

## **Tourism Experiences of Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia: Voices of mobility-impaired people**

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### **Abstract**

Tourism is a fundamental right, yet mobility-impaired Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) face significant barriers in Malaysia. This study explores their tourism experiences, highlighting challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited independence, and insufficient support from tourism providers. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, four semi-structured online interviews were conducted. Findings reveal a need for accessible transport, accommodations, and inclusive event planning. Advocating for universal design principles and comprehensive accessibility guidelines, this study emphasizes the urgency of inclusive policies to ensure PwDs can travel with dignity, independence, and confidence, fostering a more equitable tourism landscape.

**Keywords:** Accessible Tourism; Mobility Impairment; Persons with Disabilities; Tourism Experiences

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Tourism is a fundamental right that provides enjoyment, relaxation, and meaningful experiences for all, including persons with disabilities (PwDs). However, mobility-impaired individuals often encounter significant physical barriers that hinder their ability to travel comfortably and safely. With approximately 1.3 billion people globally experiencing disabilities (WHO, 2023), it is crucial to ensure their equal participation in tourism. Disability, as defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), encompasses impairments that affect daily activities, with each individual facing unique challenges. This study aims to assess tourism accessibility for mobility-impaired PwDs in Malaysia, emphasizing inclusive practices, staff training, and policy improvements to promote equitable, barrier-free travel experiences. Specifically, it seeks to (1) categorize Malaysian PwDs in accessible tourism experience and (2) identify the key barriers that hinder the participation of mobility-impaired tourists in Malaysia.

Although international frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Degener, 2017), advocate for inclusive tourism, gaps in implementation remain. Despite policies like Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, many barriers persist, limiting PwDs' full participation. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering equitable and inclusive travel experiences.

### 1.1 Statistics Related to Tourism Experiences of Person with Disabilities

Travelers with mobility disabilities contribute \$58.2 billion annually to the travel industry and take leisure trips nearly as often as those without mobility challenges (MMGY Global, 2022). However, accessibility remains a major issue, with 96% reporting accommodation problems, 86% facing flight difficulties, and 79% struggling with transportation. As baby boomers age, disability rates rise, increasing the demand for accessible tourism.

Online resources are crucial for PwDs to gather accessibility information. Martin-Fuentes et al. (2021) found that 23.91% of accommodations on Booking.com offer at least one accessible room with features like grab rails and wheelchair-friendly doors. Despite this, accessibility remains underdeveloped due to misconceptions about PwDs' financial capacity (Balan & Raghavan, 2022). In Europe alone, PwDs represent a \$150 billion market (Dominguez Vila et al., 2019). Malaysia promotes inclusivity through Universal Design guidelines, yet poor enforcement persists (Larkin et al., 2015). This study examines PwD tourism experiences and accessibility challenges in Malaysia.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Inaccessible Tourism Experiences

Tourism experiences are inherently subjective, shaped by individual satisfaction and perceptions determining whether they are pleasant or unpleasant (Ang, 2019; Nam-Jo et al., 2021). Extensive research highlights the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities (PwDs) in tourism, often leading to exclusion due to structural and social barriers. The literature categorizes tourism into three key phases: anticipation (pre-visit), realization (during the visit), and recollection (post-visit) (Potgieter et al., 2016; Nigg et al., 2024; Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). Understanding these phases in the context of PwDs' experiences is crucial for identifying gaps in accessibility and inclusivity.

In the anticipation phase, PwDs share similar travel motivations with non-disabled persons (NDPs), including cultural experiences, nature exploration, history, and gastronomy (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). They intrinsically seek relaxation, enjoyment, and independence (Reindrawati et al., 2022). However, pre-planning their journeys presents significant challenges due to unreliable online accessibility information. Some destinations inaccurately market themselves as PwD-friendly, leading to disappointment and discomfort upon arrival (Nigg et al., 2024). This gap in accessibility information highlights the need for more accurate and standardized travel information tailored to PwDs.

The realization phase, which involves the actual travel experience, is where accessibility plays a crucial role in determining satisfaction. Research consistently indicates that PwDs, especially those with mobility impairments, frequently encounter unpleasant experiences. Discrimination and exclusion in this phase manifest through three primary barriers: structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Devile & Eus, 2023).

Structural barriers include physical obstacles in transportation, accommodation, and public spaces. PwDs often struggle with inaccessible infrastructure, such as the absence of ramps, narrow doorways, and uneven pavements, making navigation difficult and unsafe (Budiatiningsih & Rojabi, 2023; Reindrawati et al., 2022). Many of these barriers persist due to past urban planning models prioritizing non-disabled individuals, outlining the need for policy reforms to promote inclusivity (Duignan et al., 2023).

