

VisitFlanders. Sara Lefèvre, Accessibility Expert

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Brussels. My name is Sarah LeFevre. I work for VisitFlanders. I have the honour to welcome you to the building that houses an important part of the Flanders' administration.

As you all know, welcoming visitors is one main part of a guided tour. The tourist guide becomes an important ambassador or quoting ENAT, the face of a destination.

Taking part in a tour, visitors can have a meaningful tourism experience. This goes beyond the scope of providing accurate information. Like a museum, it is more than a display of remarkable things. A guided tour is more than dates and names. The tourist guide will try to present relevant information in a way that it relates to its audience, its background and interests.

By defining a tour as a meaningful experience, we expand the scope to a rational and emotional level. The tourist guide knows how to act on these levels, verbally and non-verbally, to respond to a diverse audience and to adapt the story to the feedback they receive.

Tourist guides are also often first to detect and become part of new social trends. For many tourist guides the current frame of discussion about inclusion in tourism, didn't come as a surprise.

Day by day tourist guides find their audience becoming increasingly diverse. Participants with intellectual or learning difficulty join a group. So, for a tourist guide, this calls for a skilful response. And sometimes, the adaptations that seem necessary go further than what tour guides are used to.

Tourist guides seek to exchange knowledge, to discuss ideas and experiences and to find hands-on tools for improvements. Preferably, as it happened in Flanders, to test their ideas with trained informants of the target group.

Our training department has established a close cooperation with tourist guides in securing a high level of service provision. Training is a key element when providing quality services. That's why VisitFlanders has accessibility training since 2007 for tourist guides. In an in-depth full or half day programme, I'm happy to say these sessions have been fully booked, and are much appreciated by participants in their evaluation and feedback.

So, today, Flanders is very proud to be the host of the conference of many good initiatives from all over Europe. I look forward to sharing our points of view, and knowledge, in order to inform the professional tourist guides about the requirements of visitors with learning or intellectual difficulty and how they can be engaged during a guided tour.

I wish you a very interesting and fruitful conference.