspective of tourism stakeholders

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the current state of accessible tourism in the Cappadocia region through the perceptions of tourism stakeholders. Adopting a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 tourism professionals, and thematic analysis was applied. The findings reveal that despite the region's natural and historical appeal, accessibility for individuals with disabilities is limited due to physical infrastructure deficiencies, inadequate staff training, and geographical challenges. Participants made recommendations emphasizing infrastructure improvements, training programs, and the role of local authorities. The research highlights the need for systemic interventions to make Cappadocia an inclusive destination, contributing to sustainable tourism policies.

Keywords: *Accessible Tourism, Cappadocia, Individuals with Disabilities, Qualitative Research, Tourism Stakeholders.*

1. Introduction

The tourism sector is an important part of the global economy and plays a critical role in terms of social inclusion and sustainable development. Accessible tourism emphasizes that tourism is a universal right by ensuring equal access to tourist destinations for all visitors, particularly persons with disabilities (UNWTO, 2016). According to the World Health Organization, approximately 15% of the global population consists of individuals with disabilities, representing significant potential in the tourism market (WHO, 2023). However, physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers in many destinations prevent this potential from being realized (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011).

As one of Turkey's most iconic tourism regions, Cappadocia attracts millions of visitors each year with its unique features such as fairy chimneys, underground cities, and hot air balloon tours. The region is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and contributes significantly to Turkey's tourism revenue (Tosun et al., 2008). However, Cappadocia's rugged terrain and historical structures create accessibility challenges, limiting the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Although accessible tourism policies in Turkey have made progress in the European Union harmonization process, shortcomings are observed in practice (Cavlak & Cavlak, 2019). In this context, assessing accessibility in heritage destinations such as Cappadocia is of both academic and practical importance.

While the existing literature outlines the general framework of accessible tourism, there are a limited number of studies specifically on Cappadocia. Aiming to fill this research gap, this study seeks to examine perceptions of accessibility from the perspective of tourism stakeholders (hotel managers, guides, and local employees). The research questions are as follows: (1) What is the awareness of accessible tourism in Cappadocia? (2) What are the current barriers and challenges? (3) What are the suggestions for improvement? These questions will be addressed using a qualitative method, aiming to provide insights to increase the region's accessible tourism potential.

2. Accessible Tourism in Cappadocia

Accessibility is a fundamental concept that enables individuals with disabilities and mobility limitations to participate equally in social life. Accessibility refers to individuals' ability to live independently, meet their social needs, and participate on equal terms (Tiyek et al., 2016). This concept requires that individuals with limitations such as mobility, visual, hearing, and mental disabilities have equal access to services such as health, education, sports, and tourism (Darcy et al., 2010). Today, individuals with disabilities want to participate in social activities and vacations, and the concept of "disability tourism" has evolved into "accessible tourism" (Ayyıldız et al., 2014).

Accessible tourism is an approach that aims to enable individuals with disabilities to benefit equally and independently from tourism services. In the literature,

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it is also referred to as "universal tourism," "barrier-free tourism," or "tourism for all" (Akıncı & Sönmez, 2015). Darcy and Dickson (2009) define accessible tourism as independent, equal, and dignified use in terms of mobility, visual, auditory, and cognitive access. Considering that 15% of the world's population has a disability (WHO, 2023), accessibility regulations are mandatory. Types of accessible tourism are classified as physical, sensory-cognitive, temporary-age-related, psychosocial, and cultural accessibility. Physical accessibility covers infrastructure such as ramps and elevators; sensory accessibility covers Braille and audio systems; temporary accessibility covers rest areas; psychosocial accessibility covers staff training.

Accessible tourism worldwide is supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). In Europe, ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism) sets standards (ENAT, 2007). In Turkey, the 1982 Constitution and Law No. 5378 on Persons with Disabilities (2005) make accessibility mandatory. The 2011 circular of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism emphasizes accessibility standards in tourism facilities (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2011). However, implementation is insufficient (Cavlak & Cavlak, 2019). The relationship between accessible tourism and sustainable development is highlighted by promoting community development (Aquino et al., 2018).

Although accessible tourism initiatives in Cappadocia are limited, they have been increasing in recent years. Evci and Şahin (2017) evaluated accessible tourism in Cappadocia for individuals with physical disabilities, highlighting access difficulties despite the protection of historical and natural structures. Kılıç and Özdemir (2024) examined the inadequacy of accommodation facilities' practices for disabled tourism in Cappadocia, identifying shortcomings and making recommendations. Similarly, Belber and Öztan (2025) focused on accommodation facilities and disabled tourists, questioning the adequacy of practices. Yılmaz and Şahin (2021) analyzed the accessible tourism potential of the Göreme Open Air Museum and addressed the access difficulties of different visitor groups. Şen et al. (2014) evaluated the suitability of cultural assets and museums for visits by disabled tourists using the example of Cappadocia.