Interpersonal barriers arise from interacting with various stakeholders, including tourism personnel, family members, and travelers. While PwDs frequently rely on caretakers for assistance, negative attitudes from tourism staff can create unwelcoming environments that diminish their overall experience (Lim, 2020; Devile & Eus, 2023). Research suggests that on-site personnel play a critical role in ensuring a seamless travel experience, yet many lack professional training to accommodate different types of disabilities (Nam-Jo et al., 2021). The absence of proper training results in a lack of empathy, unhelpfulness, and unprofessional behavior, further alienating PwDs. Additionally, PwDs may perceive themselves as burdens to fellow travelers, leading to self-imposed restrictions on participation in tourism activities (Moura et al., 2023; Reindrawati et al., 2022).

Intrapersonal barriers, as identified by Devile and Eus (2023), include physical limitations, dependence, and perceived risks. Extended travel can be physically exhausting for PwDs, and communication difficulties may hinder their ability to express their needs effectively. Many PwDs hesitate to travel alone, preferring the reassurance of a companion (Reindrawati et al., 2022). However, overprotective caretakers sometimes impose excessive restrictions, further limiting PwDs' engagement in tourism activities (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2024). These personal limitations highlight the need for empowerment strategies that foster independence and self-confidence among PwDs. The final phase, recollection, determines whether the trip is perceived as successful or unsuccessful. Rubio-Escuderos et al. (2021) emphasize that positive tourism experiences involve unrestricted movement, accessible facilities, and supportive social interactions, whereas negative experiences lead to frustration and dissatisfaction.

### 2.2 The Affective Events Theory and Gaps of Studies

The Affective Events Theory (AET) (Cropanzano, 2017) posits that individuals primarily travel to seek enjoyment and relaxation, and their emotional responses to tourism experiences shape their overall perception of a destination. Negative experiences, such as exclusion, discomfort, or fear for personal safety, can deter PwDs from future travel (Devile et al., 2023; Reindrawati et al., 2022). Research by Lehto et al. (2018) found that PwDs frequently describe their tourism experiences with words such as "distressed," "frustrated," and "humiliated," emphasizing the detrimental impact of accessibility barriers and social stigmatization. Persistent misconceptions portraying PwDs as passive individuals needing assistance further discourage their participation in tourism (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive literature on accessible tourism, significant gaps remain. First, there is a lack of comprehensive studies assessing the effectiveness of existing policies and infrastructure in facilitating accessible tourism. Many studies focus on PwDs' barriers but offer limited insight into how current regulations and initiatives can be improved. Second, while the importance of staff training is acknowledged, research on effective training frameworks and their implementation in tourism settings remains scarce. Addressing these gaps is critical in developing sustainable and inclusive tourism policies that enhance the travel experiences of PwDs. Overall, while PwDs navigate these challenges and occasionally enjoy fulfilling travel experiences, systemic changes are necessary to ensure equitable access to tourism. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach involving policy reforms, infrastructure improvements, and professional training for tourism personnel. By bridging these research gaps, future studies can contribute to a more inclusive tourism industry that guarantees equal participation and enjoyment for all travelers, regardless of their physical abilities.

### 3.0 Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived tourism experiences of four (4) PwDs with mobility impairments in Malaysia. Excluding individuals with auditory, mental, or visual impairments ensures effective communication during data collection. Qualitative in-depth interviews with semi-structured questionnaires provide rich, firsthand insights, while snowball sampling efficiently recruits participants using mobility aids such as wheelchairs, crutches, and scooters. Data analysis follows the three-phase tourism experience model (Potgieter et al., 2016), categorizing experiences into anticipation (pre-travel), realization (during travel), and recollection (post-travel). This structured framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of tourism barriers and enablers, facilitating meaningful interpretations. The methodology enhances reliability by aligning data collection with established models, ultimately offering practical recommendations to improve accessibility, inclusive facilities, and social support, thereby enriching tourism experiences for PwDs with mobility impairments.

### 4.0 Findings and Discussions

Table 1 reflects the four PwDs' profiles during the data collection process.

