



Inclusive Tourism

Making The Roman Baths an experience for everyone

Championing the needs of all visitors has brought richly deserved recognition for the local council that manages the 2,000-year-old Roman Baths, which are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Bath.

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Katie Smith
Visitor Experience Manager, The Roman Baths

The historic site, run by Bath & North East Somerset Council, picked up the Gold Award for Inclusive Tourism at the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence last year.

You understand why it wins such plaudits when you talk to Katie Smith, Visitor Experience Manager at the Baths: "It's always been our ambition to give everybody the opportunity to come and visit the site - whatever their abilities or disabilities, age or nationality - and get a real sense of what the Romans would have experienced here 2,000 years ago."

Visitor-focused

Praising the Baths' dynamic management team and the inspirational leadership of Stephen Bird MBE, the Council's Head of Heritage Services, Katie says: "My job was created to champion the needs of visitors, so that rather than being a curatorial-led museum, this ancient site is a visitor-focused attraction."

The journey to achieve these inclusivity targets began in 2007 with the Roman Baths Development Plan, which set out its ambition to ensure the site is accessible physically and intellectually to all, and remains one of the UK's top attractions.

To make the ruins of the Roman Temple Precinct more accessible, a step-free, suspended walkway was built over them in 2014 - a tricky challenge because of the proximity to the Grade 1-listed Georgian-era Pump Room above. Funding was found by taking advantage of changes in the rules governing how local authorities can borrow money, along with the Council giving Heritage Services the financial freedoms to invest in interpretation, conservation and accessibility. More recently, three lifts have also been installed to take visitors to all levels of the site.

As well as having wheelchair access to 90% of the site, the Baths offer audio guides in 12 different languages, including Mandarin, that are all hearing-aid compatible. Hand-held devices using British Sign Language have been introduced and guides in large print and Braille are also available. Even simple measures like courtesy child-carriers have transformed the visit for families.

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Opening up to disabilities

The attraction has transformed inclusion over the past 10 years, making a heritage property accessible to the widest range of visitors, with a recent focus on those with autism and dementia.

It puts on Evening Explorer events for people with autism that are proving particularly popular. "It's the same experience but without the crowds," explains Katie. "People have told us the evenings have meant they've been able to come out for the first time as a family. That sort of thing brings a lump to your throat."

Training helps staff perfect the skills and knowledge needed to interact with visitors to help them learn about the Baths, rather than being passive stewards. Staff even spend time moving around the site in wheelchairs or wearing dark glasses to help them understand the challenges for disabled people.

Other innovations to enhance the visitor experience include hologram projections of Roman figures enjoying the Baths. "People actually feel like they're in the room with the Romans," says Katie. On top of that, actors dressed as Romans wander around interacting with visitors. "The actors stay in character the whole time, which is great fun."

Future developments, scheduled for completion in autumn 2020, include making parts of the Baths open to visitors for the first time and a state-of-the-art Clore Learning Centre.

Staff Involvement

Of all the inclusivity lessons learned during the past decade, Katie says the key is involving staff and helping decide to really get behind the drive to improve. She adds: "It's also important to get visitors' feedback to make sure what we're doing is making a difference. And we're never afraid to learn from good ideas at other attractions."

With 13.3 million disabled people in the UK, tourist venues can ill afford to ignore inclusivity. As Katie says: "Our message is that anyone who needs additional help of whatever kind is a potential customer, often with families who they might want to bring along with them. If one of them can't come because of a shortcoming in inclusivity, none of them will come. But making changes like step-free access to help one group of people ends up helping everyone."

Katie Smith
Visitor Experience Manager
The Roman Baths



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