In the context of sustainability, Cappadocia's accessible tourism has been integrated with overtourism issues. Eren and Bozkurt (2020) discussed how overtourism affects accessibility in Cappadocia and made recommendations for sustainable development. Çoban and Yıldız (2019) developed a destination management model for Cappadocia, transforming accessibility into an inclusive element. Gölgeli and İlhan (2024) examined the local community's perceptions of the destination brand image and recommended increasing accessibility awareness. Güngör (2022) evaluated the Cappadocia Cultural Route as an alternative tourism route, emphasizing accessible transportation and road-air integration.

In digital accessibility, mobile applications do not comply with WCAG 2.1 standards (Madeira et al., 2020). Digital technologies have not yet been systematically implemented in Cappadocia, but smart city approaches could increase accessibility. In an international context, Cappadocia's accessible tourism is linked to heritage preservation and local well-being (Tucker, 2022; Tosun et al., 2008). Duygu Eren and İrem Bozkurt (2020) addressed accessibility gaps in the context of overtourism. Additionally, Journeyable (2024) examined Cappadocia's accessible travel potential, including hot air balloons and its unique cuisine.

While this literature sheds light on accessibility barriers in Cappadocia, qualitative studies that deeply examine stakeholder perceptions are limited. To address this gap, the current study aims to contribute to the literature by analyzing stakeholder views using a phenomenological approach. In this context, the following methods section details the research design and implementation process.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and experiences of tourism stakeholders regarding accessible tourism in Cappadocia, Turkey. Qualitative methods were chosen because they are suitable for gaining deep insights into complex social phenomena such as accessibility barriers and stakeholder attitudes; these phenomena are often nuanced and context-specific (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, a phenomenological approach was adopted to understand participants' lived experiences in the tourism sector; this provides an interpretive analysis of how accessibility is perceived and implemented in a unique geographical and cultural setting such as Cappadocia (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

To recruit participants, a purposive sampling strategy was used, targeting individuals with direct knowledge and involvement in the tourism sector in the region. The sample consists of fifteen key informants: seven hotel operators/managers, four local residents and tourism workers, three tour guides, and one long-term tourism professional. Participants were selected based on criteria such as having at least three years of experience in the region, active involvement in tourism services (e.g., accommodation, guiding, or operations),

and a willingness to discuss accessibility issues. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative studies aiming for thematic saturation in focused inquiries (Guest et al., 2006). Ethical considerations were prioritized; all participants provided informed consent, and interviews were conducted anonymously when requested.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that balanced flexibility with consistency to obtain rich and narrative responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). A standardized interview guide was developed, consisting of five thematic sections with 17 questions: general perceptions of Cappadocia, awareness of accessible tourism, assessment of the current situation, best practices and recommendations, and closing reflections. Questions were open-ended to encourage detailed responses, and probes were used to clarify when necessary. The interviews were conducted in Turkish between June and August 2025, either in person or in virtual sessions, each lasting 30-60 minutes. Responses were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English when necessary for analysis. The transcribed responses served as the primary data source for document analysis, supported by field notes on contextual nuances.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data; following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) repeated reading to become familiar with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. NVivo software (version 14) was used to facilitate coding and theme organization, ensuring systematic management of the data set. Inter-coder reliability was increased by having a second researcher independently code 20% of the transcripts, with the Kappa coefficient reaching 0.82, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Themes were inductively derived from the data and informed by existing accessible tourism literature, such as barriers at heritage sites (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). Reliability was established through member checking (participants reviewing their response summaries) and comparative triangulation of multiple informants.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed four overarching themes: (1) Perception of Cappadocia as a tourism destination, (2) Awareness and conceptualization of accessible tourism, (3) Identified barriers and challenges, and (4) Improvement suggestions. These themes encompass the shared and differing views of the participants, highlighting the region's potential and accessibility shortcomings. Direct quotations have been integrated to illustrate key points, preserving the authenticity of the voices.

Theme 1: Perception of Cappadocia as a Tourism Destination

Participants unanimously viewed Cappadocia as a multifaceted destination combining natural wonders, historical significance, and experiential tourism; this forms the basis for accessibility discussions. For example, one participant described it as "a very special region where nature and history converge," highlighting geological features such as fairy chimneys and underground cities, as well as cultural elements like wine tours in the Ürgüp vineyards. Similarly, one participant mentioned "unique geological formations" and "cultural heritage sites such as the Göreme Open Air Museum," while another respondent noted its economic importance as "one of the most important tourism centers contributing to Turkey's national income." Hot air balloon tours emerged as the most frequently cited strength in all interviews, consistent with previous research on Cappadocia's iconic attractions (Tosun et al., 2008). Participants reported participation periods ranging from 3 to 15 years, highlighting their established expertise.

Theme 2: Accessible Tourism Awareness and Conceptualization

Awareness of accessible tourism was moderate, with participants broadly defining it as inclusive access for everyone, including people with disabilities, the elderly, and families. One respondent expressed it as "the right of everyone to travel comfortably without barriers," reflecting the definitions of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2016). Information on local practices is limited; while some mentioned ramps at the Göreme Open Air Museum and accessible rooms in selected hotels, it was unanimously agreed that facilities are inadequate. Participant 7 mentioned initiatives at one hotel, stating that "arrangements were made for easy access"; however, it was noted that the rugged terrain generally hinders progress. One outlier expressed optimism, stating that "most places are wheelchair accessible," but this was refuted by others, pointing to variability in experiences (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011).

