

## Bicycle tourism in Wallonia that's accessible to people with specific needs

### Presentation abstract

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Making active outdoor leisure activities accessible to people with specific needs remains a major, worldwide challenge.

Through its strategic development plan for bicycle tourism, which aims to be as transversal as possible, Wallonia hopes to become a destination of excellence for cyclists by taking into account this target audience's expectations.

Our French speaking region in the south of Belgium (16,844 sq kms) has much to offer, thanks notably to more than 1,300 km of RAVeL routes, made up of greenways primarily developed on former canal towpaths and railway lines where motorised traffic is prohibited.

Despite this potential, there are currently no tourism offers that are sufficiently structured and accessible. Aside from the accessibility of infrastructures, a complete offer necessitates the changing of linked services such as catering, accommodation, tourist attractions, etc.

It's the unanimous wish of the regional authorities to include issues related to improvement of facilities for people with specific needs in all structuring campaigns.

During the "Wallonia by Bike" themed year, the Commissariat général au Tourisme (Tourism administration) entrusted non-profit Access-i with the job of identifying accessible routes. This is how non-profit ANLH (a national association that works towards finding appropriate housing for handicapped persons), as an official auditor, was able to complete the job of researching and certifying.

To do so, preliminary work had to be carried out:

- Analysis of specially adapted bicycles to understand how they work and particularly their dimensions;
- Meeting cyclists with specific needs to better understand their expectations.

Based on this preliminary work, 3 major principles were established:

- Never select the routes based on the cyclists' handicaps or physical ability;
- Offer inclusive routes on which all users can be accompanied by anyone, regardless of whether or not they have any handicaps.

Cycle rides are often moments of relaxation for families or friends, it is essential, therefore, not to impose a physical uniformity on the group;

- The services present around the cycle ride are paramount for the success of the activity.

Based on these principles, ANLH worked to develop 6 routes spread throughout Wallonia. To differentiate between difficulties, 2 levels were established:

- GREEN which corresponds to an inclusive level of difficulty: all bikes – all levels;
- ORANGE which corresponds to a sporty level – either due to the user's physical strength, or because the user possesses an electric bicycle.

To decide whether a route can remain GREEN or must be classed as ORANGE, a series of criteria were developed.

The following elements were verified in a general way:

- The availability of secure parking close to the start of the route;
- The accessibility of the track between the car park and the start of the route;
- Accessibility of the entrance to the route;
- Adequate width along the whole route;
- Respecting certain incline and decline percentages along the route;
- Regular rest areas along the route;
- The presence of signage that allows for a serene bicycle ride, without risk of getting lost;
- The fact that there are no moments along the route that necessitate getting off your bicycle;
- The possibility to turn back at designated areas.

During visits to the sites, carried out by accessibility advisers equipped with bicycles, a tape measure, a camera and equipment to measure inclines, all the routes were tested, measured and verified. When an obstacle presented itself (too steep an incline or decline, a point on the route that is too thin), the auditors imagined an alternative path to circumvent the obstacle. If no solution was possible, the route being analysed was rejected.

During the checks, special attention was paid to visual, tourist and cultural appeal. Like everybody, people with specific needs go cycling to enjoy a moment of discovery. The aesthetics of a site is just as important as its accessibility.

Another part of the job was to identify related services: restaurants, tourist office, leisure and tourist activities.

Of 11 routes audited, 6 were certified.

This project is unique in Europe and the world. The results are concrete and transposable for all tourist destinations with the same specific accessibility objectives.

This project allowed for the:

- Putting in place of a methodology, with precise selection criteria, for the identification and/or creation of cycling routes;
- Identifying cycling routes along the RAVeL that can be ridden by people with mental, hearing, visual, sensorial or mobility impairments.

To guarantee that people with specific needs are aware of these routes, all the necessary information is available online at:

[www.access-i.be](http://www.access-i.be) (soon in English version).

**Lead speaker :** Stéphanie Villance

**Organisation :** Commissariat général au Tourisme

**City (Country) :** Jambes(Belgium)

**Biography :** Stéphanie Villance is the person of reference for bicycle tourism for the Direction de la Stratégie Touristique of the Commissariat Général au Tourisme. Convinced of Wallonia's potential for bicycle tourism and having worked on tourism project management for 18 years, she got the chance to be directly involved in the development of Wallonia's "Bikes Welcome" label and encourage transversal campaigns like those linked to accessible tourism.

**2nd speaker :** Stéphanie Herman

**Organisation :** Access-i

**City (Country) :** Namur (Belgium)

**Biography :** Stéphanie Herman. I am president of the association Access-i. I am also an expert in accessibility and the chief executive of non-profit ANLH (a national association that works towards finding appropriate housing for handicapped persons). For 17 years now I have worked towards accessibility for all and more specifically on regional, national and European projects whose objective is the integration of handicapped persons in all aspects of daily life (housing, the environment, leisure, transport, work, ...). My primary areas of focus are the improvement of accessibility, the creation of adapted services, and raising awareness through the dissemination of information.