#### 4.1 Profiles of Respondents

Table 1. Participants Profile

Code	Gender	Age	Disability	Travel Frequency/year
PwD 1	F	23	Dwarfism, Scoliosis	3-4 times
PwD 2	F	49	Polio, quadriplegic	2-3 times
PwD 3	M	17	Spinal stenosis	1 time
PwD 4	M	27	Leg impairment (accident)	More than 5 times

#### 4.2 Malaysian Tourism Experiences of PwDs

Following Potgieter et al. (2016), this study categorizes tourism experiences into three phases: anticipation (pre-travel), realization (during travel), and recollection (post-travel), as demonstrated in Table 2.

##### 4.2.1 Anticipation Phase (Pre-travel)

This phase, which involves travel planning, recorded the least engagement among PwDs, highlighting a lack of emphasis on preparation. The findings reveal that female participants were more proactive in planning, assessing accessibility, and ensuring facilities met their needs, whereas male participants were generally more carefree, relying on physical and mental resilience. During the interview session, here are the responses about the pre-travel arrangement. While PwD 2 said, *"Before booking a hotel, I ask for pictures or videos to check accessibility, especially the toilet,"* conversely, other PwD admitted to minimal planning, opting instead to prepare for unforeseen challenges: *"I seldom plan my journey, but I prepare mentally and physically to face any challenges"* (PwD 4). These findings indicate that preparation disparities exist across gender and age groups, with younger male PwDs showing less concern for pre-travel research.

##### 4.2.2 Realization Phase (During Travel)

This phase, where PwDs actively engage in tourism, emerged as the most significant, shaping positive and negative experiences. A major determinant of satisfaction was the presence of assisting personnel. Social support, such as priority lanes, specialized attention, and event accommodations, was crucial in mitigating negative emotions (Reindrawati et al., 2022). However, the concern for PwDs' safety sometimes resulted in exclusion, reinforcing stereotypes of dependency. As mentioned by PwD 4, *"The organizers reassigned me to the first floor instead of letting me sit in the standing zone due to safety concerns."* The concern is aligned with Rubio-Escuderos et al. (2021). The interviews show that their availability was inconsistent, while assisting personnel improved experiences. Studies show that well-trained staff can significantly enhance tourism experiences for PwDs (Nam-Jo et al., 2021).

Another major challenge was physical barriers, the primary cause of negative experiences. These barriers included steep staircases, inaccessible hotel facilities, and poorly designed wheelchair ramps, contradicting claims of being "disabled-friendly." Participants

expressed frustration over misleading marketing practices, where hotels and establishments falsely advertise accessibility without meeting universal design standards (Lim, 2020; Owusu-Ansah et al., 2019).

PwD 2 argued that *"Hotels claim to be accessible, but their facilities do not comply with universal design, making them useless,"* indicating that structural constraints also hindered mobility, with high pavements and unnecessary street furniture creating obstacles. Beyond physical barriers, emotional responses played a significant role in PwDs' experiences. Frustration and sadness were prevalent, often triggered by attitudinal and social challenges. The resistance toward PwDs in tourism settings led to negative sentiments, aligning with Lehto et al. (2018), who found that societal biases directly affect the emotional well-being of PwDs.

#### 4.2.3 Recollection Phase (Post-Travel)

This phase influences PwDs' future travel intentions. The study found that many PwDs have limited participation in tourism due to accessibility concerns. Three out of four participants reported rarely traveling, as destinations were not designed to accommodate their needs. PwD 2 said, *"I rarely travel. Even if I go, I can't participate in activities. I just sightsee and stay inside the hotel."*

Some PwDs also faced overprotectiveness from caretakers, limiting their ability to travel independently. This reflects intrapersonal barriers, where PwDs lack autonomy in decision-making, as highlighted by Devile and Eus (2023) and Rubio-Escuderos et al. (2021). The findings emphasize that while PwDs experience both positive and negative moments during travel, the realization phase (during travel) remains the most critical, shaping their overall tourism experiences. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving better accessibility, policy reforms, and attitudinal shifts to create an inclusive tourism environment for PwDs. Table 2 summarizes the Malaysian participants in their tourism experiences.