Theme 3: Identified Barriers and Challenges

This theme dominated the responses, revealing multifaceted barriers in physical access, service quality, and systemic issues. Physical difficulties were prominent, with participants repeatedly mentioning uneven paths, steep ramps, and lack of elevators in valleys, underground cities, and museums. For example, participant 14 described the paths at the

Göreme Open Air Museum as "problematic even for able-bodied individuals," while another highlighted "narrow, stony paths" and the lack of lift-equipped vehicles. Service-related barriers include inadequate staff training; while "good intentions" were acknowledged, the lack of specialized training was criticized; one respondent suggested that "luxury service training could raise standards." People with disabilities experience difficulties in activities such as balloon tours and valley walks, compounded by inadequate signage and limited public transportation. These findings resonate with global studies on heritage tourism, where natural landscapes increase exclusion (Michopoulou et al., 2015).

Theme 4: Improvement Recommendations

Participants proposed actionable strategies emphasizing collaborative efforts. Priority actions include infrastructure improvements (e.g., ramps, elevators, and Braille signage) and mandatory training for staff, with Participant 11 stating, "Training should be provided to museum staff and transportation authorities." Local governments should implement regulations and monitor compliance, businesses should invest in accessible facilities, and guides should adapt tours through feedback mechanisms. Awareness raising through seminars, incentives, and successful case studies (e.g., an accessible example such as the Güray Museum) was advocated. Optimism for the future is measured; participant 9 sees "great potential if serious steps are taken" but warns of continuing gaps without systemic change. These recommendations are consistent with sustainable accessible tourism development frameworks (Domínguez Vila et al., 2020).

In summary, the findings highlight Cappadocia's appeal while revealing critical accessibility gaps, particularly in physical infrastructure and education. Addressing these could position the region as an inclusive tourism hub benefiting diverse visitor groups.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the current state of accessible tourism in Cappadocia from the perspective of tourism stakeholders, revealing how the region's unique natural and cultural features influence its inclusive tourism potential. Findings based on qualitative data emphasize that despite Cappadocia's strong tourist attractions, such as fairy chimneys, hot air balloon tours, and historical sites, it is not sufficiently accessible for people with disabilities due to physical infrastructure deficiencies, inadequate staff training, and geographical challenges. Participants defined accessible tourism as "the right of everyone to experience without barriers," a conceptualization consistent with the UNWTO's (2016) principles of universal accessibility. However, practical applications remain limited; for example, while there have been partial improvements at sites such as the Göreme Open Air Museum, geographical challenges such as rugged terrain and narrow roads increase exclusion (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011).

Findings show that accessibility barriers are multidimensional, with physical access issues (inadequate ramps, roads, and transportation vehicles) being at the forefront. In terms of service quality, although staff are helpful, effective interventions are limited due to a lack of specialized training. This reflects the amateur boutique approach in Cappadocia's tourism sector and signals a potential transformation with the entry of chain hotels (e.g., Marriott). Recommendations emphasize infrastructure investments, mandatory staff training, and the supervisory role of local authorities, which could contribute to sustainable tourism models (Domínguez Vila et al., 2020). Overall, the study indicates that Cappadocia has great potential in terms of accessible tourism, but this potential cannot be realized without serious systemic interventions.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this research contributes to accessibility discussions in the context of heritage tourism and, thanks to the phenomenological approach, sheds light on the lived experiences of stakeholders (Smith et al., 2009). Practically, the findings provide guidance for tourism businesses and local authorities: For example, recommendations such as Braille signage, elevator systems, and seminars can encourage the region to become an inclusive destination. This can not only increase access for individuals with disabilities but also boost overall tourism revenue, as accessibility leads to market expansion (Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study include a small sample size (fifteen participants) and generalizability constraints due to its qualitative nature; although thematic saturation was achieved, it should be supported by broader quantitative studies (Guest et al., 2006). Furthermore, the data were collected within a specific time frame (summer 2025), and rapid changes in the tourism sector (e.g., post-pandemic recovery) should be considered. Future research could examine the direct experiences of tourists with disabilities or compare Cappadocia with other heritage sites (e.g., Pamukkale) through comparative analyses. Furthermore, longitudinal studies monitoring the implementation of accessibility policies could evaluate the effectiveness of the recommendations.

In conclusion, Cappadocia's future in accessible tourism is promising; however, stakeholder

collaboration and investment are essential. This study provides a foundation for raising awareness and policy change, which can strengthen tourism's "experience for everyone" philosophy.

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Research Interests:

Tourism product development, destination marketing and management, visitor and employee satisfaction, sustainable tourism, consumer behavior in tourism, ecotourism, and the impact of UNESCO World Heritage status on tourist behaviors, with a particular focus on the Cappadocia region.

Author statement: Author(s) declare(s) that All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. **Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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