

OGOPOGO TOURS TAKES ACCESSIBLE TOURISM TO HEART

Accessibility and inclusion are key principles in the mission of Ogotogo Tours, a sightseeing and wine tour company based out of Summerland, BC. Sharing stories about the Okanagan Valley's landscape, culture and agricultural history to small groups, Ogotogo Tours knows the benefits of having experiences, destinations and services accessible to all tourists.

BENEFITS OF BEING MORE ACCESSIBLE

Owners Darren and Adonica Sweet's journey to accessibility is a compelling tale. They founded Ogotogo Tours in 2015 to show guests around the Thompson Okanagan region in their small fleet of vehicles, including a hybrid Sedan and a sidecar. They offer a "footman" style of service (think Downton Abbey) as well as bespoke tours. Since both have professional and personal experience with disabilities, they have a strong commitment to accessibility and inclusion. Their website reads: "When we say 'tour with us', we mean it for each and every person. All our guests are our VIPs." Removing barriers is important to the Sweets. "It's a part of our value system to be inclusive," says Adonica. "This year we are ramping it up but we have had this mentality since we started."

A small business with four part-time staff, Ogotogo Tours has been growing steadily. As the first certified carbon neutral wine tour operator in Canada, they have received numerous awards, including Canadian Sustainable Tour Operator from Luxury Guide Canada for two years running, and the Penticton Chamber of Commerce's Sustainable Resource Industry Excellence Award for 2018.

In an effort to provide accessible wine tours, Ogotogo Tours recently expanded their fleet to include a wheelchair accessible vehicle, becoming the first fully accessible tour company in the South Okanagan. The van, equipped with a lift, fits 16 visitors, along with two people in wheelchairs. To the Sweets' pleasant surprise, their accessible van has unexpectedly opened up new opportunities to service other markets, including weddings and the Penticton Airport.

Prior to purchasing the accessible van, Ogopogo Tours' fleet included a roomy, luxury model minivan that comfortably accommodates service and emotional support animals, as well as a custom motorcycle with 2-person sidecar to which they will soon be adding a transfer board and transfer belt to increase its accessibility.

PASSION FOR ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

Accessibility is a journey, not a destination, and Ogopogo Tours is on a proactive learning path. Darren has given two wheelchair travellers a sidecar tour and, more recently, a sidecar tour to a client with vision loss. Darren says he brought the sights and scents of the Okanagan to life by sharing anecdotes and details about the scenery as they drove along. Wanting to communicate better with a client with hearing loss, Darren learned a few words in American Sign Language (ASL), including the useful and often used “thank you.”

FINANCIAL IMPACTS OF ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility offers significant social and economic impacts to the tourism industry. Here are a few statistics:

- Over the next 20 years, Canada's senior population — those age 65 and older — is expected to grow by 68%. Over the last 40 years, it has more than tripled in size.
- Around 38% of Canadians aged 65 or older have a disability.
- Canadians with physical disabilities represent 14% of consumer spending (\$164 billion), making up a large and growing consumer group. When you add in the friends and family of Canadians with disabilities, the estimated buying power is \$366.5 billion.

- Approximately 88% of Americans with disabilities take a holiday every year.
- North Americans with disabilities spend an estimated \$19 billion per year on their own travel, not counting the fact that most usually travel with others.
- Three out of five travellers with disabilities turn to the internet as their main source of information before making their travel selections.

Darren says purchasing the wheelchair accessible vehicle has garnered them a lot of attention and they have had several guests in wheelchairs on FAM tours (a familiarisation trip, or no charge tours offered to people in tourism, hospitality and media). Their focus now is on spreading the word about their accessible wine tours. To that end, they are in contact with travel agencies that specialize in accessible tours and international cruise ship lines. Ogopogo Tours has a regular contract with a local retirement home. With their accessible vehicle well suited to seniors, the Sweets will be reaching out to more retirement homes in the coming months.

HOW A BUSINESS BECOMES MORE ACCESSIBLE

Such has been the success of their wheelchair accessible vehicle that the Sweets are considering the purchase of a second accessible vehicle for next year, and as part of their research, they are identifying what differences and capabilities would complement their current vehicle.

There is a large, untapped market in accessible tourism that Ogopogo Tours want to reach. The company is updating all their promotional materials to include accessibility information. Darren says he is redesigning their website to be accessible and to meet the international standards for web accessibility.



For businesses interested in starting on the accessibility journey, Accessibility Services Canada* suggests these three easy steps:

1. Actively encourage customers to contact you if they have any access needs.
2. Keep accessibility in mind when creating marketing materials (font size and type, colour contrast), creating signage, and updating your website.
3. Remove and reduce barriers in your built environment. For example, keep pathways clear and provide sufficient lighting.

THE BUSINESS OF ACCESSIBILITY

“We are future focused,” Adonica says. And with an aging population and an increasing number of people with disabilities, smart businesses will cater to the changing needs of their customers. If companies are not accessible, says the Sweets, they are literally pushing customers away. “Let’s face it — something can happen to anyone of us at the drop of a hat,” concludes Adonica.

Thanks to Darren and Adonica Sweet, co-owners of Ogoogo Tours, for their participation in this interview
OgoogoTours.com [Facebook](#)

*Accessibility Services Canada (formerly Accessibility Ontario) is a training and development organization that helps non-profits and businesses in Canada to understand and comply with provincial accessibility legislation.