Accessible tourism in the Parks of Sintra

- Overall project for the improvement of access to spaces and information
- 2 million euro investment (over 2 years), co-financed by Turismo de Portugal
- In-depth research into international best practices for strategic planning
- In partnership with ACAPO, APS and Associação Salvador; membership of ENAT
- Our employees will have access to sign-language classes and best-practice training
- Facilities: wheelchair tractors, wheelchair stair climber, wheelchair lifts, wheelchairs, ramps, accessible vehicles, tactile maps, 3D models
- Preparation of sensory tours and construction of tactile models
- Accessible Website (Level AAA accessibility of WCAG 1.0) and video relay service for the hearing impaired

Sintra, 15 July 2014 – The “Parques de Sintra Welcome Better” project is underway to improve access to the parks and palaces that are managed by Parques de Sintra, turning them into an example of best practice for accessible tourism and equal access to natural and built heritage. This project, which involves an overall investment of around two million euros over two years, and which is 25% co-financed by Turismo de Portugal, began with an in-depth investigation into best practices, which received input from several Portuguese stakeholder organizations, namely ACAPO (the Association for the Blind and Amblyopic in Portugal), APS (the Portuguese Association for the Hearing Impaired) and Associação Salvador (whose mission is to promote the inclusion of the physically impaired).

The project will run until June 2015 and the company has taken on a grant-holding PhD candidate who has been researching best practices, analysing case studies and looking into the products that are available on the global market. This has enabled us to determine the best strategy and to select the best options for the expected outcomes.

The objective of the “Parques de Sintra Welcome Better” project is to improve access for a broader range of visitors, in particular regarding:

- mobility - physical access: namely through **new facilities** and by adapting physical **space**;
- quality of the **services rendered**;
- changes in **communication methods and platforms**.

Because of the impossibility of making large-scale physical changes to the natural or built heritage, we have had to resort to acquiring **new equipment**. New acquisitions have included:
10 wheelchairs that benefit from being lighter (13 kg) and can be made available to visitors who book them in advance; 4 wheelchair tractors (swiss-trac) to be used on slopes with gradients of up to 20%; 1 stair climber to be used in Pena Palace (this device is still in the testing phase and will allow access between the terraces and the cafeteria); 3 wheelchair lifts (one at the Palace of Pena and two at the Moorish Castle); several park benches that are part of a plan for creating new rest areas in each park; and 6 movable ramps that will be placed or removed whenever needed (ramps are especially useful since they can be used to expand the accessible visiting area for visitors with impaired mobility – for example, in the Palace of Sintra the area of the building accessible to such visitors has been increased in this way from 100 m² to over 600 m². In addition, the new hybrid buses that connect the park entrance to Palace of Pena can be safely used to transport people in wheelchairs. Parques de Sintra is also building 3D models of the palaces to show the spaces that remain inaccessible to some visitors as well as tactile maps developed with the assistance of ACAPO that will improve autonomous navigation for the blind. Besides this equipment, physical changes have also been implemented wherever possible in the spaces, including reserved parking places for disabled visitors, the on-going regeneration of pavements for better circulation, the introduction of handrails in areas with stairs, the adaptation of toilet areas to allow wheelchair access, and the installation of lifts wherever possible (as in Palace of Pena, which has a new lift that connects the shop, restaurant and cafeteria).

Regarding the improvement to the services rendered, approximately 100 employees that deal directly with the public have already received training in the main standards and best practices and have been made aware of issues related to physical disabilities, giving them the tools to handle a greater diversity of visitors. By the end of summer, another 20 will have attended Portuguese sign-language classes (a training course organized by the APS, who will also act as consultants in training guides for guided tours designed for the hearing impaired). ACAPO is also studying the development of sensory tours to the parks (to be launched this summer), which will allow visitors to experience the plants and animals in their natural habitat using all of the senses. With regard to multimedia applications, Talking Heritage will be updated with audio and sign-language contents in three languages. This application is made available by Parques de Sintra to all visitors on their own smartphones or on devices lent by the company. The inclusion of sign language will be tested by the APS. Parques de Sintra will also implement a sign-language interpretation service via video call to allow hearing-impaired individuals to communicate with us to ask for information. The interpretation service will be provided by a specialist intermediary who will be in simultaneous communication with the hearing-impaired person (via video) and the members of our company’s call centre (via phone).
With regard to **communication platforms and methods**, improvements have been made to online information and printed materials and signposts. The new Parques de Sintra website includes descriptions of the access conditions at all sites managed by the company and has been developed to level AAA of the WCAG 1.0 in order to make it accessible to citizens with disabilities. The printed maps of the Pena, Monserrate and Moorish Castle parks, which are made available to all visitors, now have information about the recommended routes to be taken by people with reduced mobility as well as the locations of areas with steep slopes. A tactile version of the maps is being considered in association with ACAPO (the Association for the Blind and Amblyopic in Portugal) so that visually impaired visitors may also be able to use the parks. Regarding signposting, the signs will start to include pictograms in addition to text so that visitors with a low level of literacy or those who are unfamiliar with the Portuguese or English languages may also be able to understand.

A special price list for persons with disabilities has been created that takes into account the available areas to be visited in each of the parks and monuments.

Besides the partnerships which have been established with Portuguese associations (ACAPO, APS and Associação Salvador), Parques de Sintra has also joined the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT). The main mission of this institution is to improve access at European tourism destinations for all visitors by making technical help available and by sharing knowledge and experience, undertaking the commitment to create equal opportunities for access tourism and culture.

With regard to attracting visitors with reduced mobility, the company is currently attending international trade fairs devoted to accessible tourism (such as the Gitando.All fair in Italy during the month of April) and the new conditions will be communicated to companies and institutions linked to the sector.

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**About Parques de Sintra - Monte da Lua**

Parques de Sintra - Monte da Lua, S.A. (PSML) is a state-owned limited company with exclusively public capital that was created in 2000 following the recognition by UNESCO of the Cultural Landscape of Sintra as a World Heritage Site. The company was created to assemble the public institutions responsible for preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage in Sintra. PSML has been entrusted with the management of the State’s main properties in the area. Because it does not resort to the State Budget, PSML depends entirely on proceeds from the tickets sale, shops, cafeterias and hiring of venues for events, in order to restore, maintain and promote the heritage it manages.

In 2013, the natural and cultural heritage managed by PSML (the Park and Palace of Pena, the National Palaces of Sintra and Queluz, the Chalet of the Countess of Edla, the Moorish Castle,
the Palace and Gardens of Monserrate, the Convent of the Capuchos and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art) welcomed approximately 1,700,000 visitors, over 90% of whom were from outside of Portugal.

The shareholders of PSML are the Directorate General of Treasury and Finance (Direção Geral do Tesouro e Finanças - representing the State), the Institute for the Conservation of Nature and Biodiversity (Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e Biodiversidade - ICNB), the Portuguese Tourism Board (Turismo de Portugal) and the Municipality of Sintra (Câmara Municipal de Sintra - CMS).

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