

In Flanders Fields - heading for an accessible holiday destination

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I. Visitors of the Flanders Fields area find it hard to imagine the terror and chaos that marked the region 100 years ago. The horror was so terrible that everybody agreed: this should never happen again. Alas, today we know that the world still hungers for peace. But the former battlefield area has now become a dedicated meeting place.

The Great War centenary draws the world's attention to Flanders for a few years. Between 2014 and 2018, we expect to receive about 2 million international visitors, young and old, disabled and able-bodied. For them, Flanders wants to step forward as an accessible holiday destination.

Visit Flanders started about 13 years ago with an accessibility action plan that focused on accessible accommodation, information, points of interest and events. This is, however, the first time that we tackle the whole value chain. Because several aspects of this project go well beyond the power of our organization, the province of West Flanders and the accessibility consultant Westkans have joined us. Our common goal is to establish overall accessibility of the Great War memorial activities for an audience as wide as possible.

II. Accommodation, museums, landmarks, historical buildings, events, restaurants and pubs in the area have been assessed. Parking facilities, public toilets, equipment and personal assistance, transport and public infrastructure are taken care of by the province. All these facilities were screened by professional researchers, bottlenecks were identified and improved under supervision of specialized architects. The results are published in all information channels about the Great War centenary - mainstream media as well as specific publications dedicated to people with disabilities.

Awareness of the service providers plays a key role in the perception of accessibility. Visit Flanders publishes brochures and organizes training sessions for desk staff, tourist guides and other stakeholders.

Visit Flanders has started its actions with the mainstream tourism sector. However, we must consider that hiring specific equipment or finding personal assistance is not as easy as should be. In anticipation to a serious rise of requests, a network of providers and public services has been formed to assess and expand the possibilities in a coordinated way.

III. The battlefield region is a pilot project for the rest of Flanders. Other touristic important regions are now coming into scope, as part of the strategic goal to build a sustainable, accessible Flanders for all.