Table 2. Summary of Malaysian Tourism Experiences of PwDs

Phases of Tourism Experiences	Key Findings
Anticipation Phase (Pre-Travel)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-planning for travel arrangements.</li> <li>2. Obtaining information on site accessibility.</li> <li>3. Female PwDs are more prepared for destination research.</li> <li>4. Male PwDs have great endurance of unforeseen mobility challenges.</li> </ol>
Realization Phase (During Travel)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prioritization (Priority lanes for PwDs, assigned assistants)</li> <li>2. Good Social Support (helpful professional assistance, kind surrounding individuals)</li> <li>3. Attitudinal challenges: unfriendliness, hostile environment from on-site staffs, discrimination.</li> <li>4. Physical barriers: steep ramps, staircases, narrow doors, lack of handrails.</li> <li>5. Negative emotions (fear, sadness, anger) due to unmet needs.</li> <li>6. Misleading information on disabled-friendly facilities.</li> </ol>
Recollection Phase (Post-Travel)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited participation in tourism activities due to inaccessibility.</li> <li>2. Lack of autonomy and independence in travel decisions.</li> </ol>

#### 4.3 Challenges Faced by PwDs in Tourism Destinations

As for the second objective, this study reinforces the multifaceted challenges PwDs face in tourism, particularly attitudinal and social barriers, physical obstacles, and inadequate disabled facilities. These issues significantly impact their travel experiences, often leading to discomfort, frustration, and exclusion.

##### 4.3.1 Attitudinal and Social Challenges

One of the primary difficulties PwDs encounter is the negative perception or total ignorance of assisting personnel and other tourists. Many PwDs report facing passive or active aggression when seeking assistance, often being scolded or treated as burdens. These prejudices stem from deep-rooted stereotypes that associate disability with dependency, poverty, or lack of social status. Supporting this, Lehto et al. (2018) found that PwDs are often perceived as passive recipients of care rather than independent individuals. Notably, one participant (PwD 2) shared that when she disclosed her title as a professor, attitudes toward her changed dramatically, revealing the pervasive bias against PwDs. *"They treated us like burdens and sometimes scolded us..., but when I mentioned my title as a professor, their attitudes changed completely"* (PwD 2). An instance of passive aggression and ignorance can be found in PwD 1 and PwD 4 responses: *"Sometimes when I ask for help, no one notices me..."* *"I felt awkward navigating alone, because I know when I went to these places, there will be people looking at me in a weird way and I felt really awkward"*

##### 4.3.2 Physical Barriers

Physical obstacles significantly restrict the movement of PwDs, forcing them to take longer and more strenuous routes, often at the cost of physical pain or damage to mobility aids. While able-bodied individuals can find alternative pathways, PwDs frequently face rough, inaccessible terrain that worsens their travel experience. PwD 2 highlighted the issue by explaining that disabilities are not always permanent; recovering patients with implants or injuries also suffer from inadequate infrastructure. Said PwD 2:

*"Bumpy rides affect PwDs physically..."*

*some recovering patients have screws in their bones, and the vibrations cause intense pain."* There are some examples of existing structures that are not accessible for PwDs and their mobility aids like steep staircases and pavements that are not at all suitable for their movements and it poses a risk of accident and damage to their mobility aids (see Fig. 1(a) and (b)). This is reflected during the interview with the respondents: *"I think it is stairs, sometimes they are too high and steep."* (PwD 1) *"...the construction of the pavements is too high making the gradient of the ramps very steep..."*

(PwD 2), "... (the stairs) hinders my movements and sometimes if I'm having a fever, I can't move at all. My brothers need to carry me." (PwD 3), "If my friends ask me out to hang out or eat, if the place got many stairs, I will not be going by myself" (PwD 3).

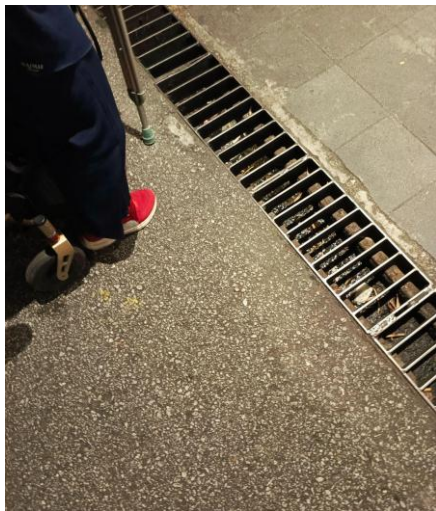


Figure 1(a) Drainage grate with long, narrow gaps



Figure 1 (b) PwD has to rely on surrounding tourists to pass the drainage grate

#### 4.3.3 Inadequate Disabled Facilities

While facilities for PwDs exist, their availability and usability remain inadequate. Accessible hotel rooms, public restrooms, and transport hubs often provide only a single PwD-friendly option, creating unnecessary competition among PwDs for essential services. PwD 2 recounted having to return home due to the unavailability of a wheelchair-accessible hotel room, highlighting the need for more inclusive accommodations. The participant suggested that:

*"Hotels need more accessible rooms... Non-disabled guests can still use them when vacant."*

In some cases, issues arise not from a lack of disabled facilities but from negligence in maintaining them to ensure they function properly around the clock.

Fig. 1(c) illustrates an example of a non-functioning wheelchair elevator at a staircase.



Figure 1(c) PwD stuck at a dysfunctional wheelchair elevator.

The challenges faced by PwDs in tourism demand urgent action. Addressing negative stereotypes, improving physical accessibility, and expanding disabled facilities are critical steps toward inclusivity. Malaysia's tourism sector can create a welcoming, barrier-free experience for all by eliminating deep-seated biases and ensuring better infrastructure.

## 5.0 Discussions

This study addresses two key objectives: (1) categorize the accessible tourism experiences of PwDs in Malaysia and (2) identifying the challenges they face in tourism destinations. The findings, framed within AET and Potgieter et al.'s (2016) tourism experience model, have implications beyond Malaysia, emphasizing the global necessity for accessible tourism. For Objective 1, the anticipation phase (pre-travel) highlights the emotional impact of uncertainty and preparedness. The disparity in planning behaviors among PwDs suggests a broader need for universally accessible travel information. To further emphasize, planning ahead enhances the participatory ability of PwDs in tourism activities and reduces intrapersonal constraints such as high risk perception and stress of novel environments (Devile & Eus, 2023; Nigg et al., 2024). Tourism boards and service providers should integrate standardized accessibility details into digital platforms, ensuring PwDs can make informed decisions. It is also crucial to address misinformation about accessible destinations, as it distorts the reality of tourism experiences for PwDs, leading to unfulfilled expectations and, ultimately, emotional distress (Ang, 2019).

For Objective 2, the realization phase (during travel) features the role of social and physical barriers in shaping PwDs' emotional responses. Inadequate infrastructure and untrained personnel contribute to frustration and exclusion, reinforcing negative perceptions of travel. Governments and industry leaders must implement staff training and enforce universal design compliance to enhance inclusivity. Adequately trained personnel improve the quality and enhance the satisfaction among PwD travelers, especially in highlighted developed countries (Nam-Jo et al., 2021; Alvarado, 2022). Equally important, as highlighted by Duignan et al. (2023), it is important to establish the 'social model of disability' to promote attitudinal change among the general public toward PwDs and the facilities designed for them. Finally, the recollection phase (post-travel) illustrates how negative experiences discourage future travel, emphasizing the long-term consequences of inaccessibility. Addressing attitudinal and structural barriers can enhance PwDs' participation in tourism, contributing to economic growth and social integration. Thus far, Malaysia has a solid set of regulations; however, tourism service providers often overlook their implementation and enforcement. To address this urgently, the active involvement of disabled individuals or experts in universal design is essential to conduct audits and enforce strict penalties for non-compliance, driving immediate action from service providers. This study's implications extend beyond Malaysia, calling for global collaboration among policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and advocacy groups to create a universally inclusive tourism landscape that prioritizes dignity, autonomy, and equal participation for all PwDs.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study emphasizes the urgent need for a more inclusive and accessible tourism landscape for PwDs in Malaysia. True accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure to encompass social support, attitudinal shifts, and effective policymaking. While accessible facilities are essential, trained personnel are pivotal in ensuring PwDs experience tourism without unnecessary difficulties. The presence or absence of such support profoundly impacts their emotional well-being, shaping either positive or distressing experiences. Addressing physical barriers, improving staff attitudes, and enhancing access to tourism information are critical steps toward inclusivity. To drive meaningful change, stakeholders must prioritize universal design principles, continuous staff training, and more assertive advocacy for PwD-friendly policies. Collaboration among the government, tourism industry, and disability organizations fosters a barrier-free environment.

While this study provides valuable insights into the tourism experiences of PwDs in Malaysia, it is limited to mobility impairments, excluding other disability groups. Future research should adopt a broader approach to accessibility and use experimental methods to capture real-time interactions of PwDs in diverse tourism settings. Including PwDs of different age groups and backgrounds can offer deeper insights into their unique challenges and needs. Addressing tourism personnel training and policy enforcement gaps through targeted interventions, such as staff training modules or policy evaluation frameworks, can further improve accessibility. Ultimately, fostering an inclusive tourism sector benefits not only PwDs but also society, ensuring that accessibility becomes a standard rather than an afterthought.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research highlights how accessibility and social interactions shape PwDs' tourism behavior. Applying AET and Potgieter et al.'s model, emphasizes the need for inclusive environments to foster positive experiences, encouraging greater engagement and long-term travel participation among PwDs